

# Vacant and Abandoned Buildings in Our Communities

## *What You Can Do About Them*



**IAAI/USFA Abandoned  
Building Project**



# Vacant or Abandoned?

## ➤ Vacant buildings

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

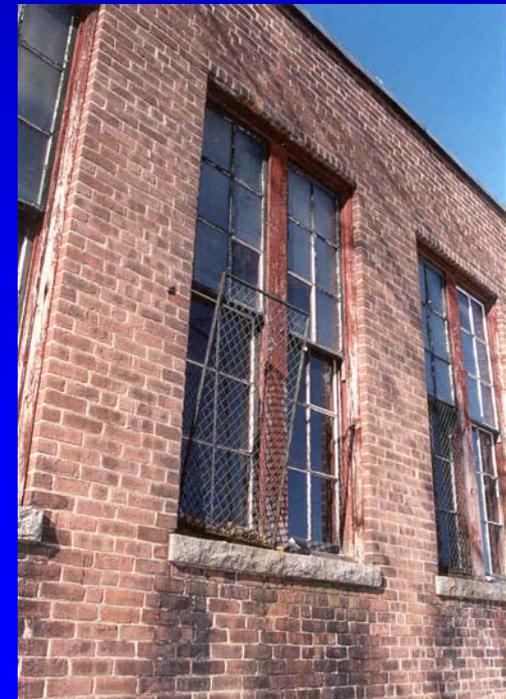
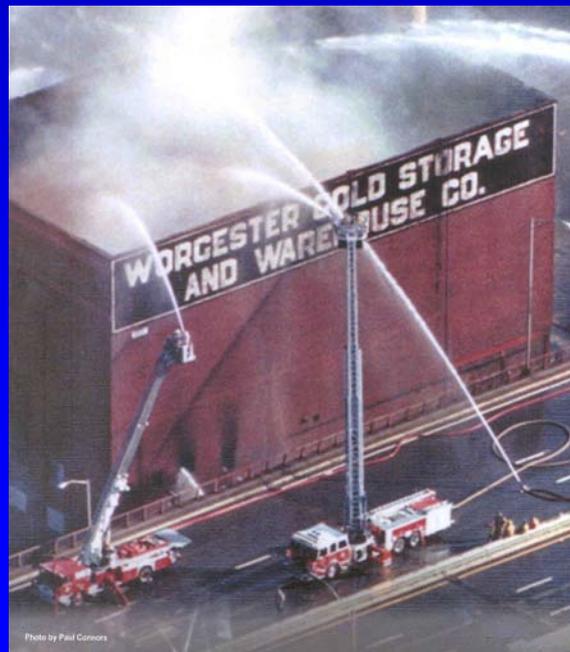
## ➤ Abandoned buildings

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



# Target Properties

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



# Vacant Properties



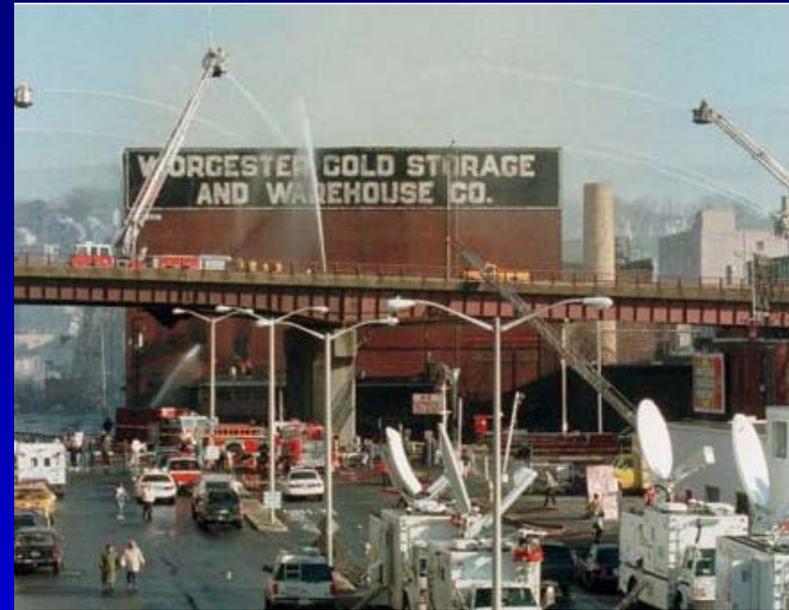
**It is estimated that 18% of urban structures in the United States are unused**

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



# The Problem

- Thousands of fires annually
- Fire Fighters are more likely to be injured fighting fires in vacant properties than any other property type
  - ✓ More than 6000 fire fighters injuries every year
  - ✓ From 1990 to 1999 - 23 fire fighters died while operating at fires in vacant/idle properties



# Greyfields – An Emerging Problem

- **Vacant or under utilized commercial structures**
- **Former Big Box type stores that are left vacant when the retailer moves to a larger or more modern property**
- **Typically are protected by sprinklers – that may not be maintained during vacancy**
- **Large unused parking area**
- **Large loading dock area that is not visible from street**



# 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**



# 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



Greatest

# The "Broken Windows" Theory of Social Disorder



***From one broken window, you  
can lose a street***

# The Impact on the Community

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

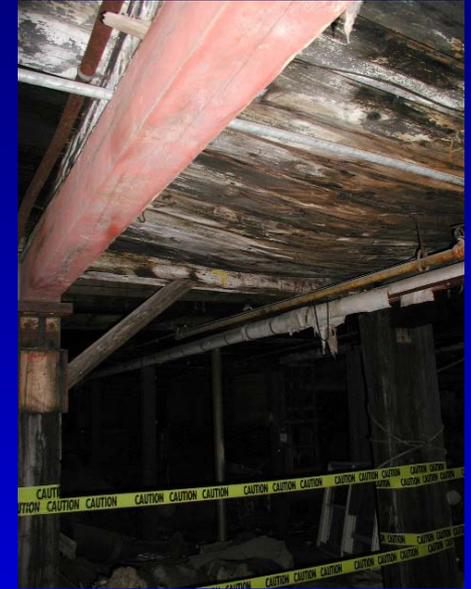
**Abandonment is a  
contagious  
phenomenon**



# Hazards to Fire Fighters



# Structural Collapse



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

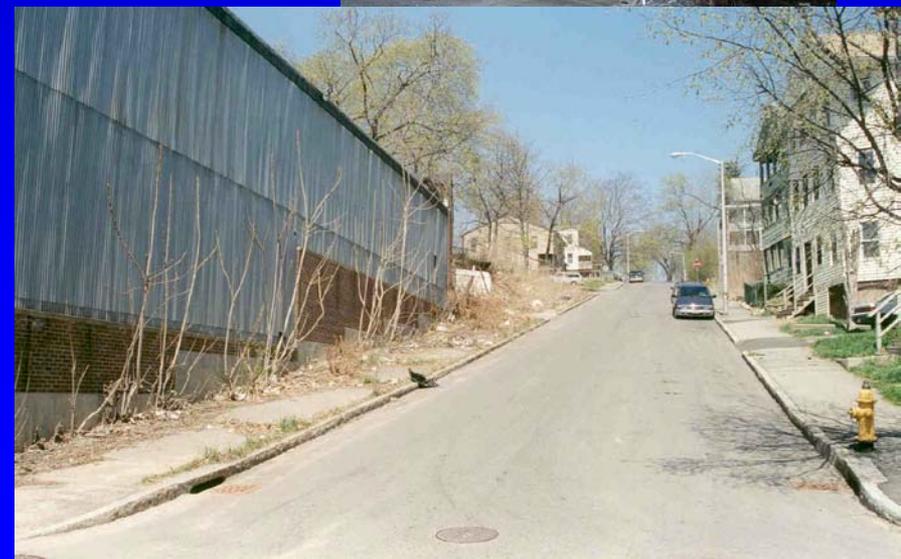
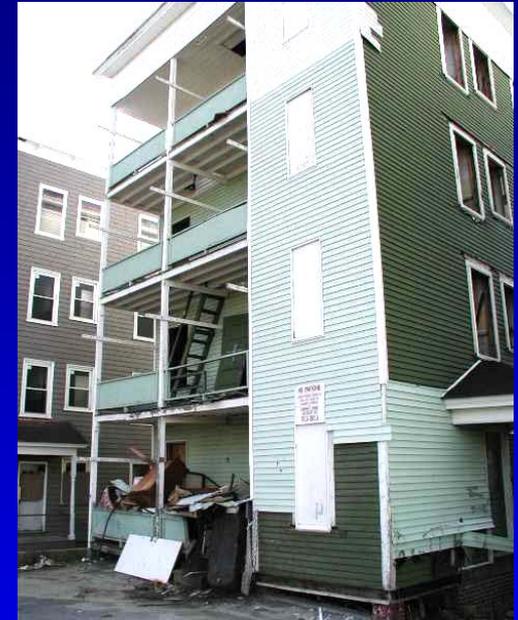
# Rapid Fire Development

## ➤ Unusual fuel loads



# Community Image and Blight

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



# Open Shafts or Pits

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



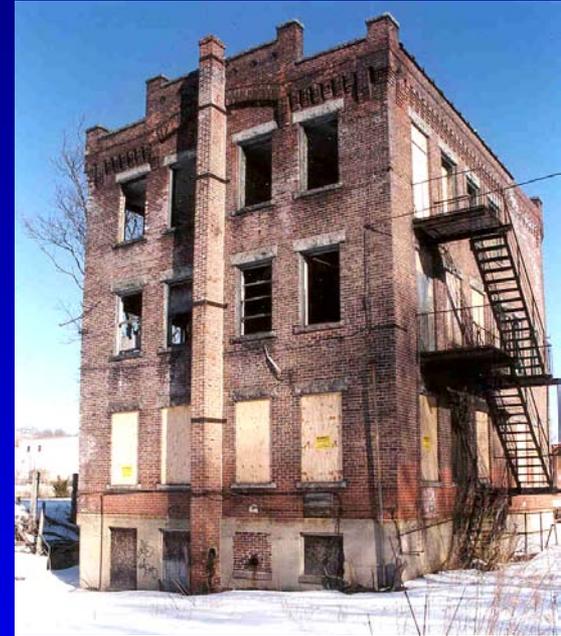
# Exposure Fires

- Hazard increases when adjacent buildings are uninhabited
  - ✓ Delays in alarm = Larger fires
  - ✓ Greater potential for spread to other buildings



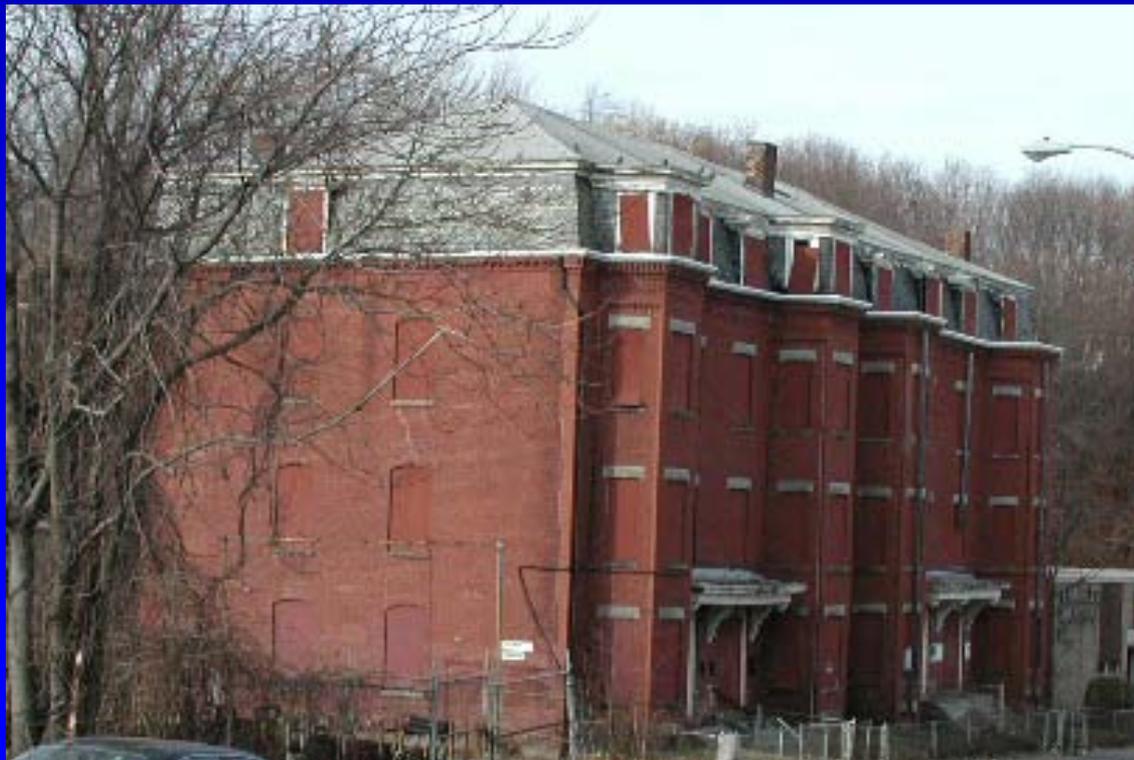
# Dealing with the Problem

- **Interdepartmental cooperation**
- **Determine the magnitude of the problem**
- **Identify properties with a potential for abandonment**
- **Evaluate and mark vacant and abandoned structures**
- **Aggressive code enforcement to prevent deterioration**



# Short Term Solutions

- **Provide building security**
- **Surveillance to monitor security**
- **Remove combustibles**
  - ✓ **Interior**
  - ✓ **Exterior**



# Long Term Solutions

## ➤ Determine candidates for

✓ Reuse

✓ Demolition



# 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*



# Do we have a 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” is time consuming and may prove to be very difficult**



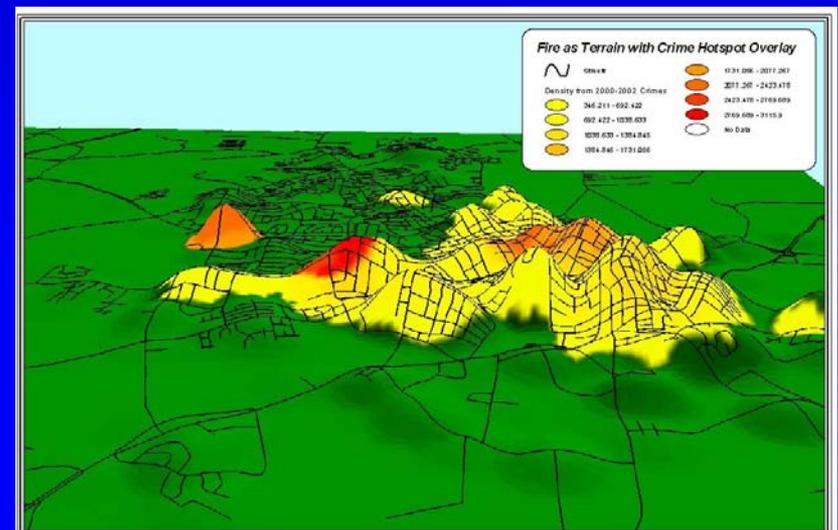
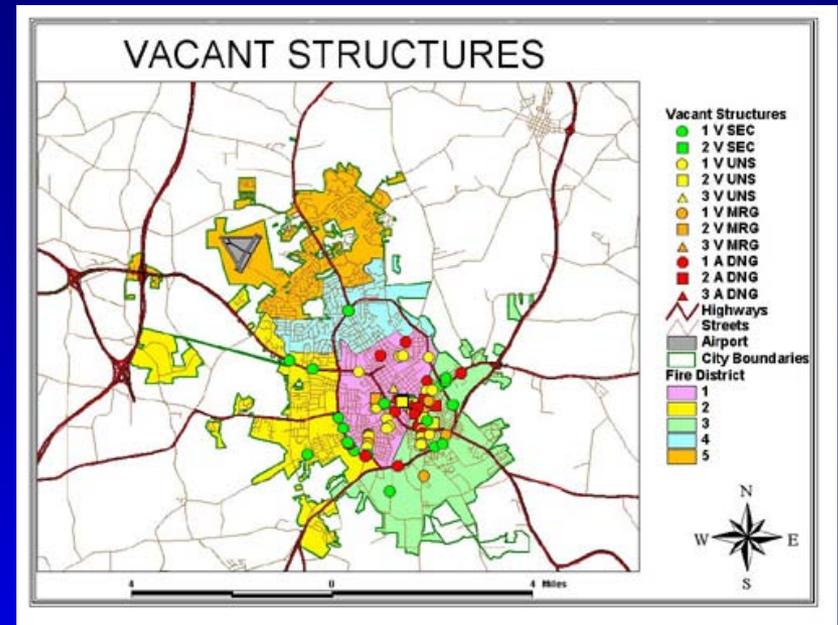
# Data Collection

- **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 is accessible to all involved agencies**

*How many vacant or abandoned buildings are in our community?*

# Tracking the Problem

- Many communities are using GIS technology
- Allows for tracking of individual properties
- Helps to predict trends and potential problem areas in the community
- Allow the user to overlay data from multiple agencies on one map



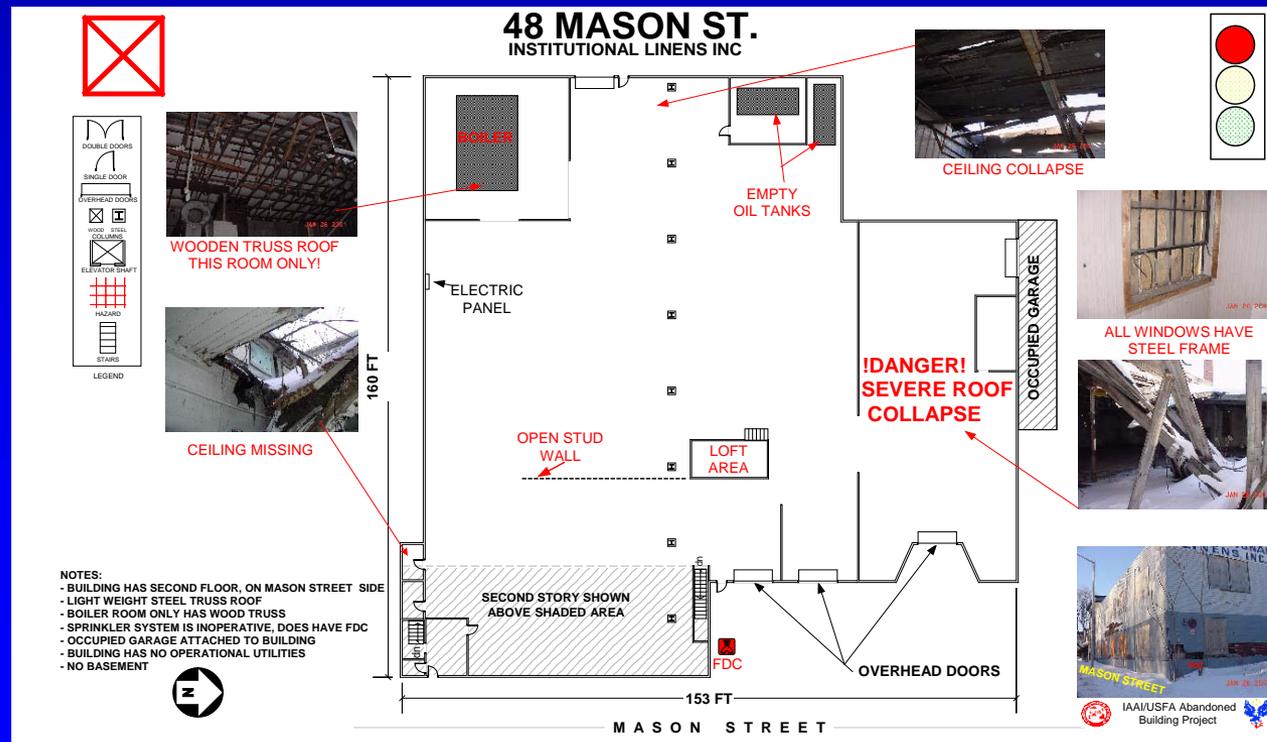
# Early Warning Signs

- **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**



# Inspection and Evaluation

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



# Identification Process

- **Used to alert fire fighters of the potential hazards in a vacant/abandoned building**
- **Makes public aware of problem properties**
- **Allows for increased surveillance**



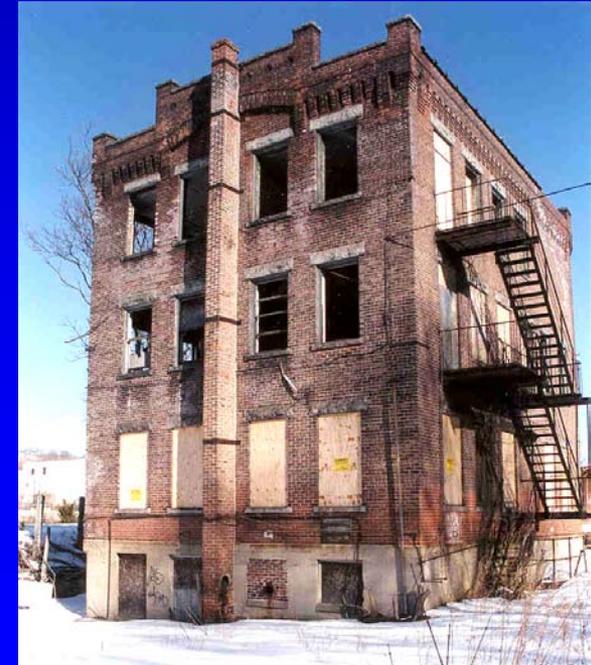
# Marking Buildings



- **Severe structural or interior deficiencies**
- **Operations should be conducted from outside except for life safety**
- **If interior operations are required:**
  - ✓ **Approved by Incident Commander**
  - ✓ **Tactics modified**
  - ✓ **Examined before units are committed**
- **Time of any interior operations must be limited**

# Securing Buildings

- The objective is to prevent unauthorized access
- Must be done well
- Slows down deterioration of the structure
- Security = Fire Prevention





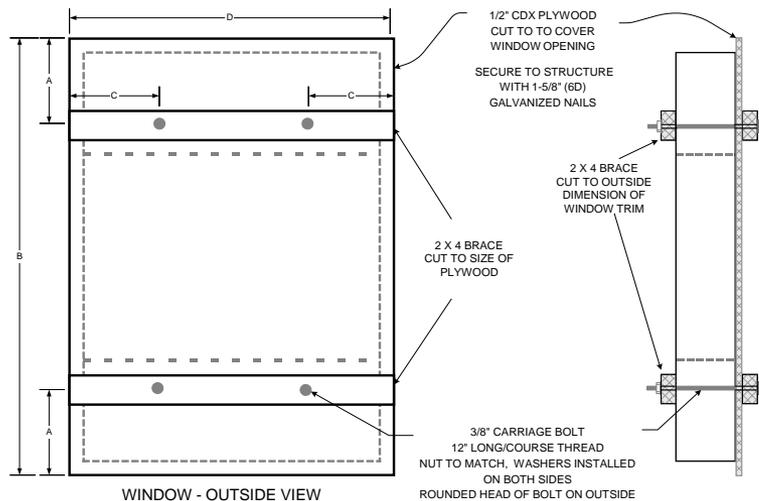
# Particle Board Doesn't Work!





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

# HUD Secure Board-Up



- NOTES:**
1. FOR DOUBLE HUNG WINDOWS, SLIDE SASH TO CENTER OF UNIT AND PASS BOLTS THROUGH OPENINGS AT TOP AND BOTTOM.
  2. STORM WINDOWS SHOULD BE REMOVED AND STORED INSIDE STRUCTURE.
  3. OUTSIDE TRIM MAY HAVE TO BE REMOVED TO ACCOMMODATE A FLUSH AND TIGHT FIT.
  4. TIGHTEN NUTS FROM INSIDE ENOUGH TO SLIGHTLY COMPRESS 2X4 BRACE.
  5. BRACE LOCATIONS: A = 1/3 B (SEE DIMENSION LOCATIONS ON DRAWING)
  6. LOCATION OF BOLT HOLES: C = 1/3D (SEE DIMENSION LOCATIONS ON DRAWING)

USFA National Arson Prevention Initiative  
Board Up Procedures



Window Detail

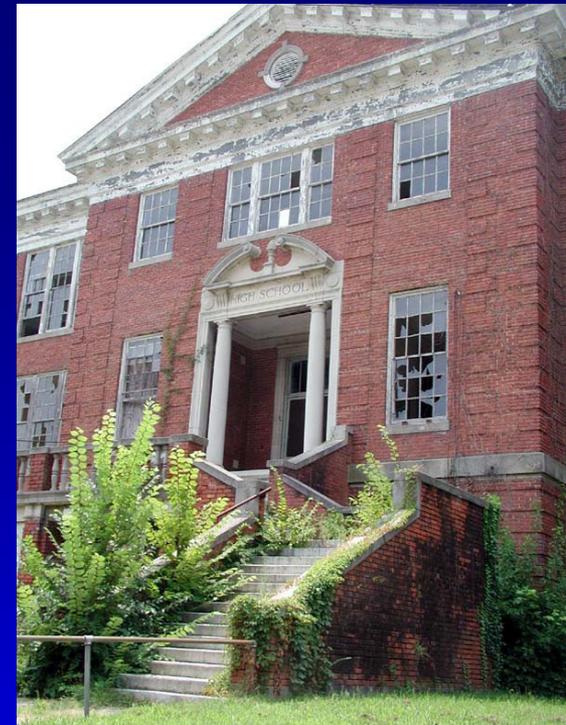
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The HUD secure Board-up procedure is a very effective method of preventing unauthorized access to buildings

# 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**
- **A source of affordable housing or commercial space**
- **Preserves historical buildings**



# 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**
- **State development programs**
- **Local tax dollars**
- **Private enterprise**

***Public/private partnerships  
tend to be the most  
successful***



# What can you do?

- **Support anti-blight ordinances in your community**
- **Report at-risk or vacant properties**
- **Report signs of unauthorized entry into vacant properties**
- **Encourage political leadership to address vacant/abandoned buildings in your community**