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# Viewpoint: When institutions shape neighborhoods, collaboration must shape policy

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Across Lansing, residents are told revitalization will come through big plans and bold visions. Yet in the Eastfield Neighborhood, just east of Michigan Avenue, vacant parcels and surface parking lots tell a different story.



This op-ed draws on a Michigan State University Michigan Applied Public Policy Research report developed after residents asked us to document their experiences and reimagine equitable reinvestment in their neighborhood.

Our research shows this is not a failure of community vision or city effort. Instead, it reflects a deeper structural challenge in Michigan cities: when large institutions own significant land, they often shape neighborhood outcomes more than zoning codes or city plans.

In Eastfield, Sparrow Hospital's extensive landholdings have become a major force shaping neighborhood change. This dynamic is not unique to Lansing. Across the state, hospitals, universities, and other large employers acquire property for future growth or expansion. Yet Michigan property law offers cities limited tools to compel timely reinvestment. Zoning and code enforcement can address use and safety, but they cannot prevent prolonged vacancy.

The result is a mismatch between who holds power and who bears the consequences. Residents live with empty lots and stalled plans, while municipal leaders have few regulatory levers. Under these constraints, institutional decision-making can exert disproportionate influence over neighborhood futures.

This research unfolded during a period of change. When Eastfield residents reached out in 2024, they had long sought answers about vacant properties. New ownership, improved communication, and the rebuilding of several homes that were sold to families signaled progress. With the

University of Michigan Board of Regents approving additional funding for Sparrow projects, ensuring community voices remain central to planning through collaborative partnerships is more important than ever.

We do not suggest institutions act in bad faith; instead, the policy framework is incomplete. When cities cannot compel action, stronger partnerships are needed to align institutional growth with community benefit. In Eastfield, this means moving beyond informal conversations toward community benefit agreements that establish timelines, maintenance expectations, public amenities and engagement.

Our research also highlights an opportunity Lansing is well positioned to seize: deeper collaboration with MSU. Stakeholders emphasized the value of partnerships with MSU to support corridor activation, mobility improvements, and small-scale site interventions. As a land-grant university, MSU can complement city efforts through design support, data analysis and community-engaged projects.

These partnerships matter because Eastfield residents are not asking for monumental developments. Instead, they consistently prioritized small businesses, safe walking and biking paths, neighborhood parks, shaded seating and markets. These everyday amenities shape how people experience their neighborhood and foster social interaction, health, and belonging.

Neighborhood satisfaction is closely tied to sense of community and access to green space, both undermined by vacant land. But modest investments such as pocket parks, protected bike lanes, pop-up markets and traffic calming can quickly change how a neighborhood feels and functions.

This insight carries important policy implications. Too often, redevelopment strategies prioritize scale over impact. Eastfield shows that success requires not only anchor projects, but also smaller improvements shaped by resident priorities. An example is the informal dirt trail connecting a dead-end street to the Eastside Connector bike path through green space north of the hospital. With modest investments in surfacing, lighting, and signage, this well-worn path could become a safe, intentional link with meaningful daily impact.

Eastfield is not an outlier. It illustrates how institutional land ownership, limited municipal authority, and community aspirations collide in mid-sized cities across Michigan. The lesson is not that revitalization is impossible, but that it requires rethinking power, partnership and progress.

If institutions shape neighborhoods through landownership, collaboration must shape policy. And if residents tell us they want walkable streets, green spaces, and places to gather, not only grand gestures, we should take them at their word. Lansing's future will be built not just through big plans, but through everyday investments that make neighborhoods work.



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*is an assistant professor of landscape architecture at MSU whose research bridges landscape architecture, urban design, and environmental psychology.*



**Dr. Deyanira Nevárez Martínez**

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**Dr. Christopher Thompson**

*is an Eastfield resident, pediatrician, and neighborhood leader whose firsthand experience with local challenges prompted him to bring Dr. Saeidi-Rizi and Dr. Nevárez Martínez together to launch this collaborative research effort.*

## **Expressive Liberation: My Experience at the National Council for Black Studies Conference**

### **Alayla Milow**

Research Assistant,  
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For 50 years the National Council for Black Studies has organized conferences for scholars from across the world to examine various aspects of the Black experience. When Dr. Kevin L. Brooks invited me to present my research on stewarding spaces of belonging for Black students on campus, I was excited to accept the opportunity to join many of the leading researchers in this discipline together in Baltimore, MD. However, as my departure date and presentation approached, I grew increasingly nervous about presenting alongside scholars and changemakers within my community.



Due to a long and challenging journey to the conference, my uneasiness deepened when flight delays