

Oberlin's housing past, present, and future

The overall desire to eliminate blighted properties is to create space for quality housing to accommodate a growing population, increase property values for Oberlin citizens, and make our community aesthetically pleasing and enjoyable. "Blighted properties breed dumping, hazardous building conditions, drug activity, and other crimes. They threaten the health and safety of neighbors and impose high economic costs on the larger community by lowering property values and requiring costly code and police enforcement."ⁱ In Oberlin, blighted properties exacerbate feral cat, rodent, and snake issues as well. Additionally, Oberlin has numerous properties struggling with appearance, safety, and overall clutter.



The City Council has taken a community-minded approach to address both blighted and struggling properties. Oberlin is in a unique position, which could be the verge of opportunity.

While Oberlin's population is low and declining, there is a shortage of adequate housing. Oberlin has lost approximately 189 houses since 1978. With our nation facing the recovery process of the first global pandemic of anyone's lifetime, urban residents are looking for options. With the recent addition of fiber internet Oberlin has a lot to offer for businesses and individuals to work remotely. Young families moving to Oberlin, and urban residents seeking a safer environment leaves Oberlin in the dilemma of a housing shortage. Later in this report is an explanation of the plans to address the Oberlin housing shortage and options to take a more aggressive stance to fix the housing shortage.

Earlier in 2020, a comprehensive housing assessment report was conducted, and this report will show those results and comparisons to previous Oberlin studies. As the information will show, Oberlin has been circling the housing issue for decades but has yet to gain any real ground toward resolution. After completing this research and report or simply driving around and comparing memories to Oberlin's current state, the need for action is evident. Some of the questions are:

- What kind of action does the council want to take?
- What will the action look like implemented?
- What do we want it to look like?
- What will it look like if no intentional action is taken?

Action refresher

Below is the action the council has already to address blighted properties. These programs offer a community-minded approach toward dealing with blighted properties.

Heritage Program: The city has already sent out one round of letters for the Heritage Program and had zero responses. The Heritage Program intends to provide a way for individuals who own property in Oberlin. Still, no family lives here, and the property has sat vacant for an extended period of time. The properties receiving Heritage letters appear to be in a condition where demolition is the only option.

Connections Program: This program is a lot like Heritage except for the condition of the property. A property needs to be able to be rehabbed. There have been about five housing transition through the Connections Program and has enabled families to have a home.

Tax Sales: The city has purchased two properties so far during sheriff tax sales. Tax sale purchases have proven to be an effective way to deal with blighted properties. The downside is the properties are few and far between and is not addressing blight on a large enough scale. One of the properties was demolished, and the other is entering into the Connections Program.

Heritage Program	Connections Program	Tax Sales
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Contacts owners of vacant abandoned property to donate to DAD.• City purchases donated property from DAD• All proceeds from Heritage project are donated to GROW from DAD during match month• To qualify for the Heritage program all properties are in demolition condition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Properties are transitioned to a new owner• New owner is obligated to rehab property at their expense• Excellent program for sweat equity• To qualify properties must be able to rehabbed• Eligible for incentive program	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• County tax sales often sell blighted properties and the city can purchase through this method• City has used tax sales to purchase blighted properties in the past• Assessment of property determines if property can be rehabbed or scheduled for demolition

Action refresher - proactive

There are different reasons a property might be struggling; it is close to blighted, but there is still potential. The city wants to help these properties reach their potential through positive community-based policy rather than punitive measures; punitive measures are the last resort. Below are active programs in Oberlin. These programs are geared toward property rehabilitation and assisting citizens who do not have the means financially or physically to care for a property. Struggling properties might also be candidates for the Connections Program.

Rehab Incentive	Spring clean-up	Ministerial Alliance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free use of dump truck • Waive building permit • Waive electrical deposit for 6 months • 10% electrical discount for 6 months • Paint rebate • Tree rebate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free pickup of anything taken to curb • Coordinate with county for free dump 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free neighbor helping-neighbor • Assit with outside maintenance • <i>COVID halted this effort this year</i>

COVID-19 had a dramatic effect on people gathering in groups in 2020. COVID-19 all but stopped the Neighbor-Helping-Neighbor program sponsored by the Ministerial Alliance. The organization itself is thriving in Oberlin, but efforts have understandably shifted toward COVID-19 related assistance. The hope is the group will return more active than ever for Neighbor-Helping-Neighbor projects in 2021.

The incentive programs seem to be gaining in popularity, and we have seen some improvement already. The table below shows the usage of different programs so far in 2020.

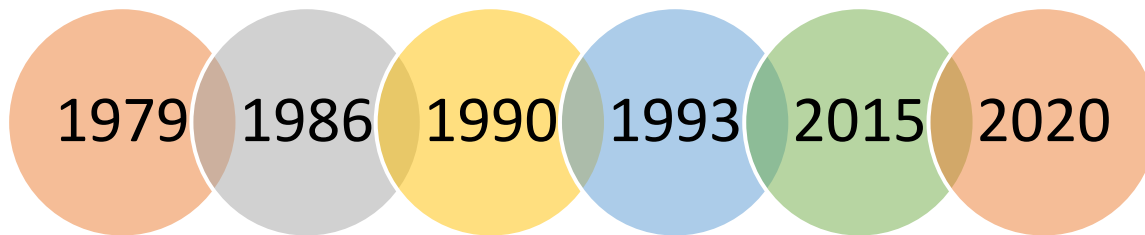
Incentive programs	Usage 2020	Usage 2019	Improvements
Paint rebate	\$2,447.00	Unavailable	\$2,447.00
Tree rebate	\$1486.00	\$812.50	14%
Sidewalk rebate	\$200.00	zero	4%
Dump truck	Used twice	Unavailable	Rehab projects
Building permits	Waived 2	Unavailable	Rehab projects
Electrical rebate		Unavailable	Rehab projects

These numbers are encouraging and show residential housing improvement; the council is headed in the right direction. Another consideration is to remember is there are still at least three months left 2020.

Historical highlights of housing efforts

Below is the timeline of all available reports, strategic plans, surveys completed to address the housing crisis in Oberlin. After reviewing each report in chronological order, there is no indication of the housing situation improving in Oberlin. A conservative estimate is \$50,000 of city funds have been spent to research and study housing in Oberlin. The only reason it is only \$50,000 is volunteers conducted the 2015 study. The 2015 survey was incredibly labor intensive. If you are a data junkie, you will appreciate the pain-staking time and effort poured into the 2015 housing assessment tool (HAT), and it sadly yielded zero benefits. Oberlin staff conducted The 2020 study. Both of these studies are assessed at zero dollars.

Housing study timeline



1979

The baseline for this report is a strategic planning study completed in 1979. During the '70s, Oberlin was in a good place. The information reflects the overall condition as positive while there were still 35% of housing units in a dilapidated state, with 1,133 housing units. The report does show an improvement from 1975 to 1978, and shows regions of Oberlin with 'substandard' housing. " (Commission, 1979)ⁱⁱ This indicates 1978 was the last time Oberlin saw any improvement in housing.

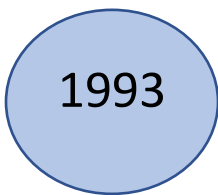
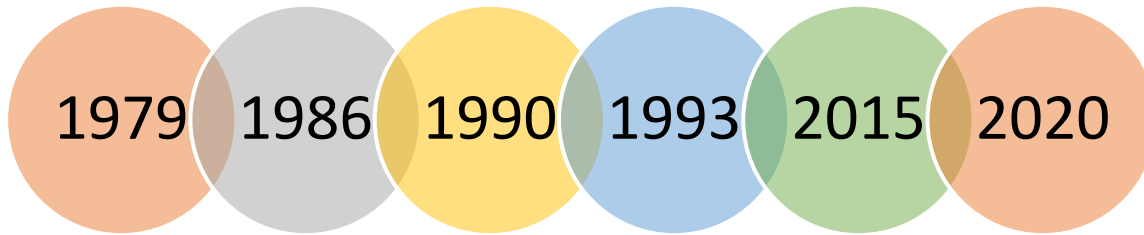
1986

While this study primarily focused on spending habits, the issue of housing was beginning to emerge. Citizens' concerns are ranked from 1 – 40, and in 1986, the removal of dilapidated buildings ranked 8, and housing availability ranked 25 in a consumer spending survey. Rental property availability was a concern as well.ⁱⁱⁱ

1990

The 1990 report discusses the importance of the relationship between overall beautification, entertainment, recreation, and a thriving residential housing market to create what the report deems a quality living environment. "The towns which survive, or even grow, in rural Kansas will be those which offer the highest quality living environment."^{iv}

Historical timeline



This small publication is jam-packed full of gems. The best staff can guess is in 1993, the report was published, but this publication is a keeper. Here is an actual snapshot from the report. ^v

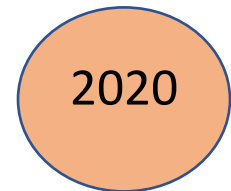
HOUSING

The future growth of Decatur County depends upon its ability to develop and maintain an adequate housing supply for the residents of the County. Existing housing must be maintained and new housing must provide ample places to live in the growing urban areas. Every effort must be made to improve outdated housing. Unsafe structures should be removed.

The current building trends indicate that few new homes are being constructed. An inadequate housing supply can be detrimental to a potential resident or perspective business concern. New housing units must be made available to revitalize the housing market.



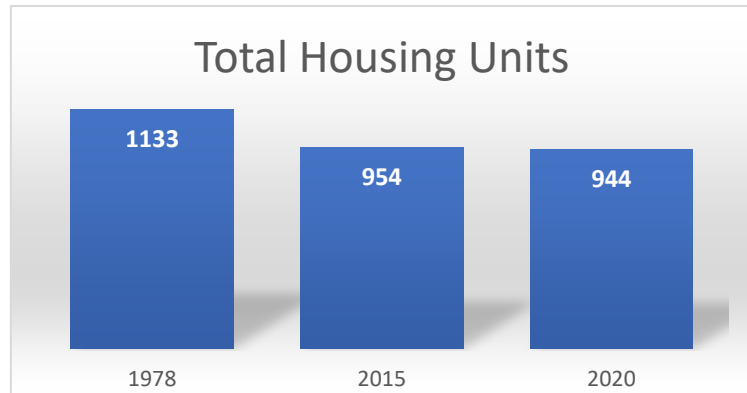
Both reports were conducted in-house and more data-focused than previous reports. The 2015 and 2020 were labor-intensive on-the-ground comprehensive housing inventory assessments of condition. The data of these reports provide a comparative look against the data in reports already referenced.



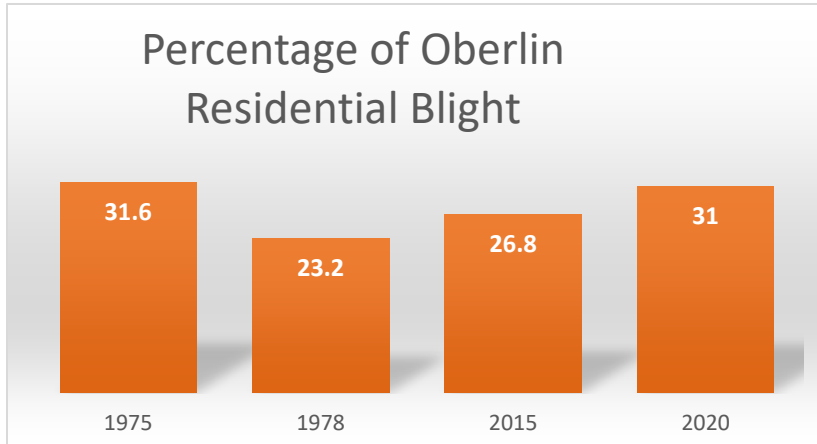
The Data

The theme of these reports is declining residential housing. Nothing here is new; this data only confirms what people intuitively know; there is a housing crisis in Oberlin. Again, not news and the issue has been circled for over four decades, 40 years, two scores; a real long-time, without any tangible, measurable improvement or intentional action. When looking at housing in Oberlin, a question initially emerged, how is it with Oberlin having the lowest population ever, there are not enough homes?

This chart shows the decline of housing units in Oberlin. From 1978 to 2015, the average annual housing units lost averaged almost five units per year. Fast-forward to 2020, and the average housing units lost between 2015 and 2020 are only two units per year.^{vi}



If anyone is going to research Oberlin housing, then blighted properties must become a variable in the equation. This graph shows the escalation of blight. The one improvement shown in blight was between

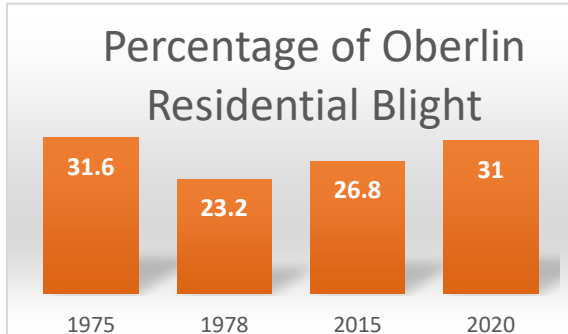


1975 and 1978. No other data were available for 1975, and the blight percentage was the only data stated.^{vii} The rest of the data from the 1979, 2015, and 2020 housing studies show a consistent escalation in blighted properties.

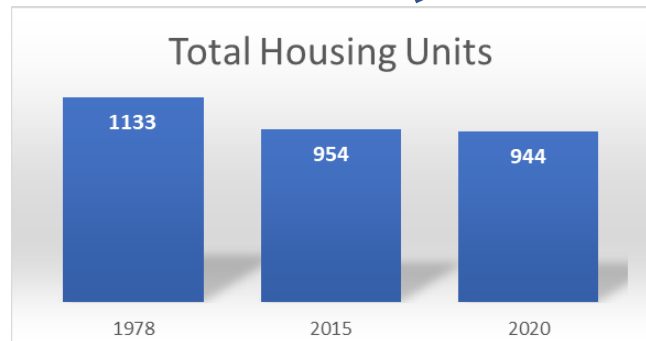
What this data begins to show is the distinction between housing units and the availability of housing units in living conditions. Unavailable housing becomes the story between the data points. Oberlin has a housing availability problem. Oberlin has plenty of housing units; it is the condition of the units creating the housing crisis.

Data relationships

A deeper dive into housing data produces a more precise and more systemic view of Oberlin's housing. The relationship between the data, and looking at other data impacting housing, specifically population data.



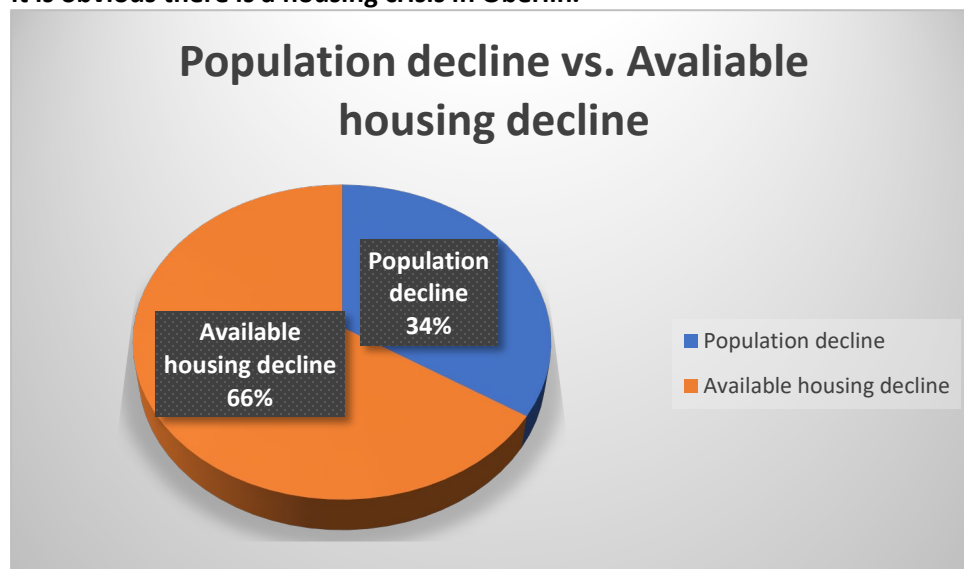
Here is where we begin to see the exponential impact of blight. Blight is not necessarily growing; yes, it has increased, but a 4% increase between 2015 and 2020 is not alarming for any measure. The impact that comes into play is the accumulation of blight building year after year. Additionally, we are seeing a consistent decline in housing units and increasing blighted conditions. With these two elements working in tandem, it is squeezing the available housing market in Oberlin.



Theory

Since 1980 Oberlin has seen a 22% population decline^{viii}

Since 1980 Oberlin has seen a 42.5% decline in available houses; this number combines blighted properties with lost units. When making the distinction between housing units vs. available houses, it is obvious there is a housing crisis in Oberlin.



Next Steps

This next- step is at the council’s discretion. This step would involve acting on policies already set in place by previous councils but culturally have been veered away from in the past. This laissez-faire approach has facilitated an environment where blight in Oberlin resembles a runaway train. This is a difficult transition to make while laissez-faire is often coined as a market-based solution for an economy that fits well with Kansas culture; however, when it is applied to other areas, it often falls short. Waiting for the market to correct terms of the blighted property will happen in an undesirable direction without specific and intentional intervention.



City code already encompasses the below actions at the last resort.

- Disposal of junked vehicles
- Condemn property
- Demo of property
- Abatement for weeds and overgrowth

ⁱⁱ Planning Study 1979, Northwest Kansas Planning and Development Commission, Department of Housing and Urban Development; pg. 58

ⁱⁱⁱ Oberlin Area Residents’ Opinions on Oberlin, Community Development Cooperative Extension Service Kansas State University, CD Study Report No. 15; pg. 14

^{iv} Market Analysis Oberlin Municipal Auditorium, James L. Gardner, Oblinger Mason McClugge & Van Sickle Corporation, Wichita, KS. Pg. 45

^v Decatur County Comprehensive Master Plan, Kiene & Bradley Partnership, Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1993, pg. 9

^{vi} Decatur County Planning Study 1979, Northwest Kansas Planning and Development Commission and Housing and Urban Development, February, 1979; pg. 57 and data from the 2015 HAT report and 2020 Housing Assessment

^{vii} Decatur County Planning Study 1979, Northwest Kansas Planning and Development Commission and Housing and Urban Development, February, 1979; pg. 57 and data from the 2015 HAT report and 2020 Housing Assessment

^{viii} Populations of Cities in Kansas 1900 – 2010; <http://www.ipr.ku.edu/ksdata/ksah/population/2pop33.pdf>