

# ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Editorial

## **Robberson: Addressing internal decay is fundamental to any city's revitalization**

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Why does blight matter so much to the overall health of a city? We don't necessarily have to be talking about St. Louis — blight is the visible evidence of any city's decay. Think of it in dental terms: It doesn't matter how straight and shiny those front teeth appear if all the teeth behind them need fillings, root canals and dentures.

I make no claim of special insights into the history of the blight that plagues St. Louis, but anyone who has studied urban blight can spot the results regardless of the location. A downtrodden neighborhood in Detroit, Dallas, Baltimore or Knoxville contains pretty much the same profile of uneven development and neglect.

In 2014, as part of a White House-commissioned task force, Dan Gilbert, the founder and CEO of Quicken Loans, looked into the biggest problems blocking Detroit's revitalization. The top challenge he cited was overcoming blight. In Baltimore, experts cite blight as a chief obstacle to recovery because empty buildings serve as magnets for drug users, criminals and vagrants.

Business decision-makers look closely at these issues before making a relocation decision, according to Entrepreneur magazine. If city leaders want job creation, they must address blight.

I know the effects of blight because I spent nine years studying and mapping it in southern Dallas, a poor, minority-dominated, blighted area the size of Atlanta. I worked closely with **Timothy Bray**, a University of Missouri-St. Louis scholar who now heads the Institute for Urban Policy Research at the University of Texas at Dallas. Together, we dug down deep into the ingredients of blight affecting five large districts of southern Dallas.

Bray sent a group of researchers street by street with handheld computers. They recorded everything they could see: abandoned houses, stray dogs, cracked or nonexistent sidewalks, nonfunctioning street lights, broken windows, sagging roofs, overgrown lawns, junk cars in the yard. We mapped every item and created a first-of-its kind online, interactive map and database open for public access.

We dug deep into U.S. Census data to create a profile of the residents and businesses in each area. We tracked unemployment, poverty, crime, educational attainment, incomes and commute times from home to work.

All of these figures told us something important. For example, if an area is dominated by single-parent households where the head of household commutes 45 minutes each way to work, that's evidence of a home where children are spending a big chunk of the day without parental supervision — an invitation for trouble.

Supermarkets shun blighted areas. That's how food deserts develop. If a single parent commutes long distances, then has to spend another hour getting to and from a supermarket to buy dinner, that's even more evidence of a household where kids must spend an inordinate amount of time fending for themselves.

I mapped out the performance levels of the schools in southern Dallas, which were uniformly abysmal compared with counterparts in the city's wealthy, white-dominated northern half. Did conditions of blight, crime, unemployment and parents' low educational attainment contribute to those low performance scores? Of course they did.

I tracked the relationship between slumlords and blight. I documented the decrepit condition of the worst rental properties in southern Dallas, then mapped and photographed the mansions of the owners. All this work was part of the package that won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize in editorial writing. The Federal Reserve of Baltimore invited Bray

and me to be the keynote speakers at a gathering of urban planning and blight-mapping specialists from around the country to explain how we did what we did.

I worked with Dallas Police Chief David Brown to map out crime hotspots. I produced a separate interactive map overlaying the placement of public housing inside high-crime areas. The map I created found its way into arguments presented to the U.S. Supreme Court in a landmark 2015 decision about discriminatory public housing policies.

Perhaps most important was the impact this project had on Dallas city council and mayoral elections. Because of the pressure this project created, politicians seeking local public office began presenting plans to address the economic and social imbalances dividing Dallas.

Mike Rawlings presented the most comprehensive plan of attack and won The Dallas Morning News' editorial endorsement for mayor in 2011. He won, and true to his word, he asked me to publish a report card every six months on his efforts to fix the many problems pulling southern Dallas down. We worked on this for three years, then I moved to St. Louis.

Rawlings' attention to the blight problem was unprecedented in the city's history. And it's because of this experience that, today, I'm pressing candidates for St. Louis mayor to bury their egos and embrace the same challenge.

If any mayoral candidate is sidestepping this issue, that's a candidate who doesn't deserve your vote.

A house in the 1000 block of Bittner Street in St. Louis' Baden neighborhood is demolished on Nov. 17, 2015, by Diamond H Acquisition Corporation Inc. Neighbors are hopeful the MSD buyout of many flood-prone properties to make a storm water control area can become an amenity to boost property values and attract new residents in the area. Photo by Christian Gooden, [cgooden@post-dispatch.com](mailto:cgooden@post-dispatch.com)

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