Forum Focus

Helping Cities Get it Right: Preservation Strategies for Addressing Rightsizing

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Helping Cities Get it Right: Strategies for Addressing Rightsizing

This Forum Focus summarizes the results of the recent study “Putting the Right in Rightsizing: A Historic Preservation Case Study,” published by the Michigan Historic Preservation Network (MHPN) and the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP). Prepared by preservation specialist Brenna Moloney, this study outlines lessons learned during her two years working closely with the cities of Saginaw and Lansing, Mich., and makes recommendations for these and other American cities that are undergoing the rightsizing process.

In an era when some cities are facing high unemployment and shrinking tax bases, city planners and policymakers are no longer solely focused on growth; they are also working to responsibly manage contraction. This process has come to be called rightsizing. Whether undertaken deliberately or allowed to happen organically, rightsizing will inevitably have consequences for historic preservation.

**GETTING THE WORDS RIGHT**

**Land banking** – the practice of buying land that is not needed immediately, but with the expectation of using it in the future.

**Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP)** – HUD program established for the purpose of stabilizing communities that have suffered from foreclosures and abandonment. The program accomplishes this through the purchase and redevelopment (which sometimes involves the demolition) of foreclosed and abandoned homes and residential properties.

**Rightsizing** – the practice of shrinking a city to a more manageable footprint and infrastructure in response to sustained population loss. This can involve the demolition of vacant and abandoned property and the curtailment of services in neighborhoods to concentrate investment in other neighborhoods through rehabilitation and new construction.
In October 2010 with grant funding from the Americana Foundation, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Michigan Historic Preservation Network (MHPN), teamed up to identify such consequences and test drive ways to use preservation strategies to secure better rightsizing outcomes. They placed a part-time preservation specialist in Saginaw and Lansing, Mich., both of which were experiencing the effects of rightsizing influenced in part by the federal government’s Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP). The goal was to create a model that would demonstrate how the application of intensified historic preservation approaches could benefit cities planning for rightsizing. In both cities, the overall preservation objectives were the same, but the preservation strategies employed differed depending on the unique conditions of each city.

**BACKGROUND**

For some time, the National Trust and its preservation partners have been concerned about the potential effects of rightsizing in the post-industrial cities of the Midwest and Northeast. They feared that federal funds—specifically Neighborhood Stabilization funds—allocated to implement rightsizing goals

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**THE CITIES**

**Saginaw** – Bisected by the Saginaw River, Saginaw today has a population of 51,000, down from its 1960s population of 98,000. A large number of housing units are vacant. As a result the city has pursued federal funding for demolition and rehab of vacant and abandoned properties, most recently through the Neighborhood Stabilization Program. It has also partnered with the Saginaw County Land Bank and promoted an aggressive strategy that involves demolishing vacant properties, acquiring land, and land banking.

**Lansing** – Lansing is the state capital and is also an auto manufacturing center. It is adjacent to East Lansing, home of Michigan State University. Despite this, the city has experienced a population loss in recent decades, with a 4.1 percent decrease since 2000. Lansing has undertaken rightsizing efforts in response to environmental issues, specifically flooding from the Grand River. It is also receiving federal Neighborhood Stabilization funds.

Both cities have an older than average housing stock. The U.S. median home age is 34 years, Saginaw’s is 109 years while Lansing’s is much younger at 54 years.
could result in a wave of demolition on a scale not seen since the 1960s when urban renewal brought about the unprecedented loss of historic resources.

The National Trust and the MHPN came to believe that the rightsizing efforts in Saginaw and Lansing offered an opportunity to intervene productively. They hoped to inspire community revitalization through historic preservation and to explore nontraditional approaches to future city planning. The preservation specialist position was created to advance thoughtful, pro-preservation rightsizing principles that incorporated preservation by providing technical assistance, community education, and organizational capacity building.

**ADDRESSING RIGHTSIZING AND ITS EFFECT ON HISTORIC RESOURCES**

Rightsizing, whether conscious or unconscious, poses significant challenges to preservationists. In both Saginaw and Lansing, preservation efforts were being inadvertently undermined by inadequate training for rehabilitation contractors, confusion over the Section 106 process, and a federal funding program (NSP) biased in favor of demolition. Once these particular areas of concern were identified, the preservation specialist focused her work in three specific areas: active participation on Saginaw’s NSP planning committee, providing technical assistance to the cities’ planning departments and historic district commissions, and assisting the communities at large.

**NEIGHBORHOOD STABILIZATION PROGRAM**

The Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Neighborhood Stabilization Program was established in response to the 2008 foreclosure crisis with the goal of stabilizing communities affected by the crisis through the purchase and redevelopment of foreclosed and abandoned residential properties.

Unfortunately in Saginaw, NSP funding led to the demolition of a significant number of historic buildings. Planners were either unaware of the significance of the buildings or unwilling to consider alternative approaches for what they saw as dilapidated structures. In general, preservation was not included in the planning process. Additionally the Section 106 process proved insufficient for dealing with the large number of demolition reviews.
As a first step in addressing this issue, the preservation specialist took an advisory role in the Section 106 process, helping both communities and NSP representatives understand the process. While the work of the specialist was important, it became clear that more 106 training was needed for NSP staff and that hiring a cultural resource manager or consulting firm would go a long way to make the process run smoothly and on schedule.

Although a second round of NSP funding was aimed at rehabilitation, elements of it acted to undermine preservation efforts. For example, restraints on rehab requirements placed by the NSP complicated the rehab work considerably, significantly increasing its cost. Other hurdles included the perception that rehabilitating historic buildings was inordinately expensive, the quick turnaround times required, and a lack of trained craftspeople available to do the work. Both cities suffered from a lack of effective preservation regulatory and planning processes, and the occasional, overt exclusion of a preservation voice in decision-making.

In response, the preservation specialist set up a training program in Saginaw to review the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for contractors interested in bidding on NSP rehab projects. A classroom session was followed by a building walk-through with NSP staff and an architect from the state historic preservation office to see how the Standards were being applied to a work in progress.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

The preservation specialist worked with both cities to better integrate historic preservation into the rightsizing planning. Both lacked staff and resources to conduct the necessary surveys and documentation work and integrate findings into the city database and GIS. This data also needed to be shared with county governments and land banks so that it could be incorporated into their systems and decision making as well. To begin to deal with these issues in Saginaw, the preservation specialist and the Michigan SHPO staff historian conducted a windshield survey of NSP target zones to determine eligibility for listing in the National Register.
**ACTIONS PRESERVATION ORGANIZATIONS CAN TAKE**

1. Conduct “Historic Preservation 101” sessions for NSP planning committee members. Develop alternative development plans for proposed demolition projects where appropriate.

2. Help the Neighborhood Stabilization Program to market historic properties by providing information/brochures on state and federal tax credits and statistics on home value stability in historic districts. Connect city staff with state and nationwide contacts to locate interested investors and developers for NSP multi-use projects and vacant historic buildings.

3. Offer training sessions for contractors interested in bidding on historic rehabs within the NSP program. Organize a tour of historic rehabs with contractors and SHPO staff to demonstrate use of Secretary of the Interior’s Standards.

4. Train NSP community representatives in Section 106 and encourage hiring of experienced consultants to assist with documentation and mitigation.

5. Survey areas targeted for rightsizing and help with determination of eligibility for listing in the National Register. Or, in the case of a loss of integrity or context, make recommendations for de-listing.

6. Conduct windshield survey of neighborhoods targeted for infill development and suggest designs that would complement existing house types.

7. Evaluate city master plan to ensure inclusive preservation planning principles.

8. Work to strengthen local historic district commission to serve as “voice” for preservation.

9. Conduct education sessions for local residents on historic tax credits and other incentives.

10. Attend city council, school board, and neighborhood association meetings to provide consistent voice for preservation.
Another role of the preservation specialist was to strengthen the existing historic district commission (HDC). Communities faced with rightsizing need an active historic district commission that can serve as a positive “voice” for preservation. A strong commission with well-qualified members and an ongoing recruitment program will be able to work with city officials to make sure that historic resources are part of the decision-making process. In Saginaw, for example, the specialist encouraged HDC staff to attend city council and planning commission meetings and to expand their outreach to residents of historic districts through the use of mailings, blogs, and social media.

The specialist also worked with the community at large to educate and advocate for preservation citywide. This work included workshops on the historic preservation tax credits, “preservation 101” talks to various civic groups and homeowner associations, and attendance at city council, school board and neighborhood association meetings along with other local preservationists.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Every city is different, and developing a one-size-fits-all solution is impossible. Some commonalities do emerge, however, from the work in Saginaw and Lansing. The greatest barrier to historic preservation in shrinking cities is the lack of financial resources available to property owners to improve their homes and businesses. This problem has been aggravated by the foreclosure crisis, unemployment, and a decades-long decline in wages. Keeping this in mind, the following recommendations emerged from the work in Saginaw and Lansing:

- Funding for rightsizing and public programs, such as NSP, should be coupled or based on homeowner or small business improvement grants, ideally focused on historic neighborhoods, to assist residents already living and investing in their shrinking city.

- Land banks should integrate preservation planning into their work when operating in historic districts.

- Single-family housing is prevalent in many shrinking cities but does not necessarily correspond to the needs of the community or future housing trends, which are expected to shift toward senior housing rather than families as baby-boomers age. Programs such as NSP do not necessarily reflect these changing demographics. More flexible approaches are needed so the reuse of historic buildings and neighborhoods will reflect shifting trends while still maintaining an acceptable level of material integrity.

- When expansive, federally-funded programs are undertaken, such as the NSP, Section 106 should begin as early as possible. Cities should use consultants who are experienced in Section 106 and familiar with federal regulations. Specialists employed by state agencies who administer these grants should receive Section 106 training.
CONCLUSION

In many areas of the country rightsizing is not likely to go away any time soon, and preservationists should plan now to make sure that consideration of historic resources are part of the process. At the same time, they should be flexible and responsive to the critical resource needs that cities are trying to address in their rightsizing plans. The work in Saginaw and Lansing provides a blueprint for preservationists in other cities to follow when rightsizing takes place in their community. Historic preservation can serve as a way to democratize the rightsizing process and empower citizens to identify for themselves what should remain and what should be let go. As such preservationists should be tireless in their efforts to make the rightsizing process leverage historic resources for the benefit of all.