

Historic Preservation and Rightsizing

Current Practices and Resources Survey

Prepared for the Right Sizing and Historic Preservation Task Force
Advisory Council on Historic Preservation

May 2012



Cara Bertron and Donovan Rypkema
PlaceEconomics

About the authors

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Report design by Cara Bertron and Jesse Lattig

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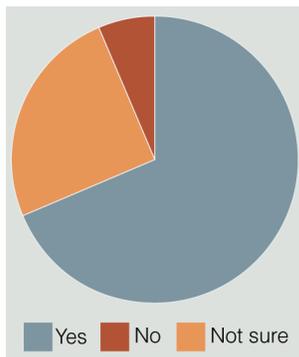
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Introduction

Older industrial cities today face complex challenges. The places that built America into a financially optimistic middle-class nation on the move—Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Youngstown, Rochester—have been plagued by population loss for decades. The foreclosure crisis and its consequences have compounded longtime problems, leaving older industrial cities with struggling downtowns and commercial corridors, a glut of abandoned houses, and many associated problems. While some cities are experiencing modest population upswings, even they still have to deal with the physical legacy of decades of depopulation and disinvestment.

This report examines how cities are developing responses to this situation, with an emphasis on rightsizing: the process of reshaping physical urban fabric to meet the needs of current and anticipated populations. Rightsizing can be a politically charged term—one often associated, accurately or not, with demolition or forced relocation—and many cities use downsizing or long-range planning instead. By any name, the process is being executed principally by planning department staff in concert with local housing and redevelopment agencies, building inspection/code enforcement departments, parks and recreation, and occasionally school districts. Elected officials may serve as driving forces or public faces in the process.

Fig. 1 Cities engaged in rightsizing



The report provides the results of a survey about the problems associated with long-term population loss, municipalities' responses and use of federal resources, and the current and potential place of historic preservation in those efforts. The report was developed for the Right Sizing and Historic Preservation Task Force (RSTF) of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, which seeks creative ways to use preservation and related tools in stabilizing and revitalizing challenged communities. Municipal planners, preservation planners, and local preservation advocates from the 20 older industrial cities with the highest proportional population loss (1960 to 2000) contributed ideas and information.¹ Their responses reveal that nearly three quarters of cities are engaged in explicit rightsizing efforts, and nearly all are carrying out actions and strategies aimed at long-range planning for a smaller city (Fig. 1).

¹ The list was drawn from Joseph Schilling and Jonathan Logan's "Greening the Rust Belt" in the *Journal of the American Planning Association* (Autumn 2008, Vol. 74, No. 4). That list was adapted from a selection of 65 older industrial cities included in "Restoring Prosperity: The State Role in Revitalizing America's Older Industrial Cities," by Jennifer Vey for The Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program (2007).

The survey included telephone interviews and an online survey and consisted of:²

- 22 interviews with preservation planners or preservation advocates from 20 cities
- 16 online surveys completed by planners
- 8 follow-up interviews with planners
- 5 interviews with State Historic Preservation Office staff, state-level nonprofit staff, and professionals and scholars focusing on the intersection of preservation and rightsizing

Survey results suggest broader patterns among other older industrial cities. Information from these 20 cities—the hardest hit, and likely the most invested in addressing the challenges stemming from population loss—indicates an urgent need for a comprehensive, locally tailored approach to long-range planning, better federal tools to support it, and a more effective strategy to integrate historic preservation into planning decisions.

Surveyed Cities

Baltimore
Binghamton
Buffalo
Canton
Cincinnati
Cleveland
Dayton
Detroit
Flint
Harrisburg
Huntington
Newark
Pittsburgh
Rochester
Saginaw
Scranton
St. Louis
Syracuse
Utica
Youngstown

² Because of the inherent challenges of small samples, this report should be viewed as an indication of patterns and trends rather than statistical certainty.

Defining the Problems

The most visible consequences of long-term population loss are evident in once-dense residential neighborhoods now pocked by vacant houses and lots. However, the effects do not stop with abandoned houses—or churches, schools, or commercial properties. These problems exist on multiple levels, from municipal finances to development prospects to identity. One of the survey’s key questions sought information on the challenges stemming from population loss, asserting that this knowledge is critical to understanding responses on the ground and determining if available resources sufficiently support them.

Below are the most frequent responses in the telephone survey.

Vacant Buildings

- ⊕ Oversupply of aging, deteriorating houses
- ⊕ Vacant, unsafe properties (often residential)
- Depressed real estate market
- Foreclosures

- ⊕ Mentioned frequently
- Mentioned occasionally
- Mentioned once

Vacant Land

- Challenge of repurposing vacant land for some use
- No big chunks of developable land, only small infill lots



Building Stock

- Low-quality housing
- Functionally obsolete housing
- Expensive to bring historic housing stock up to code
- Aging infrastructure and public facilities

Limited Resources

- ⊕ City financially strapped as a result of lower tax revenues and other factors
- ⊕ More problem properties than the City can demolish with existing funding
- States are cutting resources for older urban areas
- Need to protect neighborhoods where abandonment is occurring

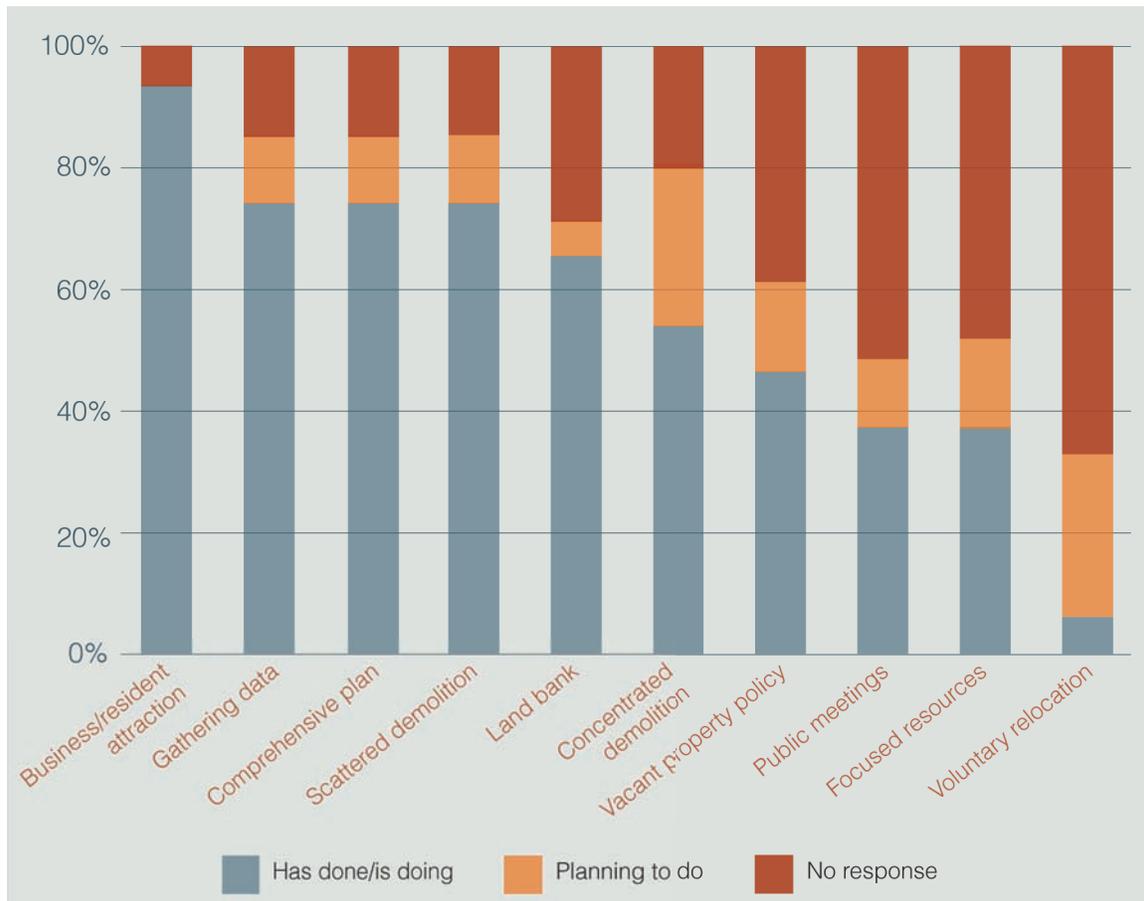
Other

- Loss of identity and challenge of creating new, more positive images for neighborhoods
- Many rental properties with unresponsive landlords
- Struggling historic commercial corridors

Responses

Though cities' planning responses to these challenges are shaped by unique local circumstances, notable common goals and approaches emerged in the survey. The vast majority of surveyed cities (94 percent) are employing a variety of strategies consistent with long-range planning, as shown in Figure 2. The most frequently used strategies are growth-oriented or related to comprehensive planning. Public meetings around rightsizing are much more rare, likely reflecting political wariness around the issue. Most cities (88 percent) are demolishing scattered and/or concentrated properties, and many (75 percent) are also enacting policy changes such as establishing land banks and strengthening vacant property policies. Few cities are using voluntary relocation. Transportation was not specifically included in the survey, but changing transportation patterns was identified as a strategic tactic during one interview.

Fig. 2 Municipal responses



Goals

- Identify “centers of activity” or “neighborhoods of choice” and focus development, form-based code use, and resources there
- Sustainability and market stability
- Find economic or environmental reuse of all the land
- Safe and affordable housing
- Increase population
 - Economic growth, not decline
 - Engage citizens
 - Clean up blight

The approaches can be broadly divided into two categories: strategic and situational actions. Strategic responses take a comprehensive, long-term view of a given challenge and related factors, while situational actions react to specific instances of problems. While these instances may not be isolated, a situational action considers each instance separately—for example, demolishing a vacant house without reference to a cohesive plan for the entire neighborhood. The following lists are drawn from telephone interviews that expand on and augment the online survey.

Strategic Actions

- ⊕ Developing a comprehensive plan with public engagement
- ⊕ City developed or is developing a new zoning code
- ⊕ Demolishing vacant properties in a concentrated area
- Establishing a land bank
- Not investing resources in distressed or environmentally sensitive areas
- Selling municipally owned vacant property and buildings in focus areas to residents
- Talking about returning some areas to undeveloped land or urban agriculture
- Recognizing historic neighborhoods and properties as attractions for potential residents
- Focusing financial, administrative, and enforcement resources in stronger areas/neighborhoods like traditional commercial corridors and historic, walkable, family-oriented neighborhoods with a strong neighborhood organization and distinct neighborhood character
- Changing local policy around vacant property (e.g., more stringent demolition by neglect legislation)
- Addressing rightsizing on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis with plans and grants
- Re-visioning neighborhoods as less dense places
- Tracking vacant properties
- Protecting designated historic resources
- Identifying potential historic resources and districts and encouraging designation
- Redeveloping streets in central areas as “complete streets”

“ The City isn’t thinking of right-sizing as knocking down houses and putting in parkland; it’s looking at where to reinvest. We’ve got the real deal—let’s build on that.”

- ⊕ Mentioned frequently
- Mentioned occasionally
- Mentioned once

“ I’m worried about the ‘if we build it, they will come’ mentality. You can’t build yourself out of it—you can’t necessarily think that someone’s going to come.”

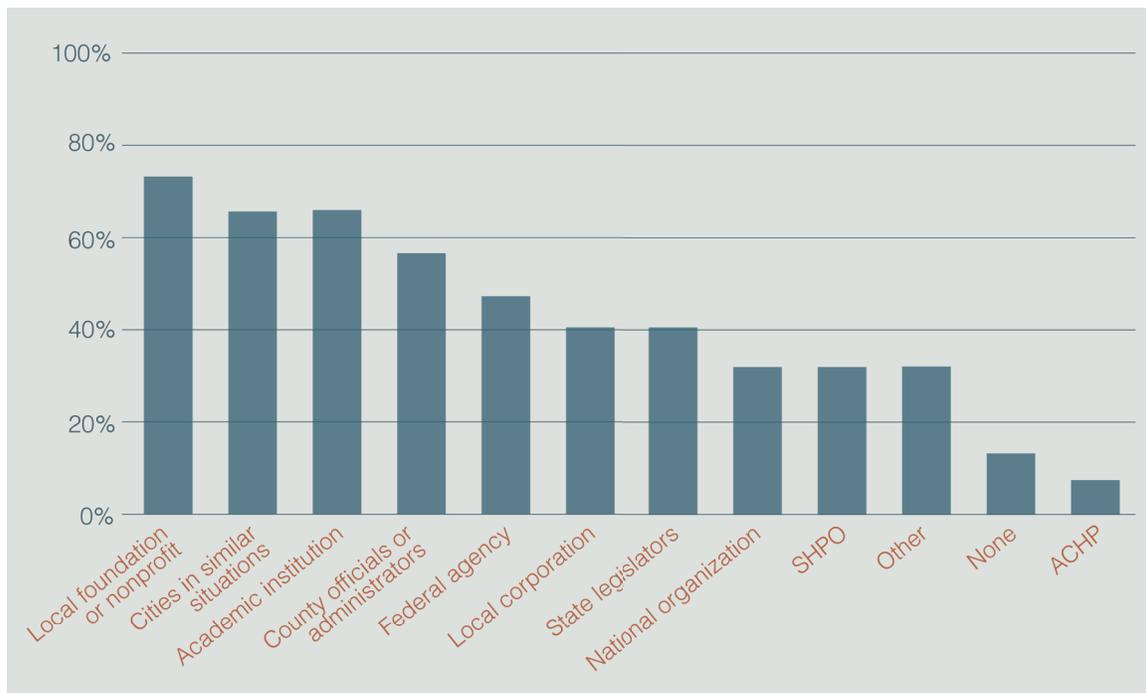
Situational Actions

- ⊕ No comprehensive planning; reactionary efforts to problems
- ⊕ Demolishing scattered vacant properties around the city
- Making demolition decisions on a building-by-building basis³
- Selling municipally owned vacant property and buildings to residents (not in focus areas)

Resources Used

Rightsizing and long-range planning in older industrial cities constitute largely uncharted territory in contemporary planning. In developing and executing plans and strategies, cities are looking for advice—and financial resources—from a variety of local, state, and federal entities in the public and private realms. Over half the surveyed cities communicate with entities familiar with the community or rightsizing issues: local organizations, institutions, and officials or cities in similar situations. Just over 40 percent of the cities consult with federal agencies (mostly HUD and the EPA; a couple consult with the Federal Transportation Administration). Just over 30 percent consult with their SHPO.

Fig. 3 Agencies and organizations consulted by municipalities in the rightsizing process



³ Respondents presented this point as both a negative (lack of overall planning) and a positive (no clearance of entire blocks).

Federal Tools Used

As part of this survey, ACHP staff identified 25 federal programs under 6 agencies that could offer support to rightsizing cities. Respondents indicated whether their city used each program for rightsizing or other activities to the best of their knowledge.

Of the 25 programs that were identified as potentially useful in rightsizing efforts, only five were cited as being used for that purpose by the surveyed cities (Fig. 4). Even the program most frequently used for rightsizing (CDBG) was identified by fewer than half the surveyed cities. Figure 5 lists the usage of the identified federal programs for any activity. As can be seen, HUD programs are the most often used. Resources used less frequently or not at all are often not clearly related to physical planning in cities, such as those offered by USDA, the Commerce Department, the Economic Development Administration, and the departments of Defense, Energy, Education, and Labor.

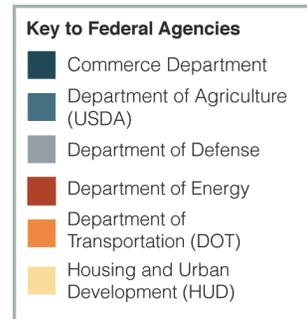


Fig. 4 Federal programs used for rightsizing

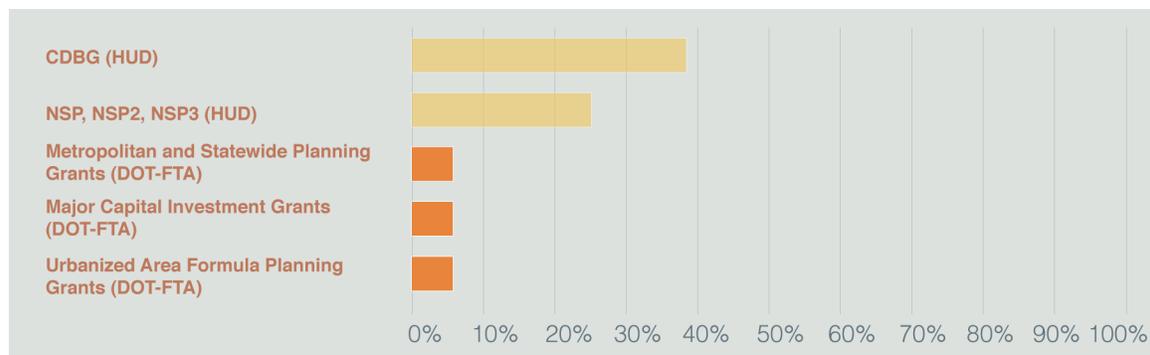
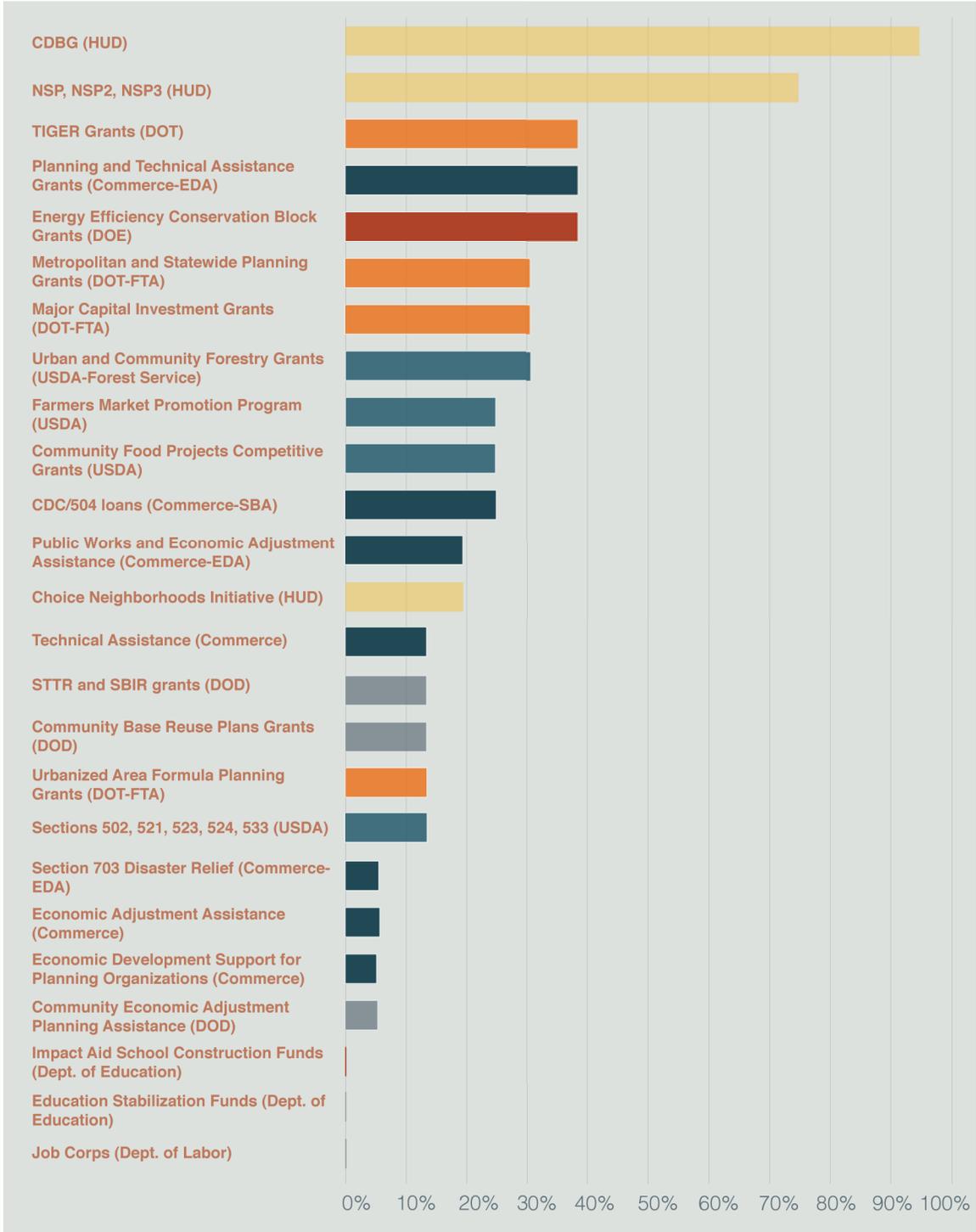


Fig. 5 Federal programs used for any activity



Continuing Challenges

Some progress is being made with current approaches and tools. Nearly three quarters of the surveyed cities are utilizing land banks, almost half are developing more flexible zoning codes and reframing policy around vacant properties, and many are focusing limited resources in strategic areas. Still, much remains to be done.

This section presents rightsizing or long-range planning issues that survey respondents identified as needing new strategies and resources. Some issues are fiscal, while others focus on important planning and policy challenges. Other issues such as suburban sprawl and state funding cannot be addressed by the municipality alone, but are key parts of a comprehensive approach to rightsizing.

“ There’s not a large-scale process to think about rightsizing. Everyone’s still trying to do what they believe to be best for the city within their own areas and programs... There are efforts in all directions.”



Few Municipal Resources

- ⊕ A small planning and Landmarks Commission staff stretched between many daily tasks, with little time for long-range planning, outreach, and education
- Low and declining tax revenues
- Inadequate code enforcement, largely due to staff cutbacks
- Lack of resources for planning process
- Inadequate demolition funding
- Few resources for people who struggle to maintain and reinvest in their homes

Planning Shifts

- How to support transitional neighborhoods
- Existing tools like participatory planning technologies, transportation improvements, and vacant land management practices are used infrequently and ineffectively
- Funding is disproportionately allocated to demolition

Policy Changes

- Zoning ordinance should be more flexible, streamlined, and “green”
- Expedited foreclosure process, with more accountability measures for banks
- How to manage neighborhood character outside historic districts
- How to remediate hazardous materials (lead paint, asbestos) in a preservation-minded way, especially when using federal funding
- Need mechanisms to help homeowners with repairs (e.g., revolving loan funds and grants)

Encouraging and Targeting Growth

- Spurring population growth
- Attracting industry and jobs
- Incentivizing development in areas designated by City plans

Multi-Jurisdictional

- Continuing sprawl and competition with suburbs for businesses, jobs, and residents
- Long-range regional planning and smart-growth strategies
- Unequal access to funding, compared to suburbs
- Entities like school districts operate independently from the municipal government, with little information exchanged about investments

- ⊕ Mentioned frequently
- Mentioned occasionally
- Mentioned once

Role of Historic Preservation

The role of preservation in the surveyed cities' long-range planning and rightsizing efforts varies, but it appears to be—with a few exceptions—very small. Some municipal preservation staff and preservation advocates are involved in comprehensive planning processes, while others are not involved with comprehensive planning and do not see historic resources included in the results. Many cities' long-range plans include preservation in one or more elements, but a number of respondents felt that inclusion starts and stops with a statement of preservation values.

Surprisingly, only 14 of the 20 cities are Certified Local Governments (CLGs), with access to the associated technical and financial assistance. The remaining third of the cities may have low municipal commitment to historic preservation or inadequate fiscal or regulatory capacity to meet CLG standards. Lack of CLG status inherently limits the use of historic preservation as a public strategy in general and as a rightsizing tool in particular.

Current Role

Traditional preservation tools—designation, rehabilitation and demolition review, tax credits, education, and advocacy—are being used in many cities, but there is broad consensus that they need to be enhanced, intensified, and supplemented to be more effective.

Long-Range Planning

- ⊕ Perception that long-range planning and rightsizing have not included historic resources
- ⊕ Preservationists feel that they are neither informed about nor involved in municipal planning efforts
- ⊕ Preservation staff and advocates participated in or led public meetings during planning process
- Preservation advocates sat on preservation or steering committees for comprehensive plan
- Preservation planners incorporated preservation into multiple sections of the comprehensive plan
- Comprehensive plan raises awareness of preservation

Planning Process

- Preservation staff reviews rehabilitation and demolition proposals and administers Section 106 process
- After demolition, building material is salvaged and sold

“ Preservationists are aware of what's happening, but they're doing triage. They're not really in dialogue with people who are creatively rethinking the city.”

- New zoning code focuses on “livable communities” and allows mixed use
- Local government could be more supportive of preservation
- City effectively balances preservation with development

Education and Advocacy

- o Preservation staff, local preservationists, and community groups educate homeowners about state historic rehabilitation tax credits (where available)
- o Preservation staff and local preservationists nominate historic properties for landmark or district designation

Preservation’s Potential

Survey respondents discussed a variety of ways that planners, preservation planners, and grassroots preservation advocates can utilize preservation more effectively to meet their communities’ needs. As can be seen in the following list, their suggestions span daily planning processes, long-range public and private decisions about where to reinvest scarce resources and energy, and the significant opportunity and challenge to change perceptions of neighborhoods and cities.

Planning

- ⊕ Identify potential historic resources
- o Argue for and employ preservation in the context of environmental and fiscal sustainability
- o Discuss how to make long-term preservation and demolition decisions in distressed neighborhoods and cities
- Require historic preservation to be incorporated in comprehensive plan



- Include preservation organizations in planning processes
- Give Landmarks Commission enforcement authority
- Increase efficiency and improve homeowner perceptions by allowing staff to approve minor alterations
- Allow sufficient time to consider the value of buildings and neighborhoods before choosing demolition
- Use more flexible standards in transitional and distressed neighborhoods⁴

Focus Resources

- ⊕ Prioritize which historic buildings and areas to fight for
- Focus financial and educational efforts in historic areas to revitalize historic areas, attract new residents and businesses
- Figure out intersections of historic resources with other important factors (grocery stores, stable schools, transportation) and prioritize investments in those areas

Look to Historic Neighborhoods and Properties First

- Take advantage of market for downtown residences and smaller houses
- Capitalize on historic districts' relative stability (higher levels of owner occupancy, active community groups, high-quality construction and materials)
- Preservationists can offer resources (state and federal tax credits, connections with developers, marketing commercial and residential properties to developers and homeowners)
- Change perceptions of historic neighborhoods located near amenities and jobs; help build a residential market
- Direct firms to historic industrial sites and downtown buildings
- Assess the feasibility of reusing existing resources (public buildings, neighborhoods, factories) before deciding on new construction
- Don't ignore pleasant, livable older neighborhoods that don't meet National Register criteria

Incentives

- Develop more "financial carrots" for preservation (e.g., revolving loan funds and state-level rehabilitation tax credits that allow rehabilitation of historic houses on a larger scale)
- More funding to rehabilitate rather than demolish houses
- Get federal government to allocate money for mothballing and repair work with historically compatible features

Education and Advocacy

- Present positive vision of how historic buildings can contribute to stronger neighborhoods and help manage change

“ At some point, we will weigh in on neighborhood ‘tipping point’ questions in some way. Now, we’re still working on a micro scale.”

- ⊕ Mentioned frequently
- Mentioned occasionally
- Mentioned once

⁴ This comment suggests that applying the Secretary's Standards in all circumstances may be limiting flexibility.



- o Educate people (especially younger homeowners) about property maintenance and stewardship
- o Develop a list of preservation-friendly affordable contractors
- Build support for preservation in other community organizations
- Learn from historical development during periods when local population was similar to contemporary levels
- Use preservation to sustain cultural continuity

Reduce Demolition

- o Look at alternatives to demolition, such as mothballing
- Make informed decisions
- Look beyond reflexive short-term solutions like demolition when responding to resident complaints
- Consider demolition's impact on historic working-class neighborhoods where the chief significance lies in intact block and neighborhood fabric

Enforcement and Maintenance

- o Proactively enforce maintenance provisions of city and landmarks ordinances
- o Address investor-landlords who neglect rental properties
- Develop a fine system that is high enough to enforce ordinance and lowers the risk of property abandonment

Conclusions

After evaluating the statistical and qualitative data, it is possible to draw four major conclusions.

First, nearly all of the surveyed cities are actively working to tackle longstanding problems of vacant buildings and land, aging building stock and infrastructure, and limited municipal staff and funding. Many of their actions are consistent with rightsizing: developing comprehensive plans, strengthening strong and transitional areas, carrying out concentrated demolitions, and using entities such as land banks to invest strategically.

Second, municipalities' ability to develop long-range plans, hire or retain planning and code enforcement staff, and execute plans and programs is exceptionally limited. Short-term situational responses to urgent issues are frequent. Many cities recognize the need to focus demolition and reinvestment resources within a long-range framework but are pressed for staff time and funds to develop a comprehensive response. Transportation—especially public transportation—needs to be an integrated part of any rightsizing strategy, but it was not mentioned as a tactic during most interviews.

Third, there appears to be a mismatch between acute municipal needs and available federal resources. The vast majority of the federal programs identified as potential resources for rightsizing were not used for rightsizing. Twenty of the 25 federal programs were used by less than a third of the cities for any purpose, to the best of the respondents' knowledge. This either reflects inadequate communication between federal agencies and municipal governments or indicates that current federal resources do not meet older industrial cities' needs.

Finally, historic preservation is, at best, on the fringe. Though preservationists are included in comprehensive planning efforts in some cities, most feel that their contributions do not substantially influence the plans. In other cities, preservationists are not even at the table. Yet both preservationists and planners agree that preservation has an important role to play in strategic planning. Respondents offered many ideas about how preservationists can bring resources for focused reinvestment; help build and strengthen real estate markets downtown and in historic neighborhoods, where cities have an advantage over suburbs; and assist in managing and prioritizing change in historic environments.

“ For preservationists to be at the table, we can't bring our usual game plan. Flexibility, compromises, and hard choices are necessary.”



In conclusion, the survey results indicate that much work remains to be done on the local, regional, state, and federal levels. Older industrial cities are taking various situational and strategic approaches to address issues stemming from long-term population loss. These cities have an acute need for additional resources—particularly resources for planning—yet available federal programs are not being utilized. Similarly, preservationists feel that they can offer assistance with planning, development, and marketing, but historic preservation is generally not an integrated part of the planning process.

Historic neighborhoods should be the cornerstones of smaller, more resilient, more livable cities. As diverse, walkable, existing environments with unique character, historic neighborhoods and traditional neighborhood business districts can be sustainable at environmental, economic, and social levels. These qualities help retain existing populations and attract new residents and businesses.

At this critical point, federal agencies and preservation advocates have the opportunity to strengthen historic cities by bringing tools, funding, and technical assistance to long-range planning and rightsizing efforts. A number of federal programs are available to promote preservation, including CDBG and NSP funds, as well as federal rehabilitation tax credits. However, the pressing problems on the ground and a local desire for urgent responses mean that interested parties must offer timely, targeted resources; and they must offer them soon.

Appendix

Surveyed Cities

Baltimore
Binghamton
Buffalo
Canton
Cincinnati
Cleveland
Dayton
Detroit
Flint
Harrisburg
Huntington
Newark
Pittsburgh
Rochester
Saginaw
Scranton
St. Louis
Syracuse
Utica
Youngstown

Survey Participants

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Michael Bosak

Landmarks Society of Greater Utica

Betsy Bradley

Cultural Resources Office Director, City of St. Louis

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City Planning Director, City of Cleveland

Ron Campbell

Preservation advocate, Flint

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MSHP/MCP, Columbia University

Nancy Finegood

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Michael Fleenor

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Economic Development Program Specialist, City of Utica

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Deputy Director, The Castle Museum of Saginaw County History

Royce Yeater

National Trust for Historic Preservation

Tom Yots

Executive Director, Preservation Buffalo Niagara

Rick Zengler

Planning Department, City of Canton

Survey Questions

1. Is your city in the process of “rightsizing,” or adjusting its physical fabric to match its current and anticipated population?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

2. With regard to rightsizing, which of the following has your city done, is doing, or planning to do?

- Gathering data in preparation for developing a plan
- Developing a rightsizing plan or a comprehensive plan that includes rightsizing
- Holding public hearings or meetings about rightsizing
- Demolishing scattered vacant properties around the city
- Demolishing vacant properties in a concentrated area
- Focusing financial, administrative, and enforcement resources in stronger areas/neighborhoods
- Establishing a land bank
- Changing local policy around vacant property (e.g., vacant property registration ordinances)
- Encouraging residents to move from weaker to stronger areas/neighborhoods
- Working to attract new businesses and residents
- Other

3. Which of the following agencies or organizations (if any) has your city consulted in the rightsizing process?

- Officials or staff from cities in similar situations
- County officials or administrators
- Local foundation or nonprofit organization
- Academic institution
- Local corporation
- State legislators
- State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO)
- National organization
- Federal agency (if so, please specify which agency in the box below)
- Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP)
- None
- Other

4. Has your city used any of the following resources offered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Sustainable Communities Partnership (SC2) for rightsizing planning and activities?

- Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP, NSP2, NSP3)
- Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)
- Choice Neighborhood Initiative
- TIGER Grants

5. Has your city used any of the following resources offered by the Department of Agriculture (USDA) for rightsizing planning and activities?

- Section 502 homeownership loans, Section 521 rental subsidies, Section 533 housing preservation grants, and Section 523 and 524 housing site loans
- Farmers Market Promotion Program
- Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program

6. Has your city used any of the following resources offered by the Small Business Administration (SBA) and Economic Development Administration (EDA) for rightsizing planning and activities?

- CDC/504 loans (SBA)
- Planning Grants and Technical Assistance Grants (EDA)
- Section 703 Disaster Relief (EDA)
- Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance (EDA)

7. Has your city used any of the following other resources offered by the Commerce Department for rightsizing planning and activities?

- Economic Adjustment Assistance
- Economic Development Support for Planning Organizations
- Technical Assistance

8. Has your city used any of the following resources offered by the Federal Transportation Administration (FTA) for rightsizing planning and activities?

- Metropolitan and Statewide Planning Grants
- Urbanized Area Formula Planning Grants
- Major Capital Investments grants

9. Has your city used any of the following resources offered by the Department of Defense (DOD) for rightsizing planning and activities?

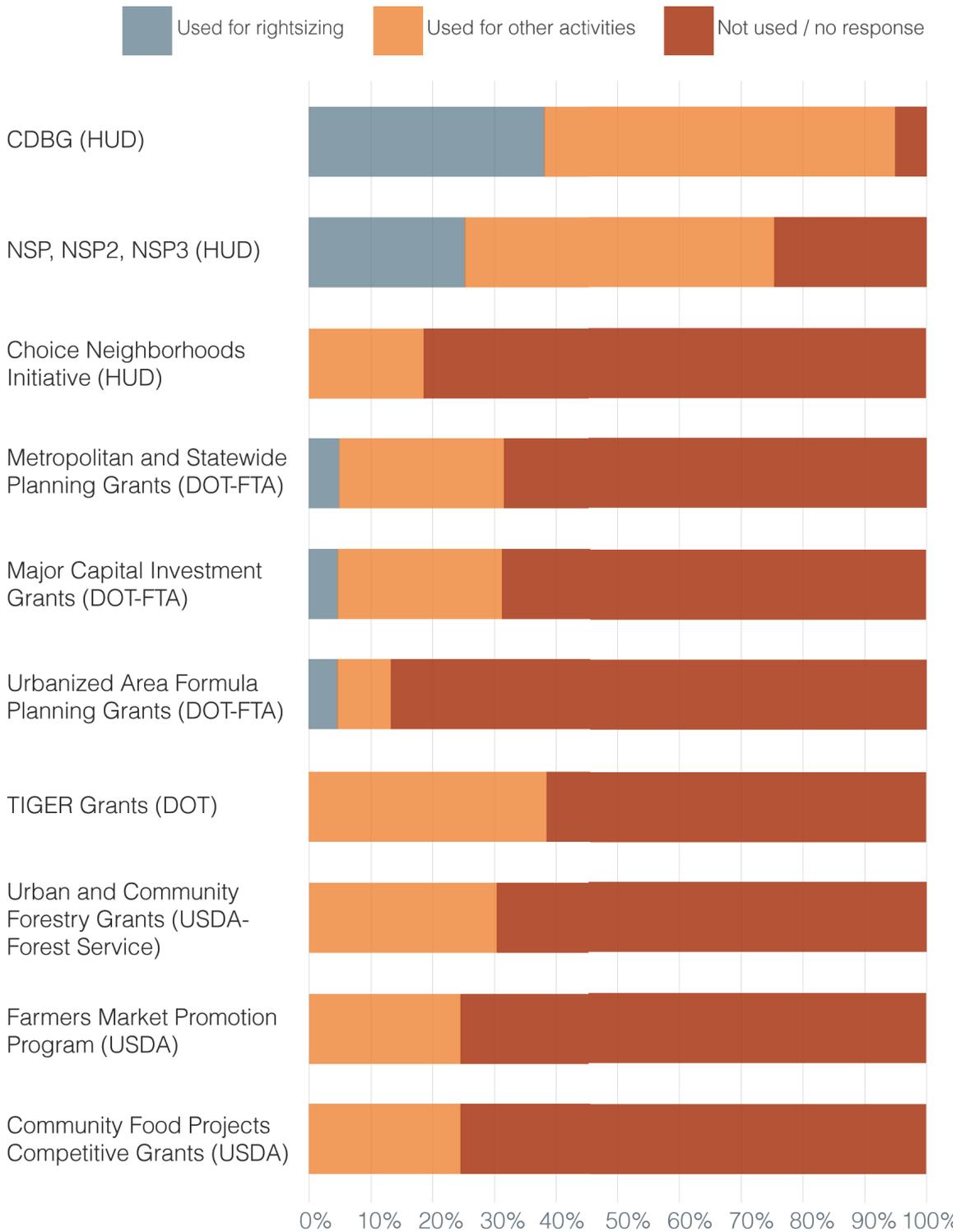
- Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) and Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grants
- Community Base Reuse Plans grants
- Community Economic Adjustment Planning Assistance

10. Has your city used any of the following resources offered by other federal agencies for rightsizing planning and activities?

- Energy Efficiency Conservation Block Grants offered by the Department of Energy
- Impact Aid School Construction Funds offered by the Department of Education
- Education Stabilization Funds offered by the Department of Education
- Urban and Community Forestry grants offered by the Forest Service
- The Department of Labor's Job Corps

11. What other resources does your city use for rightsizing planning and activities, if any?

Online Survey Data



Sections 502, 521, 523,
524, 533 (USDA)

Planning and Technical
Assistance Grants
(Commerce-EDA)

CDC/504 loans (Commerce-
SBA)

Public Works and Economic
Adjustment Assistance
(Commerce-EDA)

Technical Assistance
(Commerce)

Section 703 Disaster Relief
(Commerce-EDA)

Economic Adjustment
Assistance (Commerce)

Economic Development
Support for Planning Org-
anizations (Commerce)

Energy Efficiency Cons-
ervation Block Grants (DOE)

STTR and SBIR grants
(DOD)

Community Base Reuse
Plans Grants (DOD)

