

NVPC Participates in Shrinking Cities Symposium by Jonathan Logan¹

In early February NVPC Advisory Committee Member Dan Kildee, together with Research and Policy Director Joe Schilling presented papers at the [Shrinking Cities Symposium](#) sponsored by the [Institute of Urban and Regional Development](#) at the University of California, Berkeley. The Institute hosts the [Shrinking Cities Group](#), a collaborative of International researchers exploring the social, cultural, economic, and political implications of distressed rural and urban cities with declining populations. The symposium gathered academics and practitioners from across the United States and around the globe to discuss the dynamics of shrinking cities. Participants shared their research on shrinking cities, discussed policies to address shrinkage, and demonstrated strategies various localities and regions are testing to address the physical, social, and economic transformations that accompany shrinkage. Click here for a summary of the symposium and links to the NVPC presentations.

Although not a new phenomenon, shrinking cities have been recently receiving more attention in a global context. Like the Institute of Urban and Regional Development's Shrinking Cities Group, the German-based [Shrinking Cities Project](#), which took place between 2002 and 2005, brought together diverse disciplines to investigate the challenge of shrinking cities. The project identified four shrinking cities as case studies for shrinkage and what actions have been or are being used to address the issue: Detroit, Mich.; Ivanovo, Russia; Manchester/Liverpool, England; and Halle/Leipzig, Germany. Globally, cities may experience decline as a result of a number of factors, including deindustrialization, suburbanization, postsocialist transformation, and demographic aging (Oswalt, 2005). Shrinking cities face the challenge that they are outside the realm of the predominant planning models, which are centered on growth (Oswalt, 2005).

Academics and policymakers from Europe, Asia, and Australia are beginning to discuss alternatives to the growth model, but "[smart decline](#)" has yet to resonate to a wide audience within the US. One location outside this trend is Youngstown, Ohio, which recently decided to face its own shrinkage reality by adopting the [Youngstown 2010](#) plan. Although the project is early in its implementation, the fact that a plan to accept a smaller-sized city and acknowledge the development one time thought to be coming is a monumental step in the face of the US growth paradigm.

An exponential increase in shrinking cities has occurred since the middle of the 1950s and the traditional focus on attracting business and growth using economic incentives has proved to have modest success in stemming the forces of decline in these localities (Oswalt, 2005). The challenge this presents is that it necessitates the development of an alternative approach to stabilizing and redefining the existence of Shrinking Cities. While the shrinking of cities and regions may be caused by different factors, there is one thing they all have in common. Shrinkage is most visible in the landscape in the form of vacant and abandoned properties, as homes, businesses, and industries. As such, the National

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Vacant Properties Campaign is in the ideal position to reframe the issue for U.S. policymakers through the lens of vacant property prevention, abatement, and revitalization.

The topic of shrinkage was discussed from academic and policy perspectives during the two-day event at Berkeley. The first day presenters consisted of academics from North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. These researchers presented their work on shrinking cities and regions in places such as mining towns in South Korea, Canada and Mexico, Sao Paulo, Brazil, and the former East Germany. They also offered potential solutions to address the issue. Within the academic framework, shrinkage was presented as a parallel event with growth. From a global perspective, the concept of shrinking experiences different perceptions based on cultural backgrounds, different technical challenges such as an overbuilt environment, and numerous political obstacles such as finance and governance. Whether a post-industrial city in the U.S. rustbelt, a region undergoing post-socialist reformation, or a mining town experiencing global corporate structure change at a local level, shrinkage has many faces and presents different opportunities requiring diverse strategies and policies.

The presenters on the second day consisted of a mix of academics and practitioners, also from around the globe. The panelists highlighted research as well as presented policy strategies for addressing the issue of shrinkage. Included in the debate on shrinkage was what the process should be called. Due to the political sensitivity of facing an issue such as a decline in population, social capital, and economic prowess, presenters sought to reframe the shrinkage as an opportunity to explore new methods of city and regional structure through “smart decline,” recognizing not all areas are going to experience recovery, either in the short- or long-term. Methods by which governing bodies have dealt with shrinking include ignoring it, accommodating it through programs like land banking, combating it by investing in retention policies, and embracing it by creating assets of remaining strengths.

Among the presenters on the second day was Joe Schilling from the National Vacant Properties Campaign, who highlighted the Campaign’s work in cities across the U.S., and Buffalo in particular, discussing the [Blueprint Buffalo](#) document released in the fall of 2006. Mr. Schilling participated on a panel presenting on the translation of research into policy strategies. NVPC Advisory Committee Member Dan Kildee and Teresa Gillotti of the Genesee Institute in Flint, Mich., presented the work the Institute, in partnership with the [Genesee County Land Bank](#), has been conducting in a region experiencing a 28 percent land vacancy rate. The Institute is creating a plan for green infrastructure within the city and the county while the Land Bank, along with the county, have been utilizing a Michigan law that allows the public to leverage the equity in vacant land for acquisition and maintenance costs through tax lien sales and foreclosure processes. Kathryn Foster, of the University at Buffalo, discussed the regional shrinking issues experienced in Buffalo-Niagara that are being addressed by the [University at Buffalo Regional Institute](#). Identified as one of the “chronic losers” in an earlier presentation by Robert Beauregard of Columbia University, Foster explained the region has not experienced the typical “donut” effect, where the core city hollows out, but rather the entire region is losing

population. Despite this, the region still maintains an economy greater than that of seven states while it employs myriad strategies to address its shrinkage, including investing in job training, developing programs for resident and business retention, and growing or attracting industries to capitalize on the strengths and opportunities shrinking expose. Rollin Stanley, the director of St. Louis' [Planning and Urban Design Agency](#), presented the ongoing work of a city challenged by social and regional issues and perceptions - one that has lost 60 percent of its peak population in what he termed a "slow moving Katrina." The work focuses on many aspects to improve the city including infrastructure, education, increasing population density, transportation, and marketing city neighborhoods.

The symposium closed with the presentation of an agenda for continued research on shrinking cities. This agenda grew out of the topics presented and discussed at the symposium and includes:

- Investigating the differing economics and finance structures to better understand their implications for addressing shrinkage;
- Exploring the concepts and implementation of regional governance and its implications on the social, financial, and political issues surrounding shrinkage;
- Surveying the legal structures to better understand what legal interventions may be utilized by shrinking cities and regions; and
- Developing the concept that vacancy can be a luxury and that shrinkage should be considered an opportunity.