Vacant Land Reuse

Vacancy challenges are not only about empty houses, but also about empty lots. Swaths of vacant land from large-scale demolition of residential or industrial buildings and streets pockmarked with vacant lots where houses once stood can perpetuate a downward cycle of disinvestment. Vacant land reuse can catalyze inclusive, sustainable, and comprehensive neighborhood stabilization and revitalization while serving as a canvas to engage and empower residents, community based organizations, and city governments. Built upon an understanding of the historical context that caused vacant land to emerge as a prevalent issue in cities, this unit will explore the foundations of quality, equitable vacant land reuse planning and implementation.

The modules in this unit can be mixed-and-matched with modules in other units to create a place-based training just right for your community. Contact Courtney Knox at cknox@communityprogress.net to discuss a place-based training structure that would work best for you.

Module 1:

Vacant Land Reuse 101

Recommended Length: 60-90 minutes

Efforts to reuse vacant land can serve as the starting point of a sustainable, inclusive, and comprehensive community development process. Vacant land can serve as a canvas to engage residents and provide opportunity to take action. Within the historic context of power structures and oppression manifested through land access policies and practices, this module provides an overarching introduction to the foundations of quality vacant land reuse planning and implementation. Understanding neighborhood and city context; data, policy, and processes; community engagement and partnerships; project design (including planning, funding, and implementation); and maintenance contribute to a revitalization process that improves neighborhood conditions and empowers people. Each of these facets of a planning process can—and should—adapt to the unique needs and context of each community. This module will equip participants with a more complete understanding of a strategic approach to vacant land reuse planning and implementation.
Module 2:
The Lay of the Land: 
Data, Policy, and Processes

Recommended Length: 90 minutes

Vacant land reuse decisions happen within the context of local needs, assets, and priorities. Vacant land ownership, access, and reuse possibilities vary dramatically from municipality to municipality. The need for transparent, accessible information, policies, and processes, however, does not. Successful and catalytic vacant land reuse projects depend upon a local context that enables and supports them. This module will help you to understand the basic elements of creating a system supportive of vacant land transformation including: having transparent and accessible data (on ownership, zoning, etc.); enabling or facilitating local ordinances and policies; and designing clear, accessible processes (land acquisition, permitting, etc.). While the primary audience for this module is local government, it can be successfully adapted for a community-based audience – focusing more on the details of the local data, policy, and processes and/or how to advocate for a more transparent, accessible system to be implemented.

Module 3:
It Takes a Village: 
Collaboration and Engagement

Recommended Length: 60-90 minutes

Cities and neighborhoods are rich ecosystems, with networks of neighbors, organizations, and agencies, all of which should be leveraged in a vacant land reuse project or plan. Engaging and fostering collaboration to maximize the positive social, economic, and environmental impact of vacant land projects is equal parts art and science. This module will cover well-established, creative collaboration tools and strategies, while showcasing a range of national examples of multi-stakeholder collaborations on vacant land reuse projects and plans. Participants will be guided through how to bring diverse stakeholders together to engage and collaborate on any type of project – large or small.
Module 4:

Ideas to Action: Project Design, Planning, and Implementation

Prerequisite: Modules 2 & 3, if unfamiliar with vacant land systems
Recommended Length: 90-120 minutes

When implementing any new vacant land project—whether that means tackling a single problem lot in a neighborhood or development a citywide vacant land strategy—a little planning and design go a long way. Building on Module 3, this module will introduce participants to potential vacant land “treatments” or designs – ranging from passive to active, art to infrastructure, agriculture to recycling, and standalone to comprehensive. With ideas spinning, we’ll walk through basic project planning, including objectives and action steps, task delegation, supply and resource procurement, and budget development, as well as implementation. Participants will receive templates for site design, project planning, and budgeting.

Module 5:

Sustaining Impact through Maintenance

Prerequisite: Module 1
Recommended Length: 60-90 minutes

The visioning stage of a vacant land reuse project is usually the most exciting, but those dreams will only come to fruition—with long-term positive impacts—if ongoing maintenance is planned from the start. Maintenance and upkeep often fall to the bottom of the priority list. Maintenance is more than cutting grass, picking up trash, and responding to complaints; it is an opportunity to build local relationships, mitigate environmental liabilities, unlock new sources of financial capital, and facilitate shared responsibility for the care of community assets. The focus of this module will be to “start with the end in mind,” by strategizing methods to leverage good planning and design, stakeholders, collaborations, and resources (financial and otherwise) to support project maintenance. Showcasing initiatives that considered maintenance up front in their design process, this module will help participants consider their own unique blend of ingredients to incorporate into an intentional maintenance strategy.