

# BizTimes

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[Real Estate Spotlight: Amani neighborhood lost nearly 15% of its housing units in a decade, city officials and community members say it's due to divestment](#)



Dana Williamson, a homeowner in Milwaukee's Amani neighborhood, first moved to the area nearly three decades ago. She recalled that the northwest side community was anchored by thriving businesses like A.O. Smith and with homes and families that filled each block.

Even after leaving the neighborhood for years, she returned in 2017, with the opportunity to purchase a home.

Where businesses and homes once stood, vacant lots now stretch across blocks of the neighborhood – a problem that city officials and community members say has been caused by a slow, grinding cycle of divestment. The Amani neighborhood lost nearly 15% of its housing units between 2014 and 2024, according to census data. Total housing units have decreased from around 3,500 to 3,000 – nearly 500 housing units lost in a decade.

On Williamson's block alone, three empty lots sit staring back at her, a physical reminder of what the community has lost. She said the view has become so common that residents have grown almost accustomed to it.

But how did Amani lose its housing units? The answer is anything but simple, said Lafayette Crump, commissioner of the Department of City Development.

Crump, who grew up in the neighborhood, said the answer includes man-made decisions and

economic challenges nationwide.

“With the lack of new investment – with the erosion of Milwaukee’s middle class and increased segregation – there were neighborhoods that suffered,” Crump said. “And Amani, perhaps, suffered more than others.”

The city owns 400 vacant lots in the Amani neighborhood, 87% of which are single-family home lots, according to data from DCD. The department did not have figures on how many lots are owned by out-of-state property owners.

Teig Whaley-Smith, executive director of the Community Development Alliance, which advocates for racial justice through affordable housing, said the organization has also monitored impacts that have led to vacant lots, including a cycle of out-of-state investors who purchase homes and do not maintain their properties. He said once the homes are neglected, leading to deterioration, some are declared tax-delinquent – clearing the way for demolition.

The cycle is referred to as, “displacement by divestment,” Whaley-Smith said. He emphasized that total housing units lost may also represent families who were forced to leave the neighborhood.

“If your only definition of displacement is gentrification, it’s often too late to reverse that massive trend,” he said. “There are precursors to displacement by gentrification that you can identify.”

A decline in the number of homeowners and mortgages issued are two early signs of divestment in a neighborhood, said Whaley-Smith. Gradually, the number of vacant lots, vacant homes and housing units will increase, making room for displacement, he said.

“The more and more you wait in this cycle of displacement to solve the problem, the more expensive it gets,” Whaley-Smith said.

### **Stuck in the cycle**

There are residents who witness the cycle and get trapped in it, Whaley-Smith said. Elizabeth Brown, president of community organization Amani United, said she’s one of them.

When Brown returned to the Amani neighborhood in 2017, she rented a home from a local landlord for herself and her family. But when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, that landlord sold his properties to an out of state investor, setting off years of instability for Brown’s family.

The house quickly deteriorated. The furnace failed. The kitchen ceiling gradually collapsed, leaving the space unusable for two years. Brown said the worsening conditions forced her and her family to move in and out of the home several times.

Eventually, she learned she qualified for an affordable home through social service organization Milwaukee Community Crossroads.

“You would think I’d be able to save my money or move, but that wasn’t the case,” she said. “I still had to live every day without running water, without being able to cook, buying things to stay warm – I was taking care of a house that wasn’t mine.”

But the new home wasn’t immediately available.

The process – paperwork, meetings and delays – left her stuck between a house falling apart and a house not yet hers. During that period, Brown and her four youngest children became homeless.

For six months, they stayed with relatives or paid for hotel rooms and short term rentals. During the holidays, Brown said she rented Airbnbs to cook meals and keep family traditions alive.

She finally moved into her newly built home in 2025 and has now lived there for nearly a year. Brown said the stability has transformed life for her and her family.

Through Amani United, Brown said they are helping other residents navigate similar challenges. Many in the neighborhood, she said, are pushing for a cooperative model to help long-term residents remain in their homes.

“We’re trying to keep the residents that want to stay in this community,” Brown said. “And everybody that I can help stay is going to stay.”

“(Amani residents) are sad that so many people have been displaced in their community and they’re sad that so many of their neighbors are living in terrible properties,” Whaley-Smith said. “But also, that sadness comes with an incredible amount of optimism that things can be better.”

### **Investing resources**

By 2028, vacant lots in and surrounding the Amani neighborhood are expected to be transformed into 90 new affordable homes through a partnership between Milwaukee-based real estate development firm Emem Group, Northwestern Mutual and other community stakeholders.

Michael Emem, president and chief executive officer of Emem Group, has called the area his “first home” – expressing that his personal connection to the neighborhood drives his dedication “to creating opportunities for families to plant roots and build a future here.”

Developers like Adrienne Hunter, on the other hand, are tackling another community issue: vacant homes in the area. Amani has more than 800 vacant homes, according to census data analyzed by [datayoucanuse.org](https://datayoucanuse.org).

Through the city’s Homes MKE initiative, which aims to renovate and reoccupy a minimum of 150 vacant foreclosed city-owned houses, Hunter and other developers are redeveloping homes that have sat vacant for years.

Hunter – who serves as the managing member of Milwaukee-based real estate development firm

Top Tier Development Inc. – has redeveloped five homes, with two under construction and one waiting to close, she said. The eight homes, which are in and surrounding Amani, are expected to be completed by the end of her tenure in the program.

The five homes that have been developed have all been sold to first-time homeowners, a choice Hunter said is intentional.

“If you can get a house and that house can be collateral for you to build on – it means everything,” Hunter said. “So, for us to be able to put people into a home – that means everything.”

Hunter said growing up as she did has inspired her to do work that will uplift others.

“I want to reach back and grab other people. I want to be able to be a road map,” Hunter said.

As of May, 69 homes have been fully renovated through the program. Crump said it’s the beginning of something new in the neighborhood.

“What we’ve seen is that when you pour resources – that can be housing redevelopment, commercial revitalization – you tend to see additional investment happening that the city doesn’t have to subsidize,” Crump said. “The dollars that we pour into neighborhoods is extremely catalytic.”