Some municipalities have realized that a lack of technical infrastructure and siloed data management structures have created disadvantages in the ability to combat vacant and blighted properties. As a result, some property owners have capitalized on this inability to collect, manage, and share data to avoid scrutiny or penalty for lack of proper maintenance on multiple derelict properties.

Data on properties and owners are the foundation of both day-to-day decision making and long-term strategic plans. Government and nonprofit leaders have long stated that good data are the key to making more informed investment choices. The Center for Community Progress (CCP), the only national nonprofit specifically dedicated to transforming places where vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties exist, has issued several reports over the past several years identifying the need for data-driven strategies and investments in municipal technical infrastructure to collect and manage property data. To that end, Allan Mallach, Senior Fellow at CCP, emphasized at the 2016 Urban Blight Forum in Albany that “solving urban blight is dependent on data. If you don’t have good data -- for example, about the properties, the owners, foreclosure status, etc. -- you’re basically flying blind.”

Blighted and vacant properties represent a persistent and costly problem for New York State local governments. Code-enforcement programs carried out by New York State municipalities are the cornerstone of identifying the beginning signs of property decline but it’s a program that relies heavily on the collection, sharing, and use of information.

While there has been significant funding from Governor Andrew Cuomo’s Office and the NYS Attorney General’s Office to take action on zombie and other blighted properties, there has also been a renewed focus on investing in the overall data environment. A selection of those efforts include:

- The Cities Rise program, which has helped, and continues to help, many New York State cities with funding for software (Building Blocks) to analyze, visualize, and open data from a range of internal and external sources.
- The NYS Department of Financial Services, through the 2016 Zombie Legislation, created and now manages the state’s zombie property database.
- Recent amendments to New York State laws now require that the name and address of every member of a limited liability company (LLC) that acquires or sells residential real estate in New York State must be listed in the application.
- The NYS Department of State’s local government grant programs have funded the development of a municipal data-sharing and analytics platform (i.e., C.O.D.E.) to share data across jurisdictions so that government leaders can gain a more comprehensive picture of property owners and agents.

“Local governments have for many years shared police and fire data with each other to improve operations. Sharing code enforcement data is a valuable extension of this existing platform and will provide another tool in their arsenal to hold owners responsible for maintaining their properties to a standard regionally.”

- Mayor Gary R. McCarthy, City of Schenectady, NYCOM Immediate Past President

By John Coluccio, Signal Superintendent, City of Schenectady and C.O.D.E. Executive Board Chair | email: lcoluccio@schenectadyny.gov and Meghan Cook, Program Director, Center for Technology in Government, University at Albany, SUNY | Ph: (518) 442-3892 | email: mcook@ctg.albany.edu

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While these efforts represent only a selection of initiatives focused on data, it’s important to note that a mix of programs with investments from multiple agencies will always be necessary to address blight in New York State. Multiple approaches from a range of legislative, granting, and regulatory agencies are critical to meet the needs of New York State municipal governments as no single program can meet all the municipal needs.

The governments working diligently to build their own data environment would say it is a long-term investment that requires commitment from every department and particular attention to the on-the-ground data collection functions. Analytical tools are great but the analysis and visualizations are only as good as the data collected. The real focus is on the data collection points and, not surprisingly, code enforcement officers play the most critical role in building a municipality’s foundation for a robust data environment around properties.

The City of Schenectady recognized this in 2015 when the Mayor and Code Enforcement officials gathered their peers from Amsterdam, Gloversville, and Troy to share the lessons learned in fighting property blight in their communities. Through these informal discussions, they began to understand that the same problem owners (owners, landlords, and agents) were contributing to blight in their communities and sharing information across their jurisdictions was key for informing their own strategies.

With leadership from City of Schenectady Mayor, Gary McCarthy, and former City of Amsterdam Mayor, Ann Thane, these conversations turned into a larger discussion of each municipality’s information gaps stemming from challenges in collecting, managing, using, and sharing, code enforcement data (properties, violations, and actors) on a regular and systematic basis. To work toward addressing this information gap, the teams developed, submitted, and were awarded grants from NYS Department of State’s Local Government Efficiency Program and the Municipal Restructuring Fund to carry out a multiyear project with two overarching goals:

1. Build the technical infrastructure and organizational capabilities to collect, manage, and use code enforcement-related data within the relevant departments within each city.
2. Build, test, and deploy a statewide platform to share code enforcement-related data on properties and actors throughout New York State (the Community Officials Data Exchange, or C.O.D.E.).

City leaders recognized early on that in order to realize the benefits of data sharing among their governments, each municipality must first have the capability to collect and use their own data. They also knew that working across multigovernments would require a specific set of skills and more resources than they could individually provide. To do this, those city leaders turned to public sector innovation experts, CTG UAlbany, an applied research institute at the University at Albany, SUNY, to lead the project with the cities. CTG UAlbany’s 25-year history of working with New York State agencies and local governments had two projects start out similarly: the NYS Geographical Information Systems (GIS) Clearinghouse and the Kids’ Well-Being Indicators Clearinghouse (KWIC), both of which began as innovation projects and subsequently grew into statewide data-sharing resources.

CTG UAlbany led the city teams in a series of workshops to carry out multiple activities, including:

- Mapping processes and functions related to carrying out actions with properties;
- Identifying critical data elements for each of the city departments;
- Documenting each city’s current code enforcement systems and processes;
- Determining the scope (data, functions, interface) of the data-sharing platform; and
- Defining the governance authority, membership, and agreements for the data-sharing platform.

As a way to organize this work, the cities identified eight programs of work (or functions) that the cities carried out to address blighted properties. While not all the cities carried out all eight programs, each wanted future capability to do so. The table below outlines the eight programs of work as identified by the cities as critical programs in their efforts to prevent, mitigate, and resolve blight.

The results of the workshops produced information that the City of Schenectady, as the lead city, used to inform the development of the request for proposal (RFP) for both a system to carry out code enforcement with a strong focus on collecting, managing, and using data within the cities and the cross-jurisdiction data-sharing platform. After a rigorous assessment and selection process, the cities selected General Code and Software Consulting Associates (SCA) with MuniciCity® 5 as the system to carry out code enforcement processes within the cities and SCA as the developer of data-sharing platform.

Implementation of the system within the cities, modifications in practice within each of the cities, and attention to building data capabilities and infrastructure consumed most of the first years of the project. In the cities where not all eight programs of work were operational, much time was spent gaining information from the City of Schenectady on how each was carried out. The planned and ad hoc information sharing in project meetings and workshops allowed code enforcement officials to test their assumptions, learn from each other, and continue to build their community of knowledge across the region.

Throughout the project, all teams recognized that their hard work would pay off but it was no easy feat. Building each city’s own data capabilities while also designing, testing, and deploying a statewide data-sharing platform built for and governed by municipal governments was challenging.
The team relied on each other while defining and testing the data-sharing platform now coined the Community Officials Data Exchange, or C.O.D.E.

The Community Officials Data Exchange (C.O.D.E.) is a first-of-its-kind organization and dedicated data-sharing platform for municipal governments where government leaders can:

- Search data on actors (owners, agents, LLCs) from across the C.O.D.E. members to learn if an actor has links to other properties, and then access the violation history of those properties.
- Conduct analysis and create visualizations on property and actor data from their own municipality and aggregate data from other C.O.D.E. members.
- Learn more about how code enforcement processes are carried out from other C.O.D.E. members.

One key function of C.O.D.E. is to help municipal leaders link actors and properties across jurisdictions (even with limited information on both), so that they can get a more comprehensive picture of that actor’s blighted property footprint in New York State. In some cases, there is not enough information on an owner or agent, but there might be an address associated with a property. In another case, there might be a couple of iterations of an LLC name on several properties but with no address listed. The C.O.D.E. searching and linking capability is designed to group similar characteristics together so that the output narrows the search of multiple properties associated with an actor. Giving municipal leaders a mechanism to start assembling a more accurate and comprehensive picture of actors within their communities and their associated properties allows them to make more informed cases, justifications, and investments.

Many departments within a municipal government will find value in C.O.D.E., including the development office, corporation counsel, code enforcement department, public safety, neighborhood stabilization, and Mayor’s office. With the ability to conduct analysis and visualizations both within and across municipal borders, government leaders can use C.O.D.E. to inform their day-to-day decisions as well as long-term strategies in preventing, mitigating, and resolving property blight in their communities.

The C.O.D.E. is an intergovernmental membership affiliation, with each municipal government signing intermunicipal and data-sharing agreements. The C.O.D.E. is governed by local government leaders, and any municipal government, regardless of the system they used to carry out code enforcement or collect data on their properties, can be a member. In short, C.O.D.E. is system-agnostic, it was built as flexible and interoperable as possible so that the goal is on data sharing across municipalities regardless of systems.

Like every government data-sharing platform, the journey is quite long, requiring time and effort through ideation, creation, testing, implementation, and ultimately adoption. The time spent working on the C.O.D.E. has brought together government and industry leaders in pursuit of common goals. Teams that dedicate time and resources in shared municipal efforts do it because they know that working together yields far better results than working alone. The C.O.D.E. is still very much at the beginning but has the foundation as a trusted mechanism for municipal governments to share data and a community of leaders working together to inform their blight strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROGRAMS OF WORK</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building Permitting</td>
<td>To identify, approve, track, and manage changes/enhancements to all structures in the city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landlord Registration</td>
<td>To identify, register, and monitor landlords in the city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rental Unit Certificate</td>
<td>To identify rental units in the city and certify compliance with all city and state codes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Assembly Inspections</td>
<td>To identify areas of public assembly and certify compliance with all city and state codes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code Violation and Enforcement</td>
<td>To identify violations, issue tickets, prescribe reparations (fees and time frame for compliance), and enforce compliance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demolition Management</td>
<td>To identify, track, and manage the properties in need of and ready demolition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant Property Management</td>
<td>To identify, track, and manage vacant properties in the city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreclosure Management</td>
<td>To identify, track, and manage all properties that are ready for the foreclosure process.</td>
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