

Green spaces abound in city

Fix for sewer overflow could aid blight fight

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Cleveland is better positioned than almost any other city in the country to explore using a federally mandated water cleanup program to transform large tracts of vacant land into verdant, park-like features that could improve the aesthetic of blighted neighborhoods, while addressing the region's longtime problem of overflowing sewers.

The previous decade's foreclosure crisis in Cleveland resulted in the abandonment of thousands of homes and industrial parcels — the kind of land that other U.S. cities hope to turn into so-called “green” solutions to their sewage problems while saving their ratepayers hundreds of millions — or perhaps billions — of dollars.

Yet, despite lobbying from land reuse and city planning experts, the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District has given only minimal consideration to the potentially cheaper, greener approach to its “Project Clean Lake” — a multi-billion-dollar project designed to stop noxious overflows of the region's antiquated storm and sewer system.

Instead, the sewer district has committed to spending 97.5 percent of the project's budget on traditional “gray” infrastructure — seven massive underground tunnels that will hold untreated sewage and water during rainstorms until it can be pumped to the surface for treatment.

The tunneling project has cost the typical homeowner thousands of dollars to date.

Critics say the sewer district has brushed off their potentially cost-saving suggestions. Jim Rokakis, director of the Thriving Communities Institute, an agency dedicated to finding uses for vacant land, said recently that the sewer district “made the decision to go gray from Day 1” and has only paid lip service to green alternatives since.

If there's one thing this town has, it's available land, said Rokakis, the former Cuyahoga County treasurer and a nationally recognized expert on foreclosures.

SEWER

FROM A1

But the district never looked into what it would take to buy expanses of abandoned property or acquire them through foreclosure or eminent domain, he said.

That land, he and planners argue, could — and should — be re-used to naturally filter rainwater in “rain gardens” and other unpaved areas before it deluges the combined sewer system below and causes overflows into the region's rivers and Lake Erie.

The cost of maintaining the land — an expense that sewer district officials raise as one of their primary objections to a greener approach — would be worth it in the long run, Rokakis said. Some of the money the sewer district already charges ratepayers could be set aside to pay for long-term upkeep.

“If it could save hundreds of millions of dollars, wouldn't it be worth it?” Rokakis said. “If for no other reason than the fact that we're one of the most impoverished cities in the country, and the burden these rate increases are going to place on families will be crippling.”

Vacant land steering committee fizzles

The sewer district's \$3 billion agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency requires the district to spend at least \$42 million on green infrastructure. The 10 sites that the district eventually will develop will cost \$82 million and will divert millions of gallons of storm water through retention basins and other landscaped areas that provide natural filtration. The consent decree also allows the district to swap out tunnels for additional green projects if they are shown to be more cost-effective while achieving the same goals.

The U.S. EPA's own description of Cleveland's plan touts its focus on building green infrastructure in “low-income neighborhoods with a history of disinvestment and neglect.”

Cleveland has an estimated 15,000 abandoned lots. So far, the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District has planned green projects for 76 of them.

In 2012, sewer district officials asked Terry Schwarz, an urban planner, to participate on a committee of community experts that would help identify which vacant sites to use for green projects.

After an initial meeting, Schwarz, director of Kent State University's Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, said she had high hopes.

“We all sat there, and they gave this talk about how they really see this potential [to redevelop vacant land],” she recalled in a recent interview. “I was so excited ... and then they never convened the group. Never.”

As a whole, the sewer district has never meaningfully engaged outside community experts on how to maximize the public money spent on the project, Schwarz said.

The result: the handful of green projects the district ended up planning are scattered throughout the city, largely in areas that Schwarz says are too far-flung for anyone to enjoy.

“There's a really good opportunity here, and it's heading in a direction where I don't think we're going to capitalize on that opportunity,” she said. “And that's a really sad thing.”

St. Louis to transform blighted neighborhood

Among the cities doing it right, Schwarz says, is St. Louis.

The Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District is planning 33 miles of tunnels to cut down on the billions of gallons it dumps into the Mississippi River and its tributaries every year. But sewer officials also developed a plan that enabled the district to eliminate one of its tunnels and save more than \$1 billion by concentrating green infrastructure in a key area of the city — a neighborhood that resembles many in Cleveland, suffering from vacancy, blight and disinvestment.

The result, if all goes well, will be a neighborhood transformed into one of the lushest in the city, with park-like amenities that both manage storm water and attract further development.

The plan faces hurdles, of course. The technology and its applications remain under review during the pilot project, and so far, no one has taken the district up on its offer for free green infrastructure in exchange for new development.

St. Louis Sewer District spokesman Lance LeComb says that choosing green for the cost-savings means sewer officials must communicate better than ever before with customers and the public, educating them about the benefits of above ground storm water management and sometimes, selling them on the idea.

“Our folks are working to protect the environment, but traditionally their solutions have been out of sight, out of mind,” he said. “People tend to flush and never give it another thought. At the end of this project, how you flush isn't going to change. No magic sewer genie will show up. But the green infrastructure solutions require us to have a personal relationship with our customers, to develop trust on both sides and start using the same language about the possibilities.”

Opportunity Corridor could live up to its name

In Cleveland, Schwarz says similar possibilities still exist in the proposed Opportunity Corridor highway and the ghost town of a neighborhood that surrounds it.

In September, state transportation officials approved funding for the construction of the \$331 million corridor, a 3.5-mile, five-lane boulevard to connect Interstate 490 at Interstate 77 and East 55th Street to fast-growing University Circle on Cleveland's East Side. Work is set to begin this summer.

Between its destinations, the road would traverse some of the most desolate blocks of Cleveland, 200 acres of crumbling industrial buildings, boarded-up homes and vacant tracts known as the Forgotten Triangle. The road investment is expected to open the surrounding neighborhoods to development. More than half of the vacant land is in the city or county land bank.

Several of the sewer district's planned green projects are nearby, but with one fatal flaw: None is directly connected to the development, choking off public access to green space or storm water management to the businesses that might settle there, Schwarz says.

Sewer district officials say their initial green infrastructure plan didn't include the Opportunity Corridor. But they now are working with state transportation officials, as well as community economic development groups, to search for new green projects.

Sewer district Finding land is tough

Sewer district Executive Director Julius Ciaccia says that pairing green projects with available land is easier said than done.

To satisfy federal regulators, the district faces one formidable challenge — guaranteeing that it will have control over the green sites in perpetuity, he says. Asking private property owners to dedicate land to storm water management with the promise that it will never be redeveloped is a tall order.

The district also must demonstrate that the projects are being properly maintained and that they continue to meet the goals for combined sewer overflow control, Ciaccia said.

Finding contiguous land is difficult, too. Many parcels are separated by existing structures, whether inhabited or not.

And city leaders, including some in Cleveland, believe that urban centers should remain or green space. They have a hard time accepting the reality that people likely will never return to some neighborhoods to live or establish businesses, Ciaccia said.

Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson declined to make his administration available to be interviewed for this story. But

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and future development. They hadn't quite figured it out, Frangos said. They said they'd get back to him.

Six months later, he said he has heard no updates.

"Those are questions that probably are not easily answered," Frangos said. "What I don't know, and I wouldn't want to venture speculation on it, is whether they are just not putting their pencils and heads to the grind to answer those questions or whether it's a legitimate source of difficulty."

Schwarz. It's too soon to give up on green

Rokakis and Schwarz agree that the challenges would be worth the payoff. And although the sewer district is locked into its plan through a federal consent decree, it's not too late to change course.

Schwarz says she is heartened to hear recent news that the district is asking the U.S. EPA to reopen the agreement to negotiate an integrated plan — a strategy that seeks a comprehensive approach to water quality issues and allows the district to rearrange its priorities, addressing some sources of pollution over others. But the district should use the opportunity not to tweak the existing plan, but to start over, incorporating green infrastructure as a major part of the solution, she says.

"I was hoping that these eight years of initial green projects would get people so excited to do more," she said. "Based on what I'm seeing, I don't know if there will be much of a call to action. But I do know that standing at the beginning of a three-decade investment, it's too soon to give up."

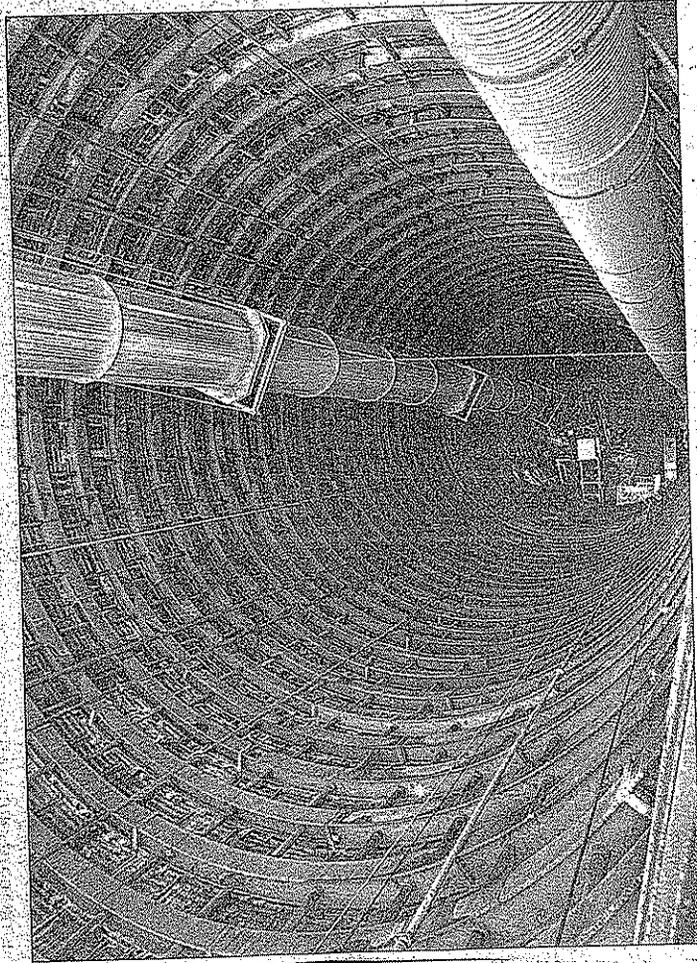
Cuyahoga Land Bank offers solutions

Gus Frangos, president of the Cuyahoga Land Bank, said it is true that many of the vacant parcels are scattered or squeezed between houses.

But thousands more are ripe for the picking, he said. And getting your hands on such land is not as difficult as it once was. Frangos said his land bank designed what he referred to as "the aggregator" — a computerized system for determining how to acquire vacant parcels in any given area. By feeding criteria into the aggregator, the land bank can pinpoint where certain abandoned properties are in the foreclosure process and map out the quickest route to completing all the purchases.

Frangos said he offered up the aggregator's powers during a meeting with sewer district officials about six months ago. He told them that if they point out where in the city they are interested in building green infrastructure, he could run the neighborhood through the aggregator and provide a road map for acquiring the properties the district needs.

But district officials indicated that, between their engineers and topography experts,



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The four men standing at the bottom of the 200-foot shaft (and one on a ladder) are barely visible, dwarfed by the scale of the Euclid Creek Tunnel project at East 140th in Bratenahl. Down in the tunnel, a borer, the second largest such machine in the United States, chews into the shale, which is removed by conveyor belt, as the tunnel slowly creeps toward Lake Erie. The East 156th Street portion of the project will begin this fall. It will be completed in 2015.

McNally Kiewit is the contractor.

In a written statement, Jackson spokeswoman Maureen Harper said that the city would work with the sewer district to include more green projects if the technology proves itself.

"We support the idea of proving the concept first, then trading more gray for green infrastructure," Harper wrote. Furthermore, Mayor Jackson and his administration view vacant property in Cleveland as an asset, a resource for green space