

# INNOVATION SNAPSHOTS

## Neighborhood Cleanup Project Becomes Hands-On Training Model



Residents of Detroit's McDougall-Hunt neighborhood had been working for years to improve several parcels of overgrown vacant land that had become magnets for criminal activity. But obtaining the resources and permits they needed to clean up the land was daunting.

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Scott Douglas,  
project co-planner

The land needed so much work – utility repairs, tree removal, regrading and more – that the cleanup was essentially a small construction project. The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) had the expertise and resources to get the job done.

To get the department involved, the project team had an idea: Turn the cleanup into a hands-on training site for community members interested in construction careers. MDOT's Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) Program, which helps minority-

and women-owned businesses begin working with MDOT, agreed to participate.

After months of planning and coordination, in September 2015 the team spent four days cleaning up 11 parcels of land. Contractors lent the team an excavator, bulldozer and backhoe, and unions provided equipment operators and professional laborers who helped construction students gain hands-on experience at the job site. Community residents volunteered their time, and MDOT donated planting materials. In all, donations of equipment, labor and materials topped \$31,000.

“A big part of what made the project so successful was the fact that it started and ended with the community,” says Scott Douglas, assistant engineer on the M-1 Rail project, who helped plan the cleanup during a graduate program at University of Detroit Mercy.

### WORKING TOGETHER TO GET THE JOB DONE

The project team's strategy was to make connections between groups who could help each other, Douglas explained. MDOT strives to put local crews to work on its construction projects, but it can be challenging for

contractors to find experienced workers with the right skills. This project created a construction skills training opportunity and helped recruit local participants. Many of the trainees were placed in skilled jobs by the end of the cleanup project.

“The concept of the project was to take a need and fill it by finding a group that had a different need,” Douglas says. “It was like a massive trade in baseball – everyone gets something different and you need everyone to make it work.” The project team documented the strategy in a step-by-step guide to developing land cleanup partnerships – a resource designed to help other neighborhoods succeed in doing the same.



**Before and after:** Clearing overgrown vegetation revealed a buried sidewalk.

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