

## Resident Task Force Manages Neighborhoods Through Thick and Thin

Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation  
Detroit, MI

In 2009, a Vacant Property Task Force (VPTF) led by neighborhood residents formed in the Grandmont-Rosedale neighborhoods of Detroit to address the high number of vacancies due to the foreclosure crisis. Residents held multiple meetings and invited Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation (GRDC) to the table to help identify solutions, priorities, and strategies for success. The partnership with GRDC provided the group with leverage and allowed residents to better gather information, formulate plans and communicate with city agencies.

Grandmont-Rosedale neighborhoods are historic Black middle neighborhoods in Detroit. The local community development agency – Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation (GRDC) – works in these neighborhoods to preserve and improve them and create opportunity. GRDC has offered a variety of improvement programs over the past 30 years to help the community prosper as a place to live, work and play. Programs include a local farmer’s market, a co-working facility called WorkPlace, home renovation and commercial revitalization programs, neighborhood beautification, code enforcement initiatives, and more.

In time, the group shifted its focus to meet the evolving needs of the neighborhood. With fewer vacant properties, it was able to turn its attention to other goals, though they still work to address vacancies, safety standards and code enforcement issues when they arise. The VPTF has about 20 active participants and about half of the group are original members. The task force is open to any interested resident and has at least one or two representatives from each of the five neighborhoods in the Grandmont-Rosedale area.

Residents often join the group after bringing an issue or concern to the table.

The task force meets monthly at a local coffee shop or virtually when needed. General information about the group is listed on the GRDC website and details from meetings and other major developments in the neighborhood are shared in newsletters (mailed to residents), on social media and on GRDC’s website.

Eventually, the task force may change its name (or add to its existing name) so it better matches its current objectives which include beautification projects, repurposing empty lots, solving issues with occupied rental properties, etc., but for now they remain the VPTF because it has local and even national recognition.

The VPTF has achieved many accomplishments, some of which are listed below. Most can be replicated by other nonprofits or volunteer groups, and all have had a large impact on the community and quality of life in the neighborhood.



**Boarding Up and Painting Vacant Properties.** The VPTF secured over 200 vacant properties by boarding up windows and doors to minimize trespassing, deter vandalism and prevent criminal activity. Over 100 volunteers from local churches, schools and colleges put up plywood and painted it so it would blend into the façade of the home. The task force partnered with a company that provided vinyl signs to cover doors and windows, making it appear like the homeowner was there. This helped neighbors to feel better about the property while it transitioned to new ownership. Plywood was provided by the City, and Michigan Community Resources (a local legal advocacy organization) provided six \$5,000 grants – one for each neighborhood association and one for GRDC - to pay for supplies, materials, staffing, insurance, and capacity building. GRDC secured a storage container for materials and gathered over 30 designs for vacant lots from a field guide distributed by Detroit Future City.



Read the field guide:

<https://detroitfuturecity.com/whatwedo/land-use/DFC-lots/>



**Disguising Vacant Properties.** When needed, task force members and neighborhood residents offer simple actions to disguise vacant properties, so they appear to be inhabited. Examples include hanging holiday decorations, clearing driveways during a snowstorm, putting out trash containers on trash days, and setting out “no delivery” signs to deter newspapers and ads from building up. These simple actions send a message that the property has someone attending to it.

**Paint Donations.** The VPTF solicits donations of old, half-used paint from neighbors then mixes them together which usually results in a brown color usable for painting boarded up properties or covering graffiti. This is an easy strategy for getting free paint.



**Painting Over Graffiti.** Task force members and community volunteers have covered over 600 instances of graffiti in the neighborhood as part of beautification efforts. Together with residents, the group identifies locations and creates a project list. They choose a work date, recruit volunteer painters, and coordinate wagons and pickup trucks to deliver supplies such as paint and brushes. A neighborhood representative accompanies volunteer painters from schools and local churches to places that needed painting and oversee work being done.

**Communicating with Neighbors.** The VPTF maintains active communication with neighborhood residents and shares information on what's happening in the area along with potential solutions to problems. They identify who to call if residents want to host an event or need help with code enforcement. They help residents connect with the local land bank when needed, or a neighborhood police officer. They provide suggestions for ongoing maintenance of vacant properties and offer strategies to deter crime or illegal habitants, encouraging neighborhoods to take ownership of neighborhood solutions.



**Grass Cutting at Vacant Lots.** Over 500 volunteers have helped to maintain lawns at vacant properties over the years. GRDC provides gas for mowing and a mower when needed, or sometimes a resident will take on a property nearby. 'Mower-gangs' have assembled in some neighborhoods and rotate responsibility for streets with multiple distressed properties. Groups get together to share mowing and cleanup responsibilities, and oftentimes neighbors who are not a part of the task force come out to help. On some distressed streets, the VPTF raised funds to hire grounds crews.

**Advocacy for Demolition.** Successfully advocating for the demolition of a dangerous building is a process that is specific to each city and a process that most residents are not familiar with. The VPTF has developed a step-by-step strategy to follow and helps residents understand those steps and the resources available. Residents take photos and catalog properties to identify issues and hazards, plus demonstrate the proximity to other neighborhood assets such as community parks, gardens, or schools. The task force helps residents connect with someone at the city and provides guidance for follow up.



Getting a problem property to demolition can be long and difficult, so it is important to celebrate success. After its first successful demolition project, the VPTF got a cake and hosted a neighborhood picnic. Over the past 10 years, the task force has helped the neighborhood accomplish over 40 demolitions.

**Deed Fraud Investigations.** A Deed Fraud Task Force exists at the county level and the VPTF shares information with them when fraud is discovered. For example, when an individual took possession of a vacant property illegally and tried to sell it via land contract to an unsuspecting buyer, the VPTF got involved and requested help from the Deed Fraud Task Force (the buyer thought they were buying the property on land contract but later found out they were scammed). Together, they were successful in getting that case through to prosecution. The VPTF is well connected with neighborhood associations and block captains so asks them to keep an eye on properties and to reach out if they see unusual activity. When this happens, the VPTF investigates the situation, asks for the individual's name and proof of ownership, and then searches official county records to make sure it is legitimate.

**Code Enforcement Advocacy.** The task force reports code issues to the city following the blight ticketing process and attends court hearings to provide narrative when necessary. In many instances, the owners are investors who are absent and do not maintain properties or comply with local ordinances. The task force sends code enforcement letters to the owner, stating that they are starting a nuisance abatement lawsuit, which often results in a response from the owner. The task force has even taken on some of the work needed and submitted an invoice to the owner for work completed, plus materials. About 10 percent of those invoices are paid by the owner.

**Identifying Property Ownership.** The task force helps residents and neighborhood groups determine ownership of a property when needed. They show them how to search county tax records and find deeds and will use Realtors if needed. Once the owner is found, they help them determine next steps.

**Property Condition Surveys.** For years, VPTF surveyed over 5,000 properties every year to assess vacancy. They used REGRID software (<https://regrid.com/>) which allows survey results to be recorded and reviewed in real time. Volunteers take photos, assess conditions, and notate vacancies. The task force no longer surveys every property every year but conducts surveys when needed.

**Repurposing Vacant Lots.** The VPTF has repurposed over 30 lots into green spaces. They have created wildflower rain gardens, rose gardens and tree nurseries. They have created permeable residential parking, built picnic tables, and added life sized chess and checkerboard games. They've installed walking paths and split rail fences, which deter people from driving or parking on the lot or illegal dumping. The task force recruits volunteers to help with plantings and sometimes hires contractors for certain projects. Because the neighborhood is involved in deciding what happens in the space, and helps to create it, they are invested and therefore continue to care for it. For every lot, the VPTF conducts visioning with community members. They leave fliers on doors and hold public meetings. Each lot transformation includes months of planning and communication. The lots with tree nurseries are cared for by neighbors and as trees grow, they are harvested and moved to other parts of the neighborhood that need trees.



**Tool Lending Library.** The VPTF established a tool lending library in a 40-foot shipping container which is stored in one of the neighborhood lots. They recruited the city youth group to paint a mural on the outside, and tools, mowers, and other gardening equipment are kept in the container for use during community cleanups. Unfortunately, they experienced attempted break-ins so needed to purchase a strong and durable (and expensive) lock. The container cost \$2,500.

**Repurposing Signs.** Illegal signs placed in the neighborhood (such as: we buy homes for cash) are redecorated with beautification messages or information about neighborhood events.



**Hosting Small Fundraisers.** The task force hosts small fundraisers to help support efforts in the community, such as selling wreaths at holiday time. For Valentine’s Day, they hold a rose sale (Roses for Rosedale), which they get in bulk from a wholesale shop. Neighbors order roses from the website, or submit an order form in person, and GRDC staff deliver roses on Valentine’s Day. The fundraiser usually profits about \$1,000.



**Foreclosure Prevention.** The task force offers ongoing foreclosure prevention outreach and has hosted foreclosure prevention workshops. They go door to door with a list of resources and send the list to any household identified by the city or county that is facing foreclosure.

**Tips for Success:** below are some tips for creating and maintaining a successful community task force.

Find Resident Leaders	The only way to have a successful program is to involve members of the community. Recruit existing leaders who can help you connect with residents, identify issues to be addressed, and help brainstorm solutions. The person ‘who knows everyone’ is a vital partner.
Recruit Varied Skill Sets	Any community task force will need members with different skill sets including technology, public speaking, research, organizational, writing and note taking skills. Groups with varied capacity will have the most success.
Be Realistic	Stay realistic on what can be accomplished and make sure community groups, leaders and volunteers understand limitations as well.
Invite Guest Speakers	Bring in guest speakers from different agencies, companies, or local government to talk about topics of interest and help foster those relationships. This is important to offer on an ongoing basis since committee membership changes as well as staffing.
Recognize Accomplishments	Find multiple ways to recognize volunteers and their accomplishments. Nominate them for local volunteer awards and host volunteer celebrations. Publish names in the newspaper or newsletter and note the number of hours the volunteers have contributed. Celebrate birthdays and success stories – with cake! Every year, publish a list of accomplishments in the annual report, agency newsletters and local news outlets.

**Questions?**

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