

Vacant & Abandoned Buildings

What Communities Can Do About Them



IAAI/USFA Abandoned Building Project



The "Broken Windows" Theory of Social Disorder



*From one broken window you
can lose a street*

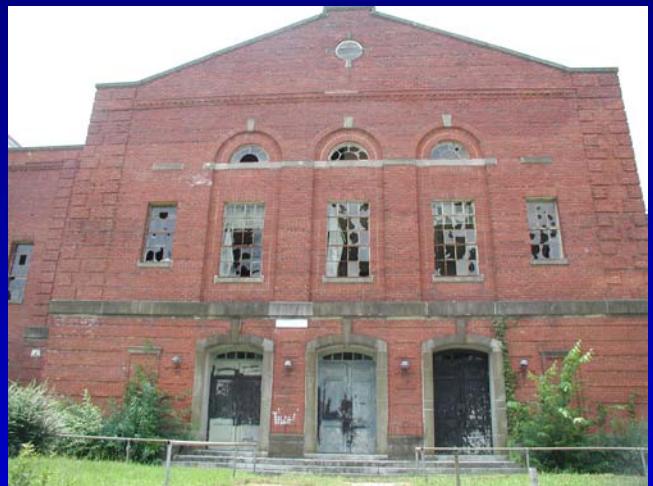
Vacant or Abandoned?

➤ Vacant buildings

- ✓ Owner is known
- ✓ Taxes are current
- ✓ Building is “unoccupied”

➤ Abandoned buildings

- ✓ No viable owner
- ✓ Taxes not paid
- ✓ Building is not legally occupied





The Impact on the Community

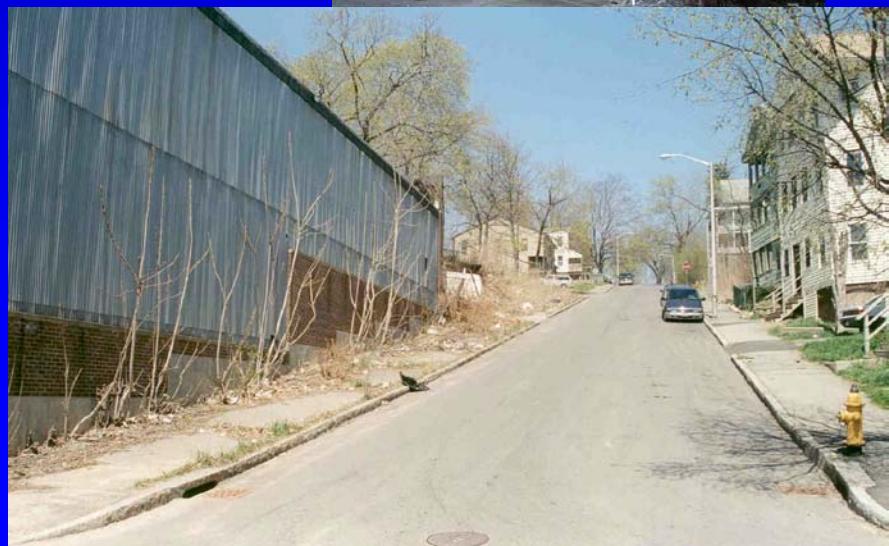
- **Community image**
- **Crime**
- **Public Safety**

**Abandonment is a
contagious
phenomenon**



Community Image and Blight

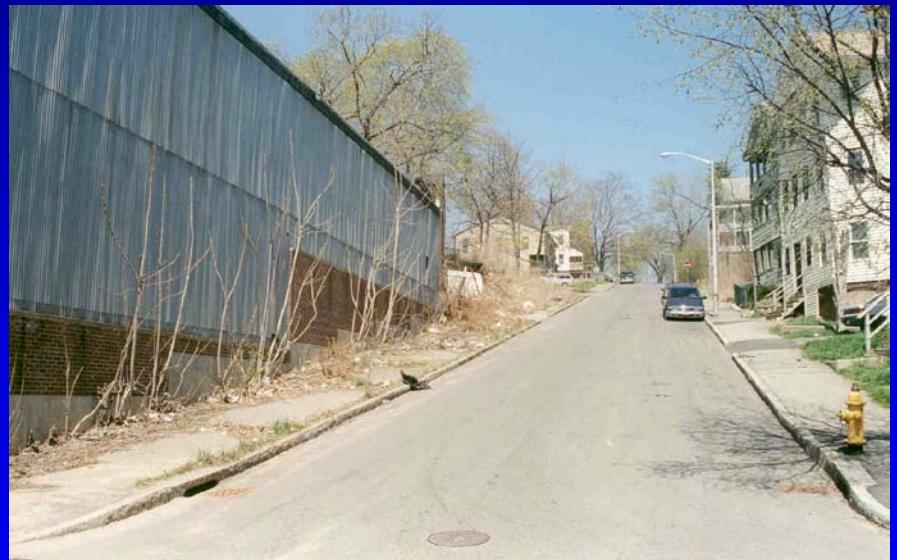
- Properties vacant or in disrepair
- Unsightly and easily ignited trash accumulations
- Rats and vermin
- ***RESULT***
 - ✓ Declining property values
 - ✓ Declining development



Crime

“Only the young, the criminal, or the foolhardy have any business on an unprotected avenue, and so more and more citizens will abandon the street to those they assume prowl it. Small disorders lead to larger and larger ones, and perhaps even to crime.”

**George Kelling and James Wilson
Atlantic Monthly Magazine, 1982**

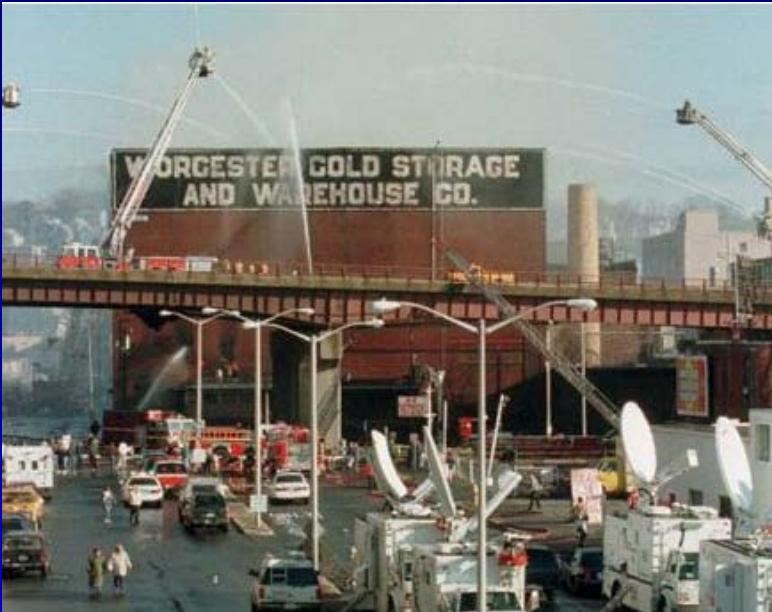


Safety



Public Safety

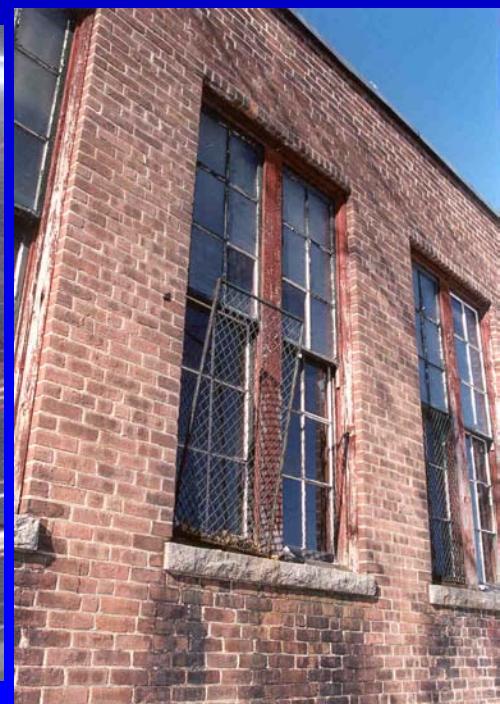
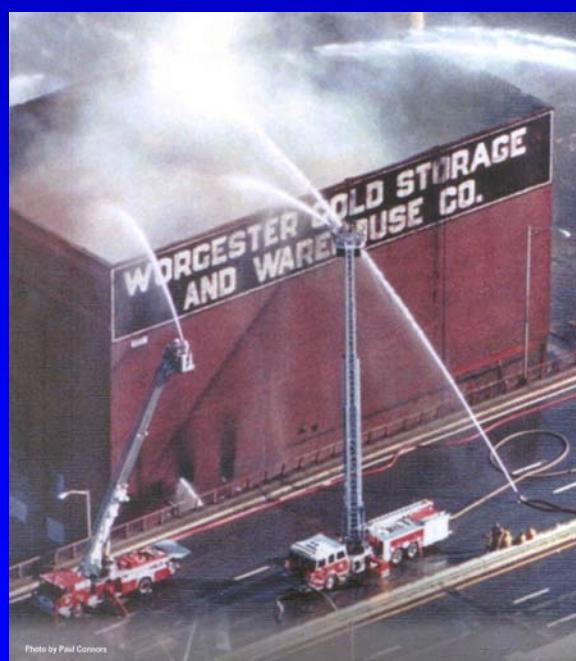
- Thousands of fires annually
- Civilian Injuries and deaths
- Firefighters are more likely to be injured fighting fires in vacant properties than any other property type
 - ✓ More than 6000 firefighters injuries every year
 - ✓ From 1990 to 1999 - 23 firefighters died while operating at fires in vacant/idle properties





Target Properties

- **Secure and well maintained properties are not the problem**
- **Target properties**
 - ✓ **Vacant**
 - ✓ **No viable owner**
 - ✓ **Unsecured**
 - ✓ **Accessible**



How Many Are There?



It is estimated that 18% of urban structures in the United States are unused

The ISO estimates that there are more than 21000 idle properties of over 15000 square feet in the United States



Community Problem

- **Abandoned buildings almost always become the problem of the community**
- **They are public safety hazards**
- **They require tax dollars to mitigate**
- **They are easy to ignore**



How serious is the Problem?

- **Studies show that many communities do not know the number of vacant or abandoned properties within their jurisdiction**
- **Critical information may not be available centrally**
- **The “paper chase” to identify owners is time consuming and may prove to be very difficult if not impossible**

The Vacancy Progression



Owner: Responsive
Uninhabited
Secure



Owner: Unresponsive
Uninhabited
Open to Unauthorized Entry



Owner: Absentee or Unknown
Building Deteriorating
Open to Unauthorized Entry

Least

DETERIORATION

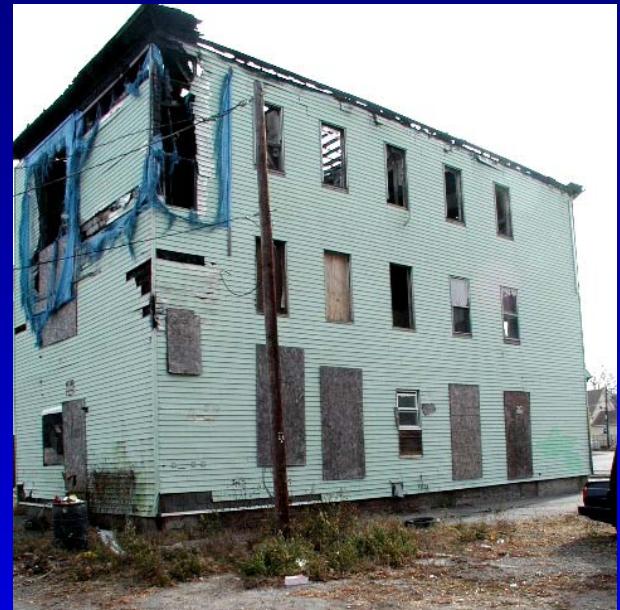
Greatest

Hazard to Public Safety

Abandonment & Fire

*Fire and abandonment
are interrelated*

- ✓ Fire may cause a property to become abandoned
- ✓ Abandoned buildings are frequent targets of arson



The Hazards

Vacant and abandoned buildings are inherently more dangerous than occupied structures

- ✓ Deterioration due to exposure to elements and vandalism
- ✓ Potential for unexpected collapse
- ✓ Rapid fire development
- ✓ Open shafts and pits
- ✓ May expose other buildings if they burn

Structural Collapse



- **Weakened structural components**
 - ✓ Weather
 - ✓ Age
- **Exposed structural members**

Rapid Fire Development

- Unusual fuel loads



Open Shafts or Pits

- Stairs – removed or damaged
- Removal of equipment
- Urban mining
- Serious fall hazard when smoke is present



Exposure Fires

- Hazard increases when exposures are also uninhabited
- Increases the deterioration of the neighborhood



FIXING BROKEN WINDOWS

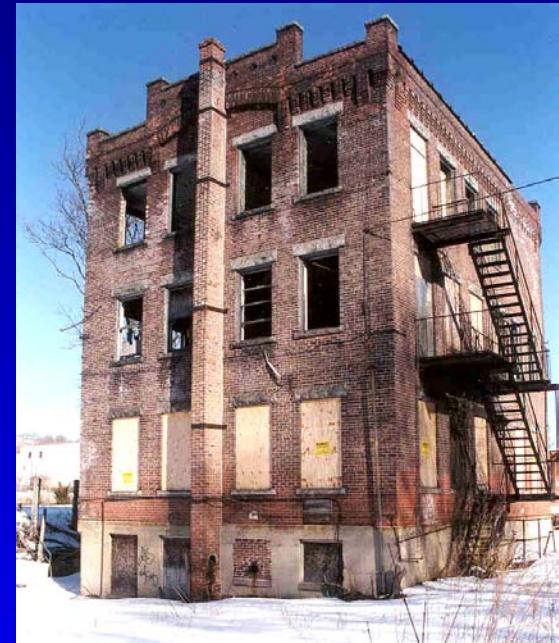
“If a factory or office window is broken, passersby observing it will conclude that no one cares or no one is in charge. In time, a few will begin throwing rocks to break more windows. Soon all the windows will be broken, and now passersby will think that, not only is no one in charge of the building, no one is in charge of the street on which it faces.”

**George Kelling and James Wilson
Atlantic Monthly Magazine, 1982**



Dealing with the Problem

- Develop interdepartmental cooperation
- Increase public awareness
- Determine the magnitude of the problem
- Identify properties with a potential for abandonment
- Evaluate and mark vacant and abandoned structures
- Enforce codes aggressively to prevent deterioration



Interdepartmental Cooperation

- City Manager/Mayor
- Community Development
- City Solicitor
- Building Inspector
- Fire Department
- Police Department
- Assessors
- Treasurer



Without the involvement of these departments or individuals, at a minimum, it will be difficult to deal with the problem

Can You Act?

Does the community have the authority to regulate vacant and abandoned buildings ?

- ✓ Building Codes
- ✓ Fire Codes
- ✓ Anti-blight ordinances

What codes or ordinances are needed to properly regulate hazardous structures in your community?



SECURITY



DEMOLITION

Vacant Building Ordinance

- Key elements of an ordinance
 - ✓ Criteria defining proper security
 - ✓ Requirements for the removal of combustibles and hazardous waste
 - ✓ An inspection/evaluation process
 - ✓ Requirements for posting and marking buildings
 - ✓ Requirements regarding the maintenance of existing fire protection systems
- Define the responsibility of the owner
- Define enforcement process and fines for noncompliance
- Posting of a bond by the owner

Public Awareness



Training

Building Evaluation



Building Security



Fire Dept. Operations



Data Collection

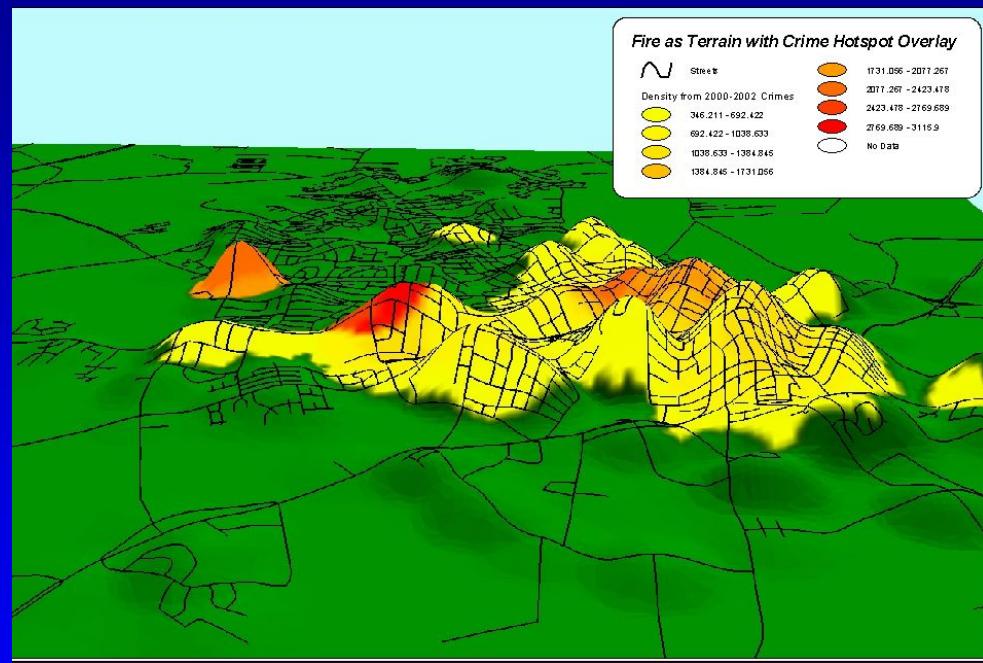
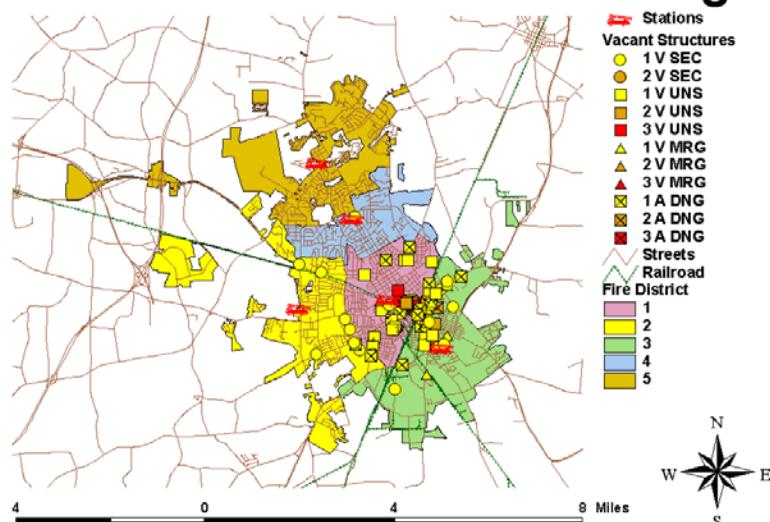
- **Determine the magnitude of the problem**
 - ✓ Use early warning signs to target properties before they become empty
 - ✓ Identify owners early in the vacancy progression
 - ✓ Maintain an accurate list of vacant and abandoned properties in the community
- **Organize data so that it is accessible to all involved agencies**

How many vacant or abandoned buildings are in our community?



GIS Presentation of Data

Vacant/Abandoned Buildings



Early Warning Signs

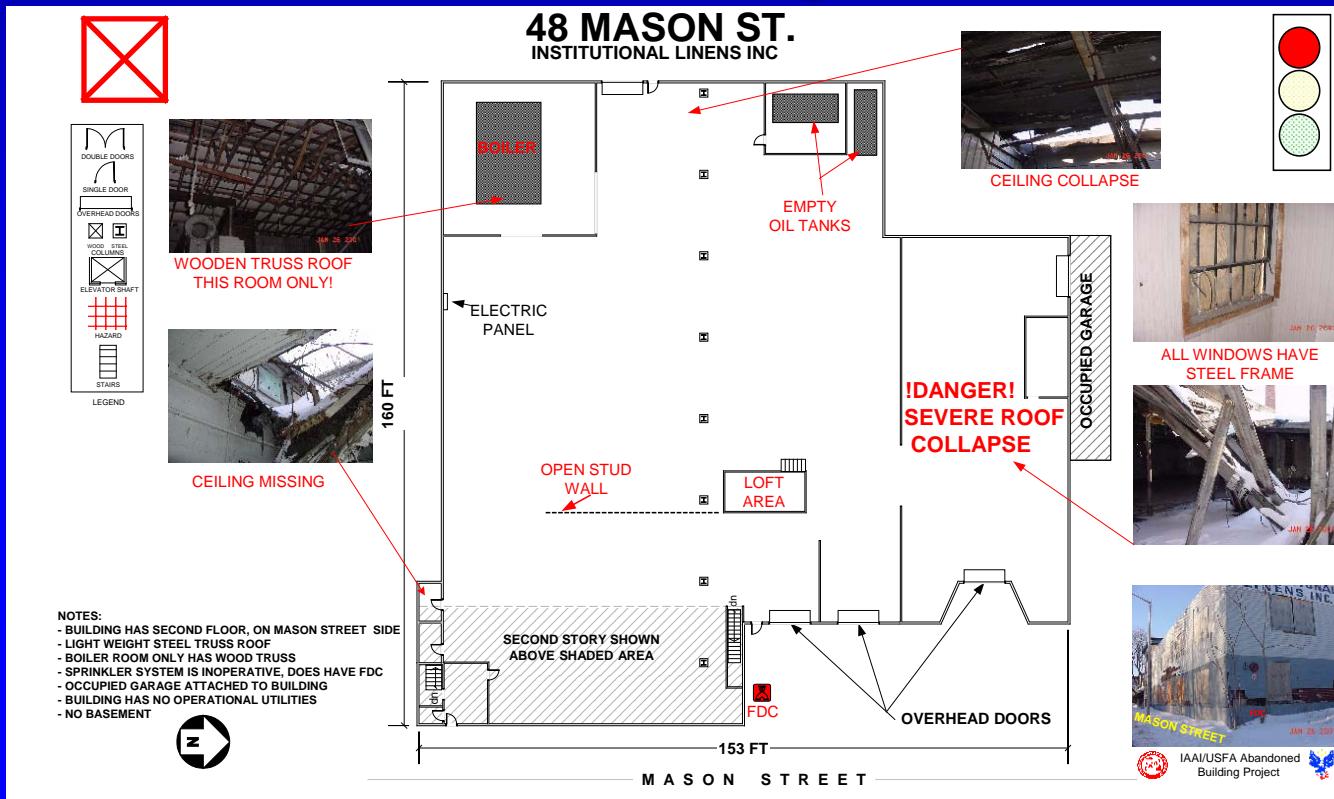
- Previous fires
- A history of back taxes
- Unabated housing code violations
- Unreleased liens and attachments
- Building owners with a history of abandoning other properties
- Decreasing utility usage
- Increasing vacancy in multi-tenant properties



OBJECTIVE: Identify properties that are at risk of being abandoned before it occurs

Inspection and Evaluation

- Determine what the hazards are
- Document the findings
- Use data to determine the proper action for the building



Identification Process

- **Alerts firefighters to the potential hazards in a vacant/abandoned building**
- **Makes public aware of problem properties**
- **Allows for increased surveillance**



Marking Buildings



- Severe structural or interior deficiencies
- Operations should be conducted from outside except for life safety
- If interior operations are required
 - ✓ Approval of Incident Commander
 - ✓ Modification of tactics
 - ✓ Examination before units are committed
- Time of any interior operations must be limited

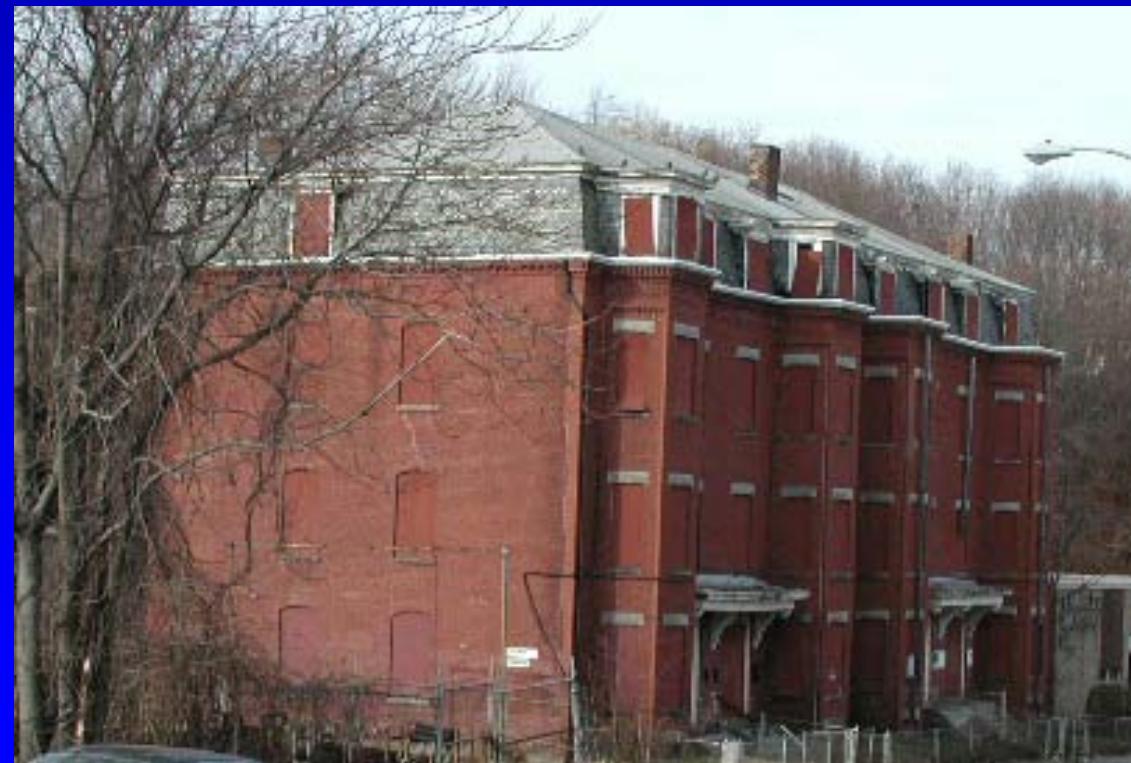
Building Security is Essential

- **Of the thousands of fires in vacant structures every year**
 - ✓ Most are of incendiary origin
 - ✓ Many are caused by children playing with matches
- **Vacant structures are havens for criminal activity**



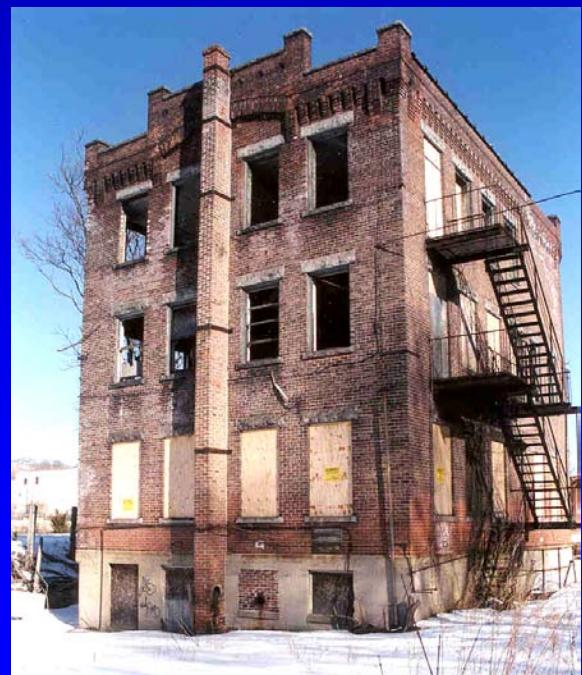
Short Term Solutions

- **Provide building security**
- **Monitor security**
- **Remove combustibles**
 - ✓ Interior
 - ✓ Exterior

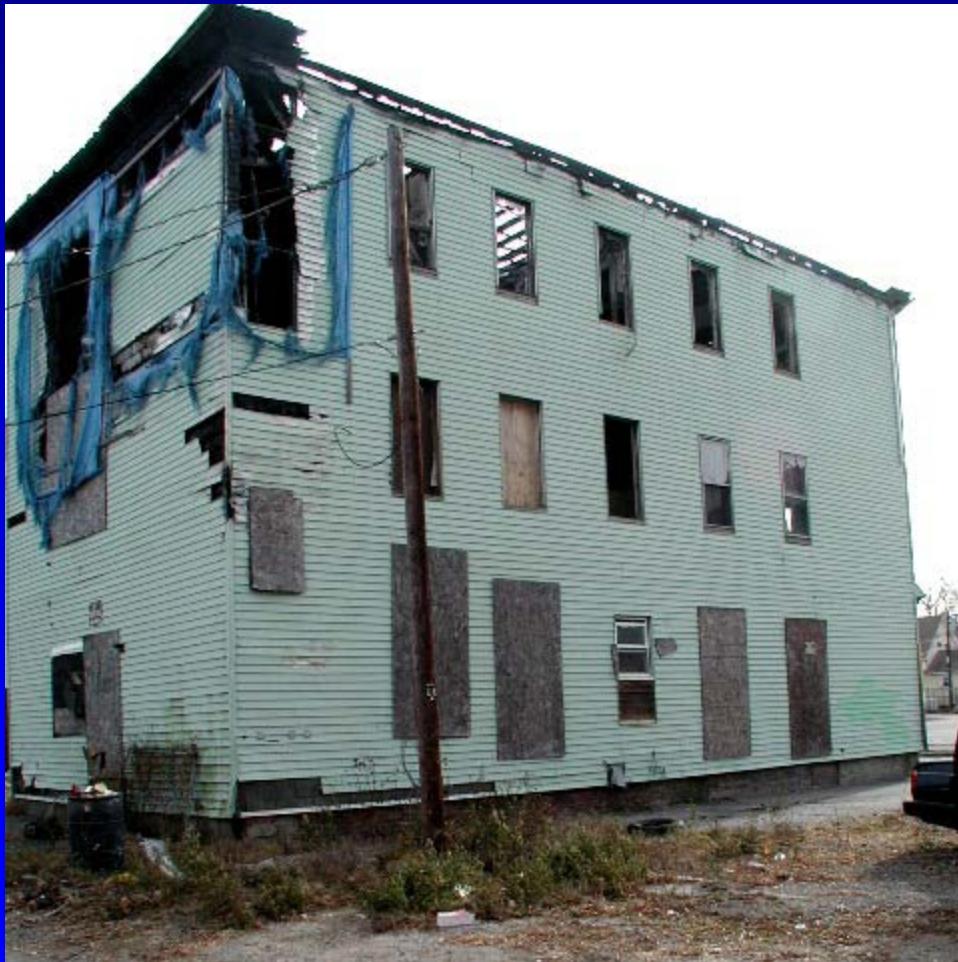


Securing Buildings

- Prevents unauthorized access
 - Must be done well
 - Helps to slow down the deterioration of the structure



Particle Board Doesn't Work!



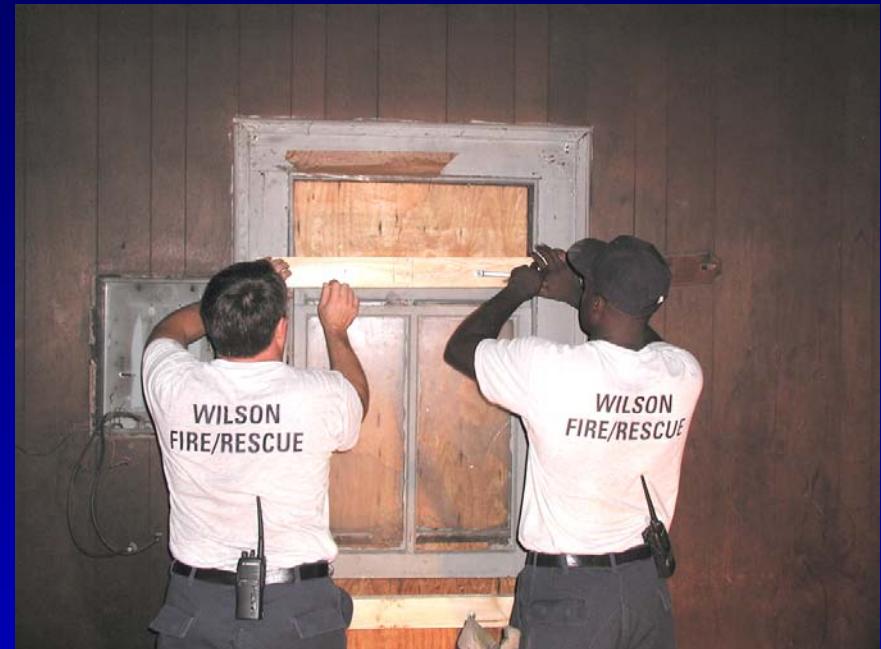


The building was boarded well on street level. On the 2nd floor, wood was easily pulled away without tools.

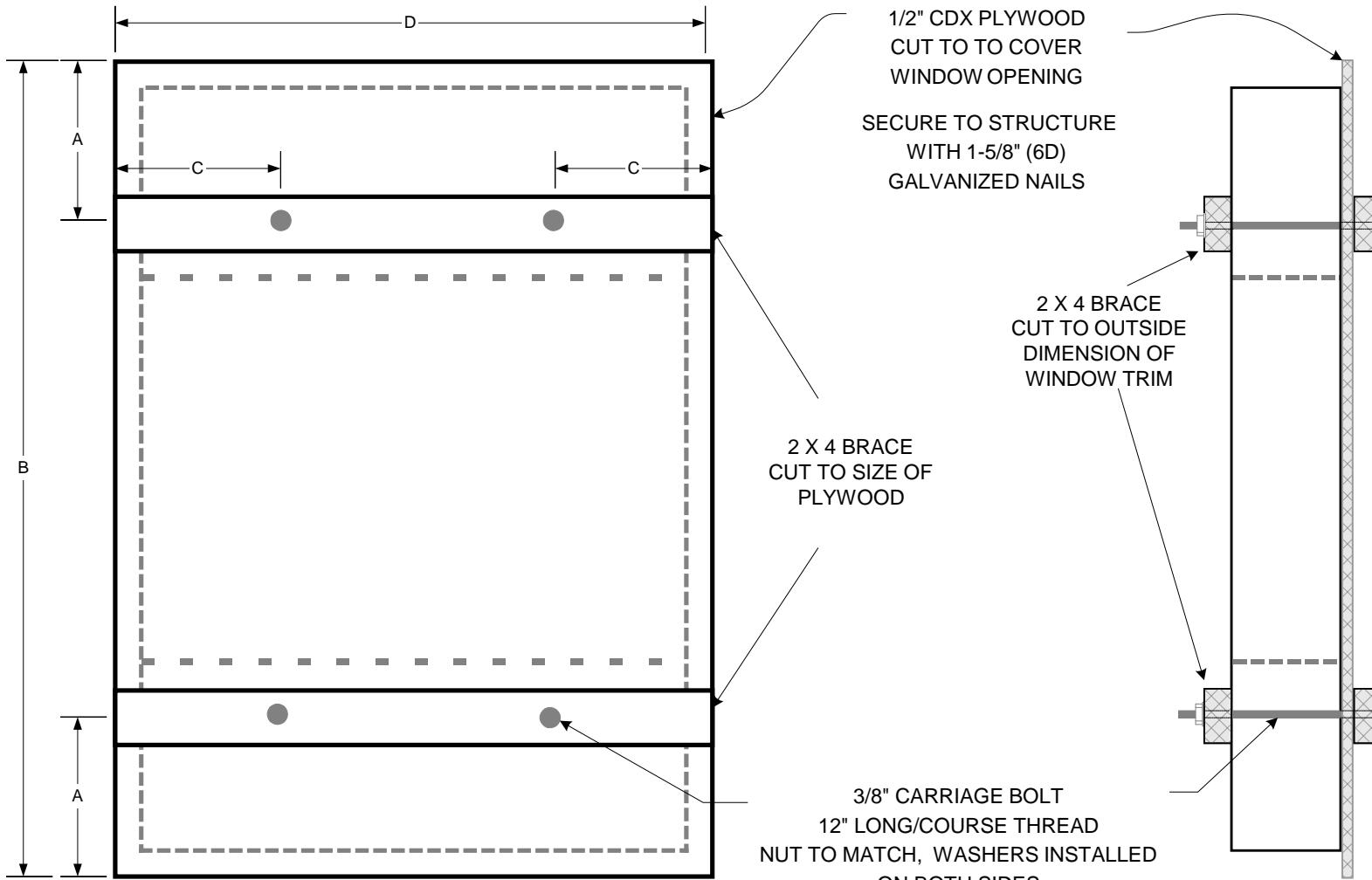
Simple Board Up



HUD Reinforced Board Up



- Adopted by the USFA National Arson Prevention Initiative
- Effective on high risk buildings



USFA National Arson Prevention Initiative
Board Up Procedures

Window Detail

IAAI/USFA Abandoned Building Project



Fixing Broken Windows



**Proper security will help to reduce crime,
prevent fires and improve the image of
vacant or abandoned properties**

Long Term Solutions

- Determine candidates for
 - ✓ Reuse
 - ✓ Demolition



Reuse

- If the structure is viable, reuse or rehabilitation is the best alternative
 - ✓ Homesteading
 - ✓ Forgiveness of back taxes
- Helps to put the property back into productive use
- Reduces blight and the associated crime
- Provides affordable housing or commercial space
- Preserves historical buildings



Demolition



- Provides a permanent solution to problem buildings
- Removes obsolete or dangerous properties
- Allows for new development
- Can be costly

Demolition

**Removal of obsolete
or dangerous
properties**



Pros

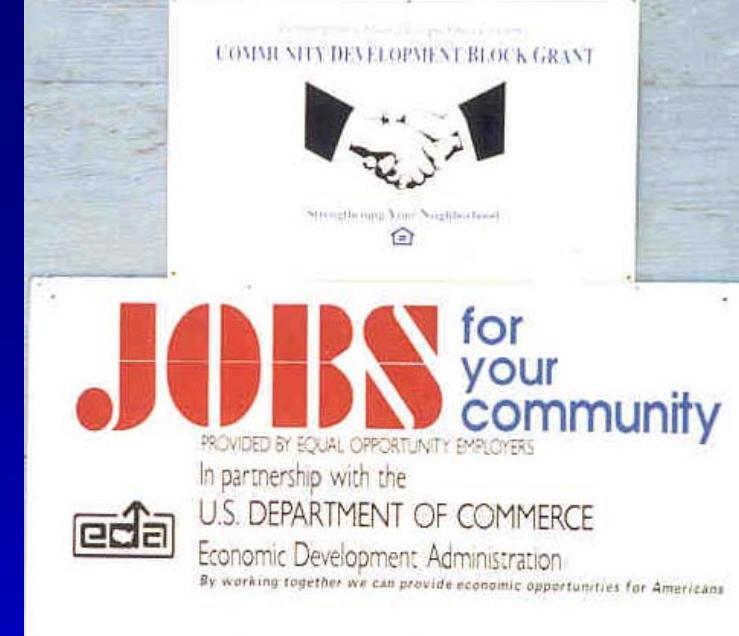
- ✓ A permanent solution to problem buildings
- ✓ Allows for new development

Cons

- ✓ Can be costly
- ✓ May have negative impact on neighborhood
- ✓ Reduces affordable housing stock

Funding Sources

- The property owner
- Federal Programs
 - ✓ CDBG program – HUD
 - ✓ Brownfield Loans – EPA
 - ✓ Crime prevention – DOJ
- State development programs
- Local tax dollars
- Private enterprise



Public/private partnerships tend to be the most successful

The Choice is Yours

Action



Inaction



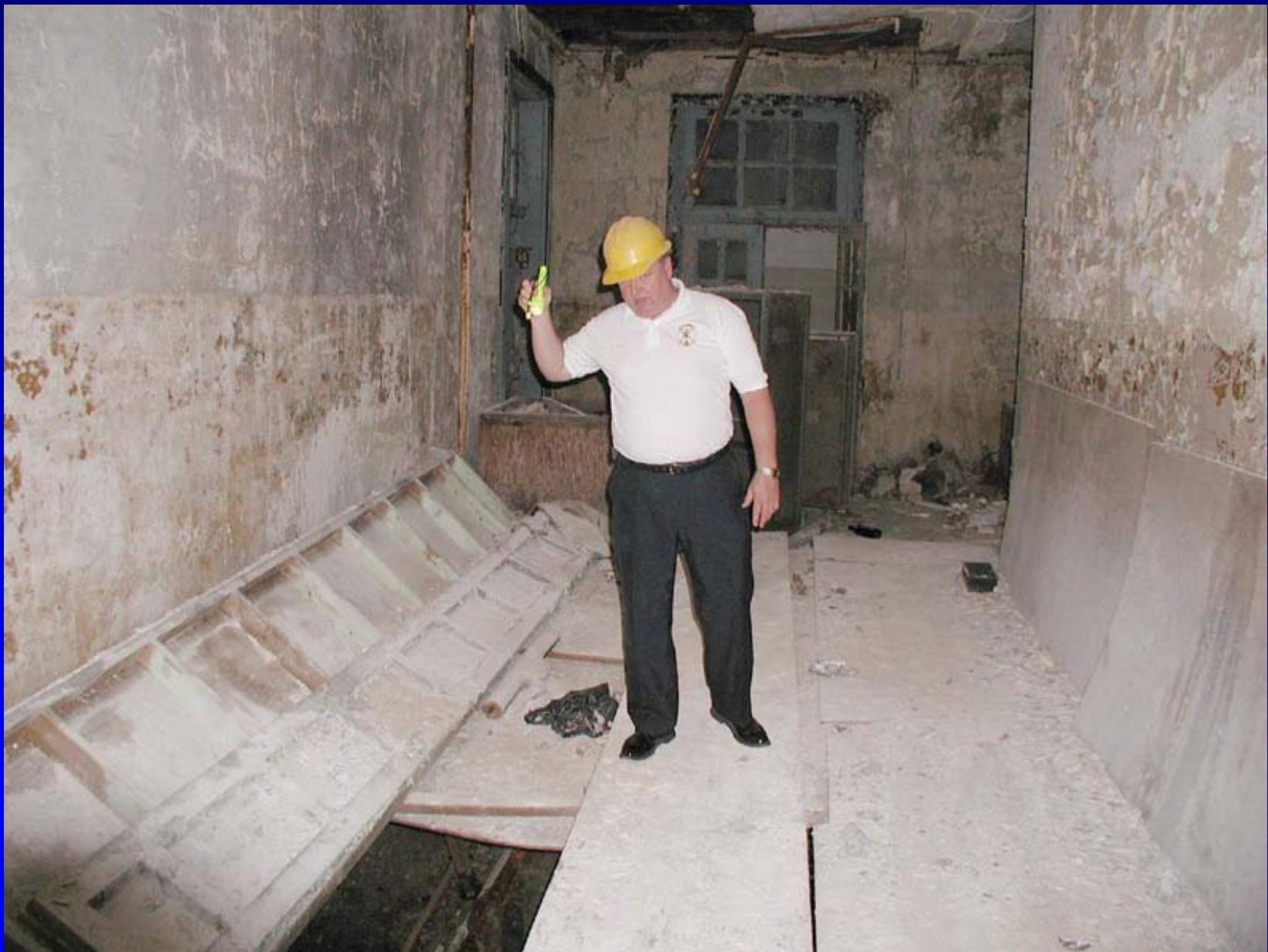
A Case Study in Reuse



Vacant High School Building
Wilson NC 2001









Building completely renovated into residential units by
private developer with incentives from the community
Wilson NC 2004





Architectural components
of the original building
preserved. The building is
provided with automatic
sprinklers

It's Your Choice

