

## HOUSING



A influx of state cash is helping cities like Newark and Trenton clean up abandoned properties, but New Jersey planning advocates say the state needs to come up with a comprehensive plan to improve housing. *Shutterstock*

# Let's plan before we demolish

## New Jersey is in desperate need of a cohesive housing policy

**Stephen H. O'Connor** *Guest Columnist*

Gov. Chris Christie's recent announcement to initiate a massive demolition of abandoned properties in Newark and Trenton should be applauded, as it offers an opportunity to physically and economically reshape these urban communities. However, absent a greater vision, simply knocking down buildings will punch more holes into an urban fabric that is already in desperate need of mending.

The scope of the challenge is formidable. According to the 2015 American Community Survey, there are 34,694 housing units within the city of Trenton; 6,850 of which are recorded as vacant. That's almost 20 percent of the total. Newark has nearly 18,000 vacant housing units, which equals nearly 16 percent of the city's existing housing stock. For the state as a whole, New Jersey is home to some 388,000 vacant units of housing. When you do the math, that's one out of every 10 housing units in the state. While vacant doesn't necessarily translate into abandoned, we won't split hairs.

So before the bulldozers arrive, let's develop a strategy by mapping the locations of the units to be eliminated. Once identified, an assessment of what will remain is essential. The prospect of a few occupied housing units surrounded by a sea of empty lots is just as debilitating as the visual and physical blight of abandoned properties.

Detroit provides a good example, although in 2015 there were more than three times as many vacant units (110,000) in the Motor City as there are housing units in Trenton. Given the scale of the challenge, Detroit initially concentrated its effort downtown before working its way toward the periphery. Surveys were conducted to assess both the physical condition of the housing units and the level of occupancy on a street-by-street basis.

Individual household surveys were conducted to interview the remaining residents in existing and occupied structures. These data then served to inform a citywide relocation strategy. The goal was to establish density by consolidation; moving residents from sparsely populated streets and neighborhoods to other parts of the city. Sufficient notice was provided to both tenant and landlord, as well as financial assistance to ensure a successful transition.

While Detroit was able to attract an impressive array of financial partners, including the Ford and Kresge Foundations, Community Development Financial Institutions and other nonprofit organizations, the city has also relied on the private market to help fund this initiative.

Integral to Detroit's overall redevelopment strategy was to control whole and contiguous blocks of property for the purpose of selling reclaimed parcels to investors. Equally important was a clear recognition that not every parcel needed to be sold or that every unit needed to be redeveloped. Instead, the vision of how to incorporate large swaths of reclaimed land into ribbons of connected open space is creating new aesthetic and recreational landscapes.

Beyond the abandoned and vacant inventory, the cities of Newark and Trenton have the highest number of foreclosures in the state at 2,255 and 1,540 residential units, respectively. While many might think this is simply an urban problem, in third place with 1,350 residential foreclosures is Toms River. In fact, the region of the state with the highest numbers of residential foreclosures comprises



Gov. Chris Christie addresses reporters and community leaders standing before 26-28 Fountain Ave. in Trenton, a block lined with boarded-up and abandoned row houses. The state is helping Trenton with funding to tear down abandoned building. *Claude Brodessa-Akner/For The Star-Ledger*

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Burlington, Camden and Gloucester counties. They combined for 16,033 residential foreclosures. And no, with less than 700 residential units in foreclosure, Camden doesn't skew this number. In fact, it doesn't even make the top 10.

In addition to having the highest property tax rate in the nation, New Jersey also holds the distinction of having the highest rate of residential foreclosures in the country. While the numbers change daily, today there are 76,577 residential units in some form of foreclosure throughout the state. This information is compiled from RealtyTrac, which is considered the gold standard for national data on foreclosures.

Whoever is elected the next governor of our great state sure has his or her work cut out, as New Jersey is in desperate need of a cohesive housing policy. Home to some of the most distressed urban communities in the nation, we need to update and implement a revived State Land Use Plan. To facilitate the redevelopment of abandoned and distressed assets, we need drastic regulatory reform.

Unfortunately, the suburban juggernaut that was once New Jersey no longer exists. The question is, which candidate possesses the vision to see the obvious and the political will to champion a public policy agenda that reflects our current reality? No less than our economic future is at stake.

*Stephen H. O'Connor is executive director of PlanSmart NJ and an adjunct professor at the Kislak Institute for Real Estate at Monmouth University.*