

For Gary mayor, vacant buildings full of promises



MELISSA HARRIS
Chicago Confidential

Gary Mayor **Karen Freeman-Wilson** knows precisely how many buildings are vacant in her city: 6,902, or 20.8 percent.

She knows how many buildings are "blighted" and in visible need of repair. That's 12,394, or 37.3 percent.

She can show you exactly where those buildings are and, thanks to a new ranking system, give some idea

when they might be torn down.

More than two years into an unprecedented partnership between Freeman-Wilson, former Chicago Mayor **Richard M. Daley** and the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy, more than 200 volunteers have cataloged the condition of every property in Gary. That information is available at garymaps.com.

"I pull it up on my phone all of the time when I'm talking to constituents and they ask me about an abandoned building near them," Freeman-Wilson said. "And I say, 'Well, let's see if it's on the hardest-hit list.'"

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Documenting Gary's properties

More than 200 volunteers surveyed the condition of each property within Gary — **58,235 parcels in all** — to help the city evaluate what to do with those structures that are abandoned and in disrepair.

PROPERTIES SURVEYED



Of the properties evaluated that have structures:

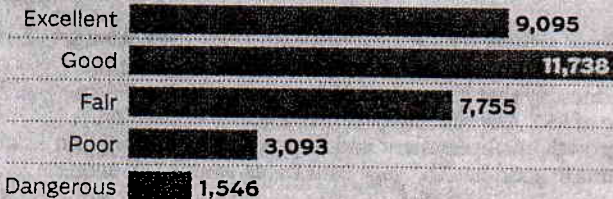
IS IT OCCUPIED?



IS IT BLIGHTED?



CONDITION



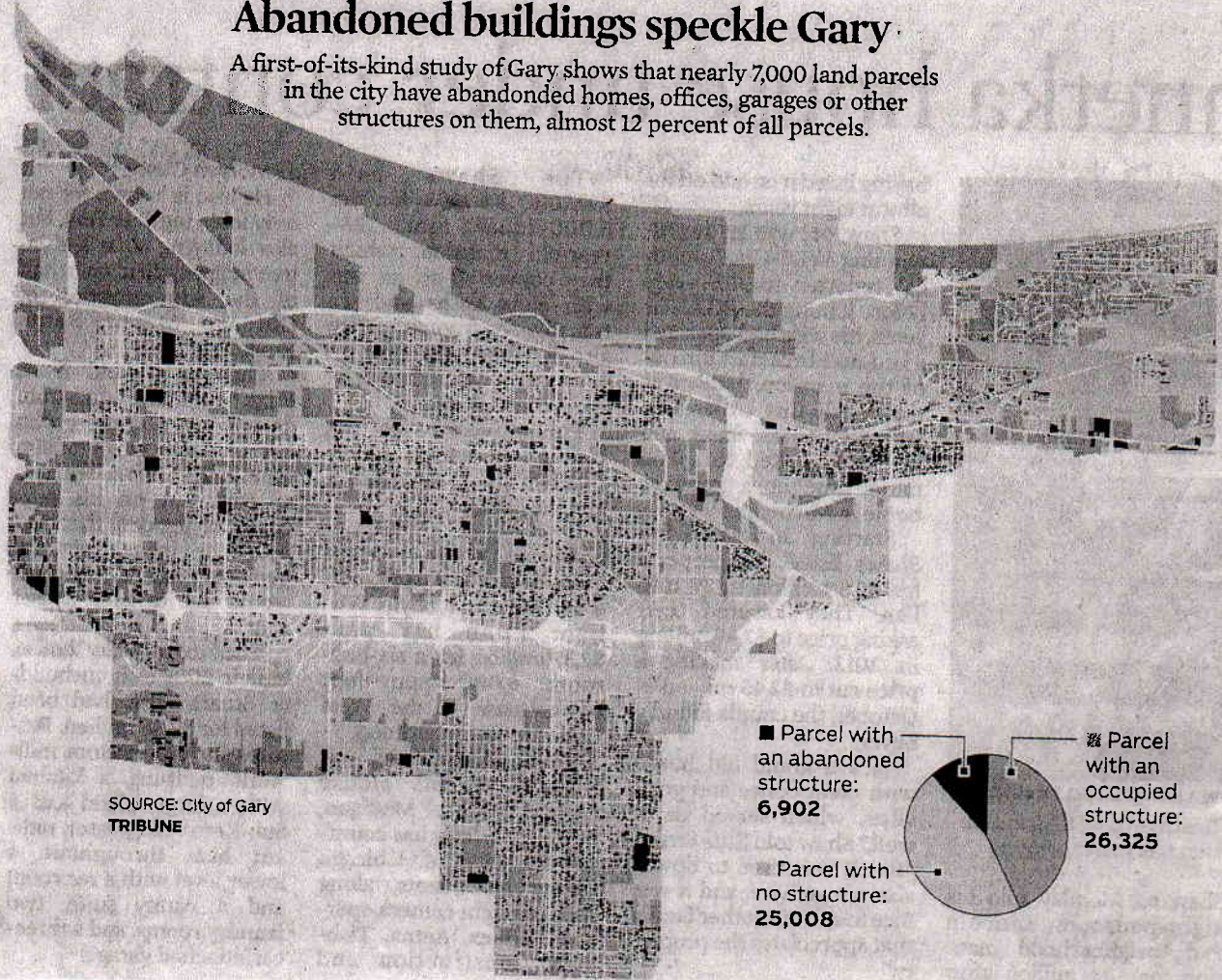
SOURCE: City of Gary

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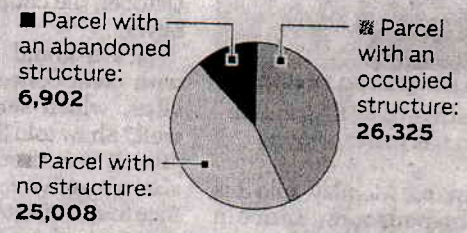


Abandoned buildings speckle Gary

A first-of-its-kind study of Gary shows that nearly 7,000 land parcels in the city have abandoned homes, offices, garages or other structures on them, almost 12 percent of all parcels.



SOURCE: City of Gary
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Promise in vacant lots

Harris, from Page 1

The Harvard-educated Freeman-Wilson now has her sights on negligent property owners. One is so bad, she just “can’t wait” to talk about him publicly, she said, but “we’re working on something as we speak.” And she wants the long-vacant Ambassador Apartments across from Jefferson Elementary School to come down next.

“That will really make an important statement to our young people,” Freeman-Wilson said. “One, that their safety is valued. But also that the environment they learn in is valued as well.”

Since leaving office in 2011, Daley has used his influence at the University of Chicago, where he is a senior fellow, to push manpower toward Freeman-Wilson. **Carol Brown**, Daley’s last policy chief at City Hall, has overseen the partnership through a graduate course called Urban Revitalization Project: City of Gary, Ind.

In September, Freeman-Wilson tore down the city’s tallest building — and one of its most derelict — the 12-story Sheraton Hotel, closed since 1985. The city is sprawling. It’s about the size of Boston, yet with 12 percent of its population.

In May, Gary won a \$6.6 million federal grant to pay for the demolition of abandoned buildings. Included in that grant is money set aside to experiment with a creative tear-down method known as deconstruction. Unemployed or underemployed Gary residents would be hired to salvage any materials that can be sold for a profit. Professional crews then come in to finish the job.



ZBIGNIEW BZDAK/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The long-vacant Ambassador Apartments are high on the Gary mayor’s tear-down list.

The Delta Institute, whose Rebuilding Exchange program has created a market for reclaimed building materials in Chicago, is a partner.

“Our survey data included some questions about what materials the buildings are made of so we could pilot this idea of deconstruction in Gary,” Brown said. “Ideally this will also be a job-creation strategy for low-skilled workers. Going forward, we’ll have students looking at what the market value of those materials are, and what is the best way for Gary to pursue this.”

Outsiders have tried to turn around Gary, whose population has declined by more than half since at least the **Lyndon Johnson** administration.

But Freeman-Wilson, a former Indiana attorney general, judge and Harvard

College and Harvard Law School graduate, has thus far avoided sharks, choosing partners from academia and philanthropy.

Most importantly, she is not afraid to ask for help.

During our 20-minute interview alone, she advertised that downtown Gary has large chunks of land available for redevelopment and said she would be pressing Harvard Law Dean **Martha Minow**, who grew up in Chicago, to supply students to work remotely on code enforcement cases.

Collecting the data to support those cases took 18 months.

“Largely due to students’ schedules and also last year’s polar vortex,” Brown said. “It is much more challenging to look at a home or building and assess whether it’s vacant or occupied when it’s buried in snow.

You can’t see whether the lawn is cut, or the mail has been picked up. Or whether there’s trash. ...

“Having the data really helps in the advocacy, because you can tell people there’s a significant blight problem, but when you can get down to the block level to show them how many blighted homes are on any given block, that makes a world of difference. A picture is worth a thousand words.”

Freeman-Wilson said the survey results were something of a relief.

Both she and Brown had expected to tally more than 12,000 vacant buildings. They found a little more than half of that.

“This is something we can achieve,” Freeman-Wilson said.

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