Grassroots Partnership Gets Results

WEST END NEIGHBORHOOD

The West End neighborhood in North St. Louis has emerged as a leading example of coordinated, cross-sector vacancy reduction. Over several years, residents and partner organizations have worked together to identify, track, and strategically address vacant properties, resulting in measurable neighborhood stabilization and improved resident investment.

In the West End in 2017, resident Tonnie Glispie-Smith became aware of the emerging St. Louis Vacancy Collaborative as a grassroots coalition that included major organizations in the community development space, including Legal Services of Eastern Missouri (LSEM). Glispie-Smith consulted with LSEM Managing Attorney, Peter Hoffman, who helped her initiate a neighborhood-level vacancy inventory, verifying properties through the Land Reutilization Authority, utility data, tax records, and direct resident input. This resident-led data collection model established the foundation for coordinated action.
"We had to bring in everyone because it wasn't just about one property," said Glispie-Smith. "Each group had a piece of the puzzle. LSEM could help clear titles, the City could help with providing usable data, logging complaints, and acting on problem properties, and neighbors could identify which properties were the highest priority."

One illustrative example involved a long-vacant duplex on Glispie-Smith's block that had become a chronic nuisance property, associated with repeated break-ins, drug activity, and sexual assault incidents. Despite multiple board-ups ordered by the City and conversations with the alderman of that ward, the property continued to attract illegal activity and presented an ongoing threat to neighborhood safety.

Coordinated efforts between Glispie-Smith, the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department, and Legal Services of Eastern Missouri helped to locate and then engage with the absentee property owner.

With legal pressure and persistent followup, the owner ultimately agreed to sell. Local architect and developer Dave Mastin, a long-time West End resident, provided technical assistance to assess the structure and identify feasible rehabilitation options. The duplex was ultimately purchased and renovated by a family moving into the neighborhood. The intervention not only resolved a high-risk property but also signaled to nearby residents that coordinated action could yield visible, lasting improvements. Within months, nearby homeowners began investing in their own repairs, and the formerly vacant and deteriorated structure became a symbol of the West End's collective capacity to reclaim problem properties.

"We had to bring in everyone because it wasn't just about one property." -Tonnie Glispie-Smith

In partnership with Invest STL, residents organized to secure planning resources for a neighborhood strategy that prioritized vacancy reduction as a key redevelopment goal. Cornerstone CDC served as the lead fiscal and administrative partner for the planning process, which engaged Yard & Co. as the planning consultant. The resulting neighborhood plan presented a unified framework for addressing vacancy.

In addition, the West End has leveraged partnerships to activate vacant land for community use. Through collaboration with Pocket Parks STL, residents transformed underutilized lots into maintained green spaces for neighborhood gatherings and events. This improved neighborhood safety and block density.

Sustained volunteer engagement and activation emerged through a zone-based system in which residents monitored and reported conditions in defined sections of the neighborhood.

Before (left) and after (right) photos of a property on the 5000 block of Maple Avenue that West End residents and Legal Services of Eastern Missouri collaborated to rehabilitate. Photos courtesy of Legal Services of Eastern Missouri.

This decentralized model increased participation, accountability, and responsiveness while enabling better coordination with city departments and service requests to the City's Citizens' Service Bureau.

"I got out a map from the Planning Department and marked all the parcels," Glispie-Smith recalled. "I said, 'It wouldn't be a burden for me to go in this area here because I drive by it every day,' and gathered some people from other sections of the neighborhood. We actually mapped it out with markers and they said, 'I live over here, I could do this section.' We sectioned out the entire neighborhood into five or six zones."

Today, the work continues through West End Neighbors, which assumed leadership of the initiative to enhance transparency and community participation. The neighborhood also continues to collaborate with partners such as Rebuilding Together STL and city agencies to support property stabilization and maintenance.

The West End experience demonstrates that vacancy reduction requires a comprehensive, multi-layered strategy—one that combines resident initiative, nonprofit coordination, legal tools, planning resources, and public-sector responsiveness. This integrated model offers a replicable framework for addressing vacancy and disinvestment across other middle-vacancy neighborhoods in St. Louis.

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