

# Large Lot Program shows the power of private land stewardship in addressing urban vacancy

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Before



4a. Google Street View June 2014

After



4b. US Forest Service photo September 2015

Scientists with the USDA Forest Service and the University of Illinois followed Chicago's Large Lots program over 5 years to examine the visual and social effects of resident-driven urban greening efforts in high-vacancy areas of the city's south and west sides. Credit: USDA

In the past 5 years, Chicago residents have purchased nearly 1,300 vacant lots and replaced weed trees and sagging fences with gardens and children's play areas. In doing so, they have demonstrated that transferring city-owned vacant lands to local residents can be a successful strategy for cities seeking to reduce blight and strengthen

neighborhoods.

In assessing the potential benefits of the City of Chicago's "Large Lot Program," a team led by scientists Paul Gobster of the USDA Forest Service's Northern Research Station and William Stewart of the University of Illinois examined the visual and social effects of resident-driven urban greening efforts in high-vacancy areas of the city's south and west sides. In their most recent paper, published last week in the journal *Landscape and Urban Planning*, the research team found that the [program](#) has resulted in continued improvements in the condition and care of the purchased "large lots" over a 5-year period and that these improvements were consistent across all five community areas studied.

"While planners around the world are experimenting with ways to address urban vacancy, few cities have the tools to assess how well their programs work after they are implemented," Gobster said. "In this latest paper we develop a practical monitoring tool, the condition-care scale, and detail how it can be implemented by planners to assess the progress of vacant lot repurposing programs. The scale also holds promise for other applications related to urban greening and we encourage others to adapt it to their particular needs.

Previously reported findings from the study showed that visible changes to large lots in the year after purchase led to increases in lot "cues to care" including ornamental and vegetable gardens and social and recreational features, and that levels of lot condition and care were highest for owners who lived closest to their purchased large lot.

"In focus groups and a mail survey of large lot owners, we also found that residents who are improving the lots are gaining a stronger sense of place and belonging to their neighborhood, and they see the program is fulfilling community goals," Stewart said. "Together our visual and social assessments show that ownership matters, and that through private

stewardship of vacant neighborhood lands the Large Lot Program is helping to address issues of environmental and [economic justice](#) in communities that have been disenfranchised for decades." The researchers' next step is to try and quantify whether participating in the Large Lot Program is leading to broader social outcomes, including reductions in crime.

**More information:** Paul H. Gobster et al, The condition-care scale: A practical approach to monitoring progress in vacant lot stewardship programs, *Landscape and Urban Planning* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.landurbplan.2020.103885](#)

Provided by USDA Forest Service

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