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# Where Do We Fit In? CDCs and the Emerging Shrinking City Movement

As some cities begin to admit they are shrinking, CDCs in high-abandonment neighborhoods are rethinking their traditional roles, and even their missions. By [ALAN MALLACH](#)



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The Green Team of Slavic Village Development, a Cleveland CDC, creating raised bed gardens. (COURTESY Neighborhood Progress Inc.)

There's nothing new about [shrinking cities](#). Many American cities have been losing population steadily since the 1950s and 1960s, as suburbanization, deindustrialization, and migration to the Sun Belt have all taken their toll. Detroit has lost a million people since 1950, a decline of 54 percent, and vast areas of open land where pheasants strut through the underbrush have replaced houses, stores, and factories. Other cities, including Youngstown, Cleveland, Dayton, and Buffalo, are in the same boat.

What is new is that more and more cities are coming out and admitting that

they are shrinking. In the early 1990s, when Detroit's city ombudsman, Marie Farrell-Donaldson, a respected African-American civic leader, called for the city to recognize that it was shrinking and begin to act accordingly, the response was a mixture of anger and ridicule. Today, Detroit Mayor Dave Bing has embraced shrinkage and set a planning process in motion that explicitly recognizes that the future Detroit will be a smaller, greener city than it once was.

Planning for a shrinking city is tough. Cities like Detroit, Cleveland, and Youngstown have begun to recognize that they have far more houses and apartments than they will ever need in the future. They have large areas that have lost most of their population, where most of the houses have been demolished, and where few if any prospective homeowners want to buy. At the same time, many other seemingly healthy neighborhoods are at risk. As Detroit's Karla Henderson says, "Even some of our stronger neighborhoods are at a tipping point with vacancy."

With rents and sales prices at rock bottom, with vacant units in the thousands, and demand not enough to keep houses even in the cities' stronger neighborhoods occupied, cities face a series of tough choices. Building more new housing, particularly affordable housing, means (with rare exceptions) that even more older homes will be abandoned. Disproportionately poor populations and high unemployment mean that these cities need to find new engines to drive their local economy or face a future as little more than bankrupt wards of a fraying welfare state. At the same time, with cities facing massive deficits, the pressure to cut back on services and infrastructure in largely depopulated areas is strong. Many of these strategies can be controversial, stirring up memories of discredited practices like urban renewal and redlining.

### **Roles for CDCs**

Community development corporations (CDCs) in cities like Detroit and Cleveland have been working for years to rebuild neighborhoods, and they find themselves challenged by this new movement.

Detroit's CDCs, led by their association, [Community Development Advocates of Detroit](#) (CDAD), have embraced the challenge head-on. At the end of 2008, well before Mayor Bing was elected, CDAD pulled together a task force to take a serious look at Detroit's future. As CDAD's chair, Southwest Housing Solutions Executive Director Tim Thorland, says, "It is only when we understand the conditions and strategies necessary for the entire city that we can begin to make decisions about specific neighborhoods."



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