

Policy Recommendations

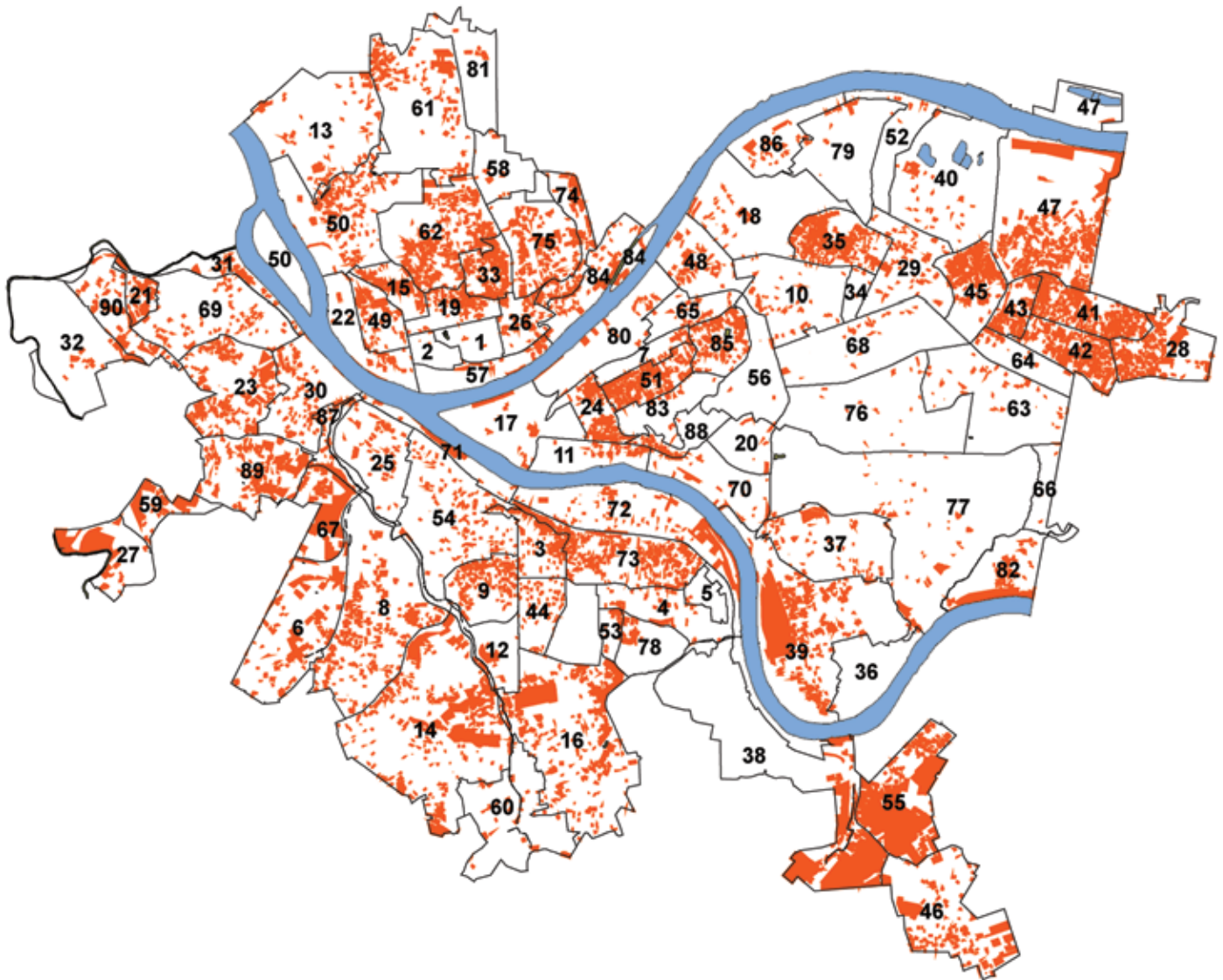
Greening Vacant Lots for Pittsburgh's Sustainable Neighborhood Revitalization



A Systems Synthesis Project
Fall 2006

Carnegie Mellon
Policy • Management • Information Technology | **Heinz School**

Vacant Lots in Pittsburgh



Allegheny Center	1	Crawford-Roberts	24	Lincoln-Lemington-Belmar	47	South Oakland	70
Allegheny West	2	Duquesne Heights	25	Lower Lawrenceville	48	South Shore	71
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Central Oakland	20	Homewood West	43	Regent Square	66	Westwood	89
Chartiers City	21	Knoxville	44	Ridgmont	67	Windgap	90
Chateau	22	Larimer	45	Shadyside	68		
Crafton Heights	23	Lincoln Place	46	Sheraden	69		

In a city of rivers, vacant land represents a sea of opportunity.



This Carnegie Mellon University policy study finds that the City of Pittsburgh can and should use green strategies to manage vacant lots for economic, community, and environmental benefit. The cost effective and comprehensive management strategies found in this document will enable green vacant lots management to become a priority for a financially constrained city.

Vacant lots are an underutilized resource in the City of Pittsburgh. Despite tireless efforts from the Mayor's office, non-profit organizations, neighborhood and environmental groups, and dedicated community members, more than 14,000 vacant lots existed in 2005. With the consent of the Mayor's office, a team of graduate students from Carnegie Mellon's H. John Heinz, III School of Public Policy and Management developed recommendations for methods to stop the neighborhood deterioration caused by vacant lots.

Objectives:

The purpose of the study as chartered by the Mayor's office and the Vacant Land Working group is to assist City efforts to reclaim vacant lots utilizing green techniques. Outlined tasks include:

1. Create a city-supported comprehensive plan for vacant lots using green management strategies that will ultimately guide city policy
2. Quantify recommendations to help mitigate the resource drain associated with vacant lots
3. Design tools to facilitate implementation of green strategies
4. Align city, non-profit, and for-profit entities around sustainable vacant land use systems emphasizing: Feasibility and Economics, Community Process, and Green Strategies

Fundamentally, vacant lots contribute to neighborhood degradation, are a financial burden to the City, and impede redevelopment. Moreover, vacant lots demand human energy, underutilize environmental assets, and strain economic resources.

In contrast, creative solutions are literally sprouting up all over the City and a critical mass is gathering behind the idea of "Greening Vacant Lots."

- **The City** is investigating ways to solve some of its biggest vacant lot hurdles.
- **The Pittsburgh Green Forum** harnessed energy, innovation and concern, seeking systematic green solutions to vacant lot problems.
- **Entrepreneurs** are growing cash crops on blocks where previously little other investment occurred.
- **Neighborhoods** are planting gardens and supporting public art in formerly litter-filled lots.
- **Homeowners** are acquiring lots adjacent to their properties as yards.
- **Non-profits** are collaborating to learn best practices for green strategies.

Policy Recommendations

1. Initiate pilot project using low-cost stabilization program to reclaim and prepare vacant lots
2. Fully implement efforts to hire a 'Clean and Green' Coordinator
3. Market and utilize *Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide for Revitalizing Vacant Lots in Your Neighborhood* community handbook
4. Better utilize existing City systems, resources, and momentum for more efficient and effective vacant lot management
5. Coordinate City's data collection inventories to create consistencies in data and definitions for vacant lots
6. Expedite process for finding solution to Capital Assets Research Corporation (CARC) – held liens

The following pages detail the team's six main recommendations, and provide a snapshot of both the scope of the problem and the benefits to be gained from implementing green strategies on vacant lots. This document, the *Policy Recommendations*, serves as an abbreviated version of the final report (see page 18). The *Policy Recommendations* should be used to educate and create support for action.

The findings of this report indicate that vacant lots represent opportunities. To fully realize these opportunities, however, decision makers will have to embrace innovation and collaboration. Vacant lots will not disappear quickly – but by making them a priority at both the neighborhood and City level, Pittsburgh may one day find itself surrounded by a sea of green.

Scope and Definition of the Study

The Heinz School Team's task was to objectively investigate strategies for greening vacant lots. From the Vacant Land Working Group's perspective, vacant lots are devoid of any structures and generally unmaintained, and often associated with blight. Green Strategies are those that improve quality of life, community interactions, recreational opportunities, and smart growth strategies that emphasize environmentally responsible land management.



Methodology

Over the past four months, eleven graduate students spent over 4,000 collective hours collecting and analyzing data, researching best practices, creating documents and tools, and crafting recommendations. They were aided throughout this process by representatives of the Mayor's Office, (who acted as the client for this project), as well as members of the convened Vacant Land Working Group. Over 100 interviews conducted included the Department of Public Works, the Real Estate Division in the Department of Finance, the Department of City Planning, and the Department of Law, educational institutions, nonprofit leaders, community groups, case study representatives, and many others. Data was gathered from the Pittsburgh Neighborhood and Community Information System, the City Real Estate Database, Map Pittsburgh, case studies, the Green Forum participants, and from online journals and periodical research. Analysis included regression modeling, cost-benefit analysis, and process investigation. The team also participated in the organization and analysis of the Green Forum, a gathering of community members and professionals dedicated to finding solutions for Pittsburgh's vacant lots problem.

A Systems Synthesis Project

Graduate students at Carnegie Mellon University's H. John Heinz III School of Public Policy and Management engage real world clients in a Systems Synthesis Capstone project, or more simply, Systems project. This course provides students in the Masters of Science in Public Policy and Management and Masters of Arts Management programs the opportunity for hands-on education while researching a relevant policy issue existing in contemporary society. The final product of the Systems project is the culmination of a semester's worth of research and analysis resulting in over four thousand hours of effort illustrated in a final presentation, a series of policy recommendations, and a final report.



The Negative Effects of Vacant Lots on Urban Neighborhoods

Vacant lots are common byproducts of a declining population in older urban neighborhoods. Vast numbers act as garbage piles, crime scenes, and impediments to redevelopment. Though vacant lots are concentrated in Pittsburgh's most underserved communities, no neighborhood is immune to their blighting influences. Individual efforts at revitalizing properties often fail due to lack of knowledge, financial burdens, or lack of community initiative. This fiscally strapped City has had to continually cut resources devoted to combating this problem so common in cities with declining populations. In short, vacant lots contribute to neighborhood degradation, are a financial burden to the City, and impede redevelopment.

200

Number of structures slated for demolition in 2007 by Pittsburgh's Redd Up Initiative, resulting in roughly 200 new vacant lots, annually.

\$800,000

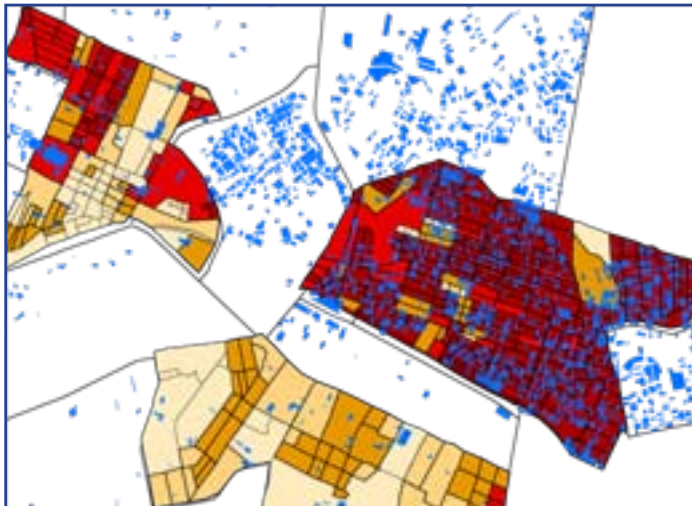
Minimum amount the City of Pittsburgh spends annually maintaining vacant lots. (Department of Public Works, 2006)

18%

Percentage decrease in property values on blocks with higher concentrations of unmanaged vacant lots. (The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, 2005)

10.2%

Percentage of parcels that are vacant in Pittsburgh, a much higher rate than cities like Baltimore, Cincinnati, and Seattle. (The Brookings Institution, 2000)



Vacant lots- effect on Fair Market Value by Block Group

Neighborhoods of East Liberty, Point Breeze, and Homewood



Pittsburgh Green Forum

On November 2-3 (2006) the Urban Ecology Collaborative and the Sprout Fund hosted the first Pittsburgh Green Forum – a gathering of both community members and professionals dedicated to revitalizing vacant land through green strategies. Over 300 people gathered over the course of two days at the Pittsburgh Project on the North Side to have round table discussions and hear presentations from Philadelphia Green and Parks and People (Baltimore), two successful vacant land management programs.



The following indicate the most significant weaknesses impeding a green strategy for vacant land revitalization (taken from the Green Forum round tables):

1. "Legal issues, including liability in using lots, liens and zoning regulations all inhibit acquiring and addressing vacant lots."
2. "The system surrounding vacant lands and their acquisition is both confusing and bureaucratic." The community at large is not armed with the knowledge or skills to apply greening techniques.
3. "There is no strong leadership or a 'face' to greening vacant lots."
4. The current land management strategy is not sustainable because high dependency on volunteer work can lead to volunteers working on this issue to burn out.

The Negative Effects of Vacant Lots on Urban Neighborhoods

We selected 86 neighborhoods across the city and analyzed conditional variables for correlations.

Our study shows:

- Significant positive correlation between the number of vacant lots in a neighborhood and the number of violent crimes in that neighborhood
- Highly significant negative correlation between the number of vacant lots in a neighborhood and the average fair market value of real estate in that neighborhood

Such correlations suggest that the number of vacant lots in a neighborhood could be a significant factor in determining its overall health, at least as far as critical variables such as market values and crime are concerned.

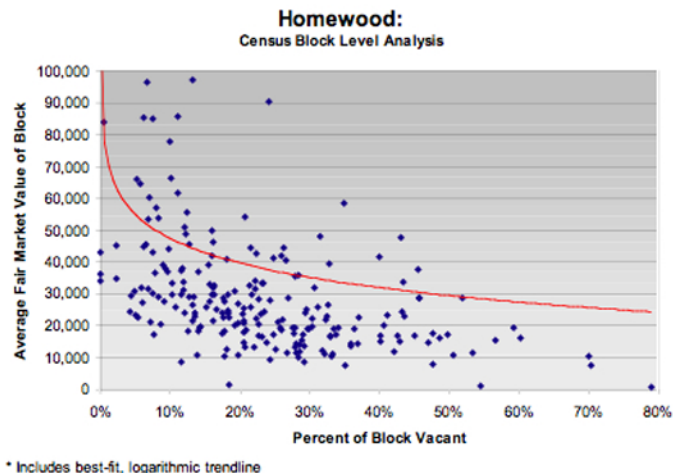
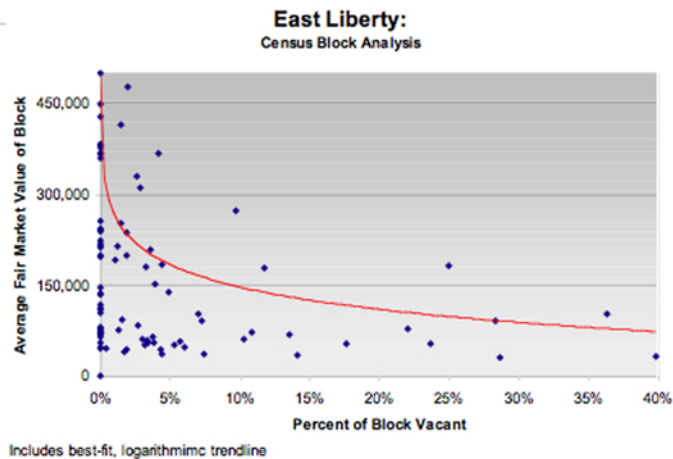
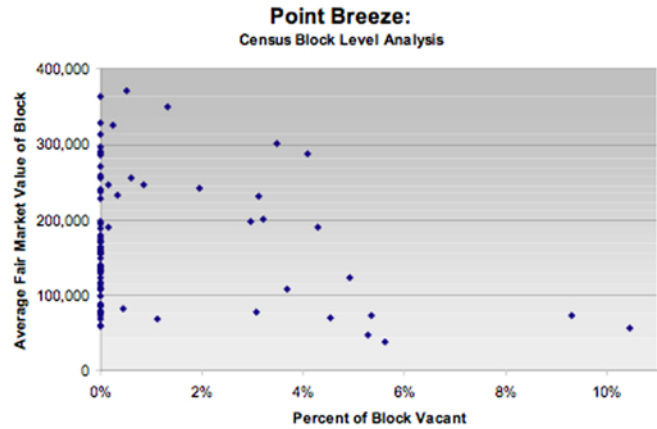
Our study shows that neighborhoods can be categorized as Stable, Distressed and Transitional.

Note: Qualitative factors should also be considered, such as level of development and community support.

Variables were analyzed at the Census Block Group level for three communities: Point Breeze (stable), East Liberty (transitional), and Homewood (distressed).

Correlation between fair market value and vacancy is strongest in transitional neighborhoods. This implies that investment in transitional neighborhoods provides the greatest return on investment by raising property values.

	Stable	Distressed	Transitional
Annual Total Violent crime/capita (3.04)	↓	↑	↑
Average percentage of Vacant Lot Area (8.21%)	↓	↑	↑↓ 2-3%
Lien amounts greater than Fair Market Value	↓	↑	↓
Access to parks & community gardens	↑	↓	☑
Fair Market Value median, Property (\$66,400)	↑↑	↓	↑↓



The Positive Effects of Vacant Lots on Urban Neighborhoods

At first glance, the issue of vacant lots seems to have no end in sight; but hope is literally sprouting up all over the City. A years old conversation is gathering new voices and growing amidst the fertile energy of progress and innovation.

9.5 %

Rise in property values within 1,000 feet of a community garden in disadvantaged communities within five years of the garden opening. (New York University, 2006)

\$2.09 : \$1.00

Estimated return on investment from implementation of vacant lot stabilization program in Pittsburgh. (Greening Vacant Lots for Pittsburgh's Sustainable Neighborhood Revitalization, 2006)

90% +

Of Philadelphia community gardeners who give food to neighbors, friends, and organizations that feed people in need. (The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, Philadelphia Green Project Profile, 2006)

10 %

Increase in nearby property values due to tree-planting. (The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, 2005)

8 % to 30%

Increase in single-family home sale prices in close proximity to well-improved parks (Ernst & Young Study, 2002)

30 %

Increase in surrounding housing values due to greening vacant land. (The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, 2005)



Vacant Lot Characteristics and Green Strategies

Vacant lots are opportunities to redefine neighborhoods through green strategies. Combining new greenspace, innovative social programming, and progressive development paired with community-based strategies and appropriate lot types adds economic and social value to neighborhoods.

"GAP"	"CONSECUTIVE"	"BLOCK"	"CORRIDOR"
Single "GAP" lots are commonly found in residential neighborhoods, where temporary reuse adds social and economic value	2 or more "CONSECUTIVE" lots are flexible for a variety of greening strategies	Vacant "BLOCKS" offer unique opportunities for large scale community greening strategies	Vacant Lots along urban "CORRIDORS" share common uses and potential future programming

Case Studies and Best Practices

Pittsburgh Based:

Projects in Pittsburgh that highlight best practices of vacant lot management utilizing green strategies

South Side Slopes Neighborhood Association

www.southsideslopes.org

South Side Slopes Neighborhood Association (SSSNA) is a volunteer-based organization formed to protect and manage open green space along the slopes of the South Side neighborhood in Pittsburgh. It currently manages four community gardens through partnerships with diverse groups, including the South Side Local Development Company, local landowners, the City of Pittsburgh, Duquesne Light and Lamar Advertising.



Nine Mile Run Watershed Association

www.ninemilerun.org

The Nine Mile Run Watershed Association is responsible for overseeing the restoration and protection of the Nine Mile Run Watershed. A product of the Nine Mile Run Greenway Project at Carnegie Mellon University, the NMRWA is a relatively young organization. Even so, it has been ambitious and successful in the management of the Nine Mile Run Watershed since its incorporation in 2001. Central to its success have been its outreach efforts and its relationships to other organizations in the Southwest PA region.



Rosedale Block Cluster

www.rosedaleblock.org

The Rosedale Block Cluster, in a step toward sustainability to support their educational programming, started their landscaping business in 1999. The Rosedale Block Cluster Landscaping company in Homewood, under the umbrella of The Rosedale Block Cluster, Inc has a blooming training and development program, landscaping, and snow removal social enterprise.



The Brassica Project

Sponsor: Steel City Bio-Fuels, www.steelcitybiofuels.org

Vacant lots and brownfields, which are currently liabilities for Pittsburgh, can be transformed into organic urban oil seed farms through the promotion of Brassica plants. Specifically, utilizing the brassica plant species to clean-up soils contaminated with trace elements could provide affordable and sustainable technology for bioremediation. Crops such as mustard, canola, and sunflower can both remediate the soil and produce vegetables oils that can be transformed into clean burning bio-diesel.



Case Studies Beyond Pittsburgh:

Case studies identified as valuable benchmarks from which to model and expand upon Pittsburgh initiatives

Chicago, IL

The Chicago City Department of the Environment is dedicated to "developing and maintaining the City's infrastructure corridor and open spaces in ways that apply and promote healthy environmental practices. The 'Conserve Chicago Together' initiative of Mayor Daley's office, run by the Department of the Environment, has extensive programming around varying facets of conservation and revitalization.

Portland, OR

A group of eleven members - six appointed by the city and five appointed by the County - formed the Portland Sustainable Development Commission, which recommended and created the Office of Sustainable Development (OSD) in September of 2000. The Department was created by merging the solid waste and recycling division (Bureau of Environmental Services) with the energy office and currently has a staff of about 30 people.

Austin, TX

The City of Austin has created a Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI) embedded in the City's Transportation, Planning and Sustainability Department and reporting to the City's Sustainability Officer. SCI serves as a resource for city staff and area residents by advocating, creating tools and providing expertise concerning sustainability. It was created in 1996 from a recommendation by the Austin Citizens' Planning Committee charged with 'protecting the long-term livability' of Austin.

Policy Recommendations

1

Initiate pilot program using low-cost stabilization program to reclaim and prepare vacant lots

2

Fully implement efforts to hire a Clean and Green Coordinator

3

Market and utilize *Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide for Revitalizing Vacant Lots in your Neighborhood* community handbook

4

Better utilize existing City systems, resources, and momentum for more efficient and effective vacant lot management

5

Coordinate City's data collection inventories to create consistencies in data and definitions for vacant lots

6

Expedite process for finding solution to Capital Assets Research Corporation (CARC) - held liens

1

Initiate pilot program using low-cost stabilization program to reclaim and prepare vacant lots

Approach

A cost-benefit analysis was based upon statistics gathered through city interviews and case studies, and reviewed by numerous Carnegie Mellon Faculty and various professionals. Grounding principles of the analysis were objectivity, conservative estimates, and efficiency.

Findings

Land Stabilization is the basic treatment of a vacant lot through clearing of debris disposing of waste, seeding for low growth grass, and planting trees to improve the blighted conditions in preparation for any future utilization. Stabilization also eliminates characteristics that negatively impact the surrounding neighborhood. Stabilization is the first step for any green revitalization on vacant lots.

The impact of stabilization programs on Vacant Lots include:

- Reduction in number of Vacant Lots. (In Pittsburgh, such a program could reclaim 1,308 lots over a 20-year period, or over 65 lots per year)
- Economic Benefits: Increased tax revenues generated by properties added back on to tax rolls and by surrounding properties increased assessed values
- Social Benefits: Increase in collaboration between communities and cities to share maintenance burdens and innovative solutions
- Environmental Benefits: Additional greenspace for city residents

Furthermore, our conservative statistical analysis reveals that

Every \$1 invested will create \$2.09 return from a stabilization program, with the bulk of returns after year five. (Return on investment to cost of investment, see assumptions right)

Case study research shows that successful stabilization programs must be pioneered by targeted pilot programs. To be most effective, according to national models, such a pilot program must address every blighting influence in a particular neighborhood. Though potentially unpopular politically, this model has proven successful and is easier to evaluate long-term. Any alternative model that prioritises lots risks realizing its full impact.

Cost-Benefit Assumptions

Philly Green, a similar program in Philadelphia, found a \$1.57 - \$1 return on Investment (Wharton Report)

Cost of \$2,000 to stabilize lot. Philly Green used a \$1,500 average cost for same treatment in 1999. Cost includes cleaning, soil testing, grading, tree/grass planting, fencing. Value raised for inflation, confirmed by local groups doing similar work.

\$28,204,000 initial cost to stabilize every lot in Pittsburgh. Recommend initial cost funded by government/foundation sources that leverage financing. Ex: Pursue state funding such as Philadelphia's Bond Initiative.

A maintenance cost of \$200 per year. Based on figures provided by Dep. Public Works and case studies, conservative compared to Philadelphia's figure of \$80/lot. Figure reduced significantly city-wide by community partnerships/volunteers.

Return on investment based primarily on tax increment

8 properties surrounding a stabilized lot see a 30% rise in assessed value due to elimination of blighting effects, at the low range of a Wharton School study of Philadelphia's program.

The average tax bill of a converted property is \$519, which is based on a Municipal Property tax rate of 10.8 mills (very high) and median value of the taxable residential property in Pittsburgh of \$48,100. Assume that lots transferred to private markets for development enter tax rolls as though valued at \$48,000, a conservative figure given that they will be mostly new construction. Only 1% of vacant lots are transferred to private hands each year, conservatively below Philly Green's 2.65% figure.

Average number of vacant lots added to City each year = 200
200 = number of Redd Up Initiative demolitions removing blighting influences in 2006 and budgeted for 2007

Decrease of 1,308 City-managed vacant lots over a 20-year period, over 65 lots per year

A discount rate of 6.75% is factored into the analysis, reducing the ratio

Recommendations

Conduct Pilot Program for Land Stabilization strategies:

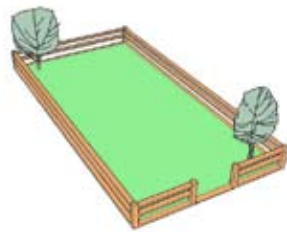
Land Stabilization strategies are a proven foundation to enabling sustained, long-term impact on community health while emphasizing short term, tangible benefits.

The Pilot Program should implement a stabilization strategy on every vacant lot in one neighborhood and encourage partnerships with neighborhood groups to further invest in green strategies on chosen lots.

To facilitate the success of the Pilot Program, the directive should come from the Mayor’s Office. Acquisition and resources are prioritized in the Pilot neighborhood. Clean and Green Coordinator oversees the process and monitors success.

Necessary components for the Land Stabilization pilot program include

- Neighborhood classifications
- Indications of Vacancy / Block and FMV
- Baseline Comparisons



Land Stabilization Program

Function:
Clean-up, transform community liabilities into assets

Resource Input:
\$500-\$2000/lot/year

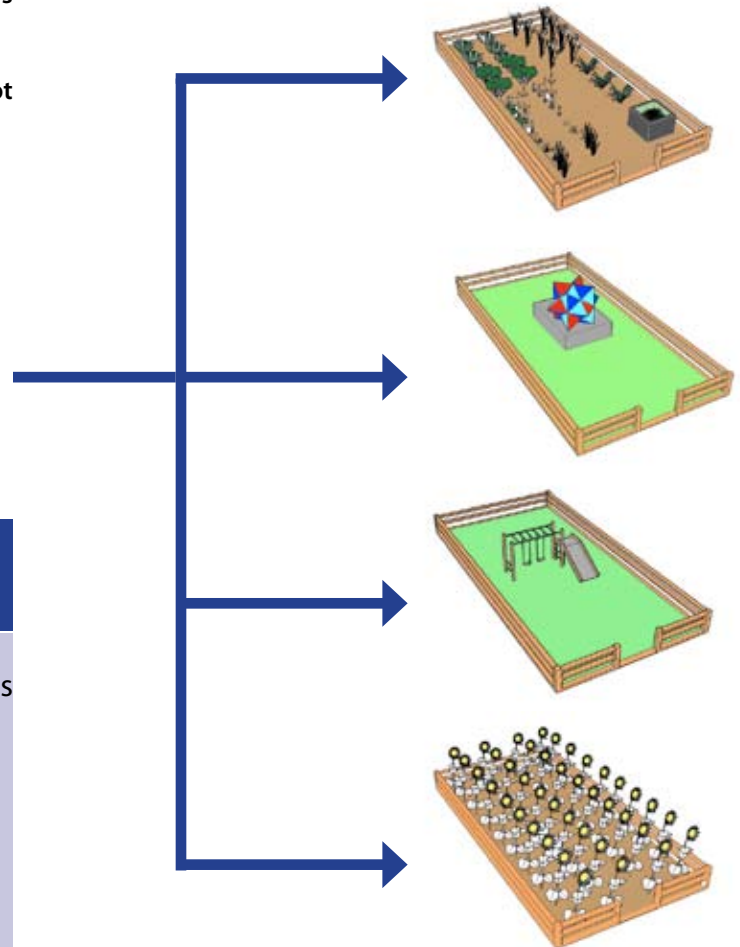
Value Added:
Community beautification, crime reduction, environmental restoration, long-term investment

Pad Prep for Community-Based Strategies

Vacant Lot Stabilization prepares “Green Pads” for short and long term community-initiated greening strategies.

Short-Term Strategies:
Stabilization, Community Expression

Long-Term Strategies:
Agricultural, Parks and Recreation, Green Enterprise, Green Infrastructure



2

Fully implement efforts to hire a ‘Clean and Green’ Coordinator

Approach

Extensive interviews and case studies both within and outside of Pittsburgh were conducted.

Findings

In every successful national model of greening vacant lots there is a dedicated employee that bridges the gaps between city departments, administrations, communities, developers, and non-profit organizations.

Recommendations

The City had funding in place for this position earlier this year. We recommend that the City continue efforts and hire a Clean and Green Coordinator responsible for overseeing green policy changes that impact vacant lot management within the next six months. We also recommend dedicated funding over the next three years.

Its creation has the potential to elevate Pittsburgh’s national status as it catches up to cities that already recognize the value of employing someone to oversee city-wide environmental initiatives. It is important that this position have the following attributes:

1. **Appropriate level of authority**
Have firm understanding of success metrics; ability to enforce metrics and performance standards for all departments
2. **Administrative position not tied to political appointment**
Should not be a part of the Mayor’s Office to ensure consistency through administration change and campaigns. Suggest creation of an office within the Department of City Planning that will grow over time: Office of Environment and Conservation
3. **Support all department staff**
 - Act as mediator between departments, coordinate intradepartmental efforts, have legitimacy within City Council and the Mayor’s Office
 - Ensure that City employees are educated about the value of greening strategies
4. **Vacant to Vibrant community handbook owner, updater, and distributor**
5. **Manage implementation and evaluation of pilot program**
 - Look towards long-term sustainability, while offering immediate actionable strategies
 - Create evaluation metrics
6. **Convener and partnership builder between public agencies, businesses, community organizations and residents**
 - Skilled at grassroots relationship building and program implementation
 - Manages relationship with non-profit partner(s) for stabilization program; Example – Model current relationship between the City and Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group regarding vacant property
7. **Knowledge holder**
 - Broad knowledge of entire vacant lot reclamation and revitalization processes

Case Studies	
Philadelphia, PA	Senior City Planner
Baltimore, MD	Supervisor, Environmental Planning
Cleveland, OH	Sustainability Program Manager
St. Louis, MO	Special Assistant to the Mayor
Chicago, IL	First Deputy Commissioner, Department of the Environment

3

Market and utilize *Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide for Revitalizing Vacant Lots in your Neighborhood* community handbook

Approach



Over the course of two months, information was gathered from more than 80 Pittsburgh organizations involved in green projects on vacant lots. Personal interviews and site visits were conducted to gather details specifically about community groups' impressions of common obstacles they encounter when beginning a green project.

Findings

Revitalization and acquisition of vacant lots is a lengthy and complicated process. *Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide for Revitalizing Vacant Lots in Your Neighborhood* was developed to empower communities and individuals interested in revitalization of vacant lots. To help facilitate an understanding of both City systems and potential Greening Strategies, as well as provide a useful guide to area resources, *Vacant to Vibrant* was guided by the following concepts:

- Community groups (excluding CDCs) that choose to start green projects typically do not have ownership of the lot.
- The top three obstacles community groups and individuals face in taking a green project concept to implementation:
 - a. Lack of Funding
 - b. Internal organizational management
 - c. Acquisition process
- Target Audience: Neighborhood associations and individuals with a desire to start sustainable green projects on vacant lots.
- Document Stewardship: Dependent upon a joint effort between the City of Pittsburgh and non-profit organizations such as the Department of City Planning, Department of Finance, and community development corporations.

Vacant to Vibrant Contents:

1. Step-by-step guide for assessing vacant lots on a case-by-case basis
2. Introduction to short- and long-term Green Strategies
3. Guide to City programs and acquisition process
4. Resource Directory

Recommendations

1. Ensure City staff and community development corporations' staff are aware of *Vacant to Vibrant* and its utility:
 - Require Clean and Green Coordinator to manage document dissemination throughout City departments where feasible
 - Require Clean and Green Coordinator to manage document dissemination among community development corporations
2. Make *Vacant to Vibrant* accessible by providing:
 - PDF copies for email purposes
 - Links to download the PDF on City and CDC web sites, such as the Redd Up website
 - Paper copies to individuals at no cost or printing/ mailing cost
3. Promote *Vacant to Vibrant* to the media:
 - Issue press releases bi-annually or after updates to the content
 - Contact local and regional newspapers and periodicals about featuring *Vacant to Vibrant* in their Gardening sections (responsibility for the Clean and Green Coordinator.)

4

Better utilize existing City systems, resources, and momentum for more efficient and effective vacant lot management

Approach

Information was gathered through key informant interviews, independent research, and national and international case studies.

Findings

City starting to investigate and implement green vacant lot management

- City exploring hiring a Clean and Green Coordinator; City seeking funding to initiate programs
- City Planning currently undertaking Strategic Neighborhood Assessment Plans (SNAP)- assessments of neighborhood health
- Department of Public Works encourages employees to receive horticultural training at Phipps Conservatory

Vacant lot management mechanisms have lost funding steadily for over a decade

- Departing staff members in Real Estate Division have not been replaced, despite documented positive returns on investment in staff
- Funding has been shifted away from park maintenance: Trust for Public Land survey shows Pittsburgh ranks 52nd out of 54 cities surveyed in park-related expenditures per city resident

Existing City resources are often underutilized

- Greenways program, City Side Yard Sale program, and Garden Waivers have had limited success due to lack of publicity and low community initiative

Current lot recycling strategy is based on tax collection and not strategic neighborhood revitalization

Comparable cities with successful vacant lot management strategies often have a non-profit partner to organize the community, share liability, and add capacity

- Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group's relationship with the City provides a model for vacant lot management collaboration

Recommendations

1. **Land revitalization must become a priority, on equal footing with tax collection, at the City's Real Estate Division. This prioritization starts at the Mayor's Office and throughout City Council.**
2. **Engage nonprofit organization(s) with capacity for partnership on stabilization program and marketing existing greening tools, programs, and resources**
3. **City should continue making greening vacant lots a priority at the highest levels, while educating all relevant employees about the importance of the program**
4. **City should continue trend of involving ground-level employees with working knowledge of day-to-day implementation of programs in policy decisions**

Key Terms:

Greenway:

A greenway is a corridor of green space. Greenways differ in their location and function, but overall, a greenway will protect natural, cultural, and scenic resources, provide recreational benefits, enhance natural beauty and quality of life in neighborhoods and communities, and stimulate economic development.

Side Yard Sale:

City of Pittsburgh program for residents to purchase publicly-owned vacant lots that directly border their existing property.

Park:

A publicly-owned, managed area of land with grass, trees, paths, sports and recreational facilities and other amenities. An area of land reserved so that it remains unspoiled, undeveloped, and as natural as possible.

5

Coordinate City's data collection inventories to create consistencies in data and definitions for vacant lots

Approach

Data was collected from three sources that keep information about parcels in Pittsburgh. These three sources were:

- Pittsburgh Neighborhood and Community Information System (PNCIS);
- Map Pittsburgh from Pittsburgh's Department of City Planning;
- Greenway and Side Yard Sale data from Pittsburgh's Real Estate Division

Land use codes, building tax assessment information and data collected from Map Pittsburgh's on-the-street review of lots was analyzed to find all the vacant lots in Pittsburgh.

Findings

Different definitions of vacant lots within these databases leads to confusion and inconsistent reporting of information. Only Map Pittsburgh collects data on the specific category of vacant lots, while other systems categorize parcels as vacant land which can include green space or vacant property as well as vacant lots. It is important for data to make distinctions between vacant lots and vacant property, as there are separate considerations of use, cost and development for each.

There is not one main source or agency that houses all the relevant data. This can make it difficult for anyone trying to gather information. It also takes time and resources away from each group if they have to continually meet with users, provide data, and explain the data they are providing.

This fragmentation and vagueness leads to less people who will be able and willing to use the data. Data sharing software such as Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and MapHub, created by the Studio for Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon University, are only as useful as the data available.

Programs like Map Pittsburgh lead City efforts to improve data collection, however, this project is only half complete and the data is not yet made public.

Recommendations

1. **There is a need to develop definitions that are clear, concise and utilized by everyone. It is our recommendation that groups begin to use the definitions laid out in this booklet and to adapt them as necessary.**
2. **We also recommend that there is one central information center for all users that coordinates data collection and analysis efforts. It is our recommendation that this data be housed within the Department of City Planning. It is more efficient for this data to be held by the government because most of the data comes from City and County departments, and this would make communication easier.**
3. **If this data is housed within a City department, it is our recommendation that the data be made public. There is a necessity to increase the users of information technology such as GIS and MapHub. The City should encourage this by making data and GIS files for public use.**

We recommend the following standard definitions:

Additional definitions are found in the Final Report

Vacant Land:

Parcels of land that are either vacant lots or vacant properties, which contain a damaged or condemned structure. Vacant land can either have tax liens or a free and clear title. Vacant land includes parcels that can or cannot be developed such as parks, greenways, community gardens, cemeteries, playgrounds, sidelots, yards, vacant lots and vacant properties.

Vacant Lot:

Parcels of land completely void of any structures. These parcels usually result from absentee landlords and tax lien accumulation. These lots are unkempt, maintained by municipal authorities, or maintained by a neighborhood steward.

Vacant Property:

Parcels of land that include condemned, damaged or partial structures. These properties usually result from absentee landlords and tax lien accumulation. These properties are either unkempt or maintained by municipal authorities. If a municipal authority demolishes the property, it then becomes a vacant lot.

6

Expedite process for finding solution to Capital Assets Research Corporation (CARC) - held liens

Approach

Extensive interviews were conducted with city employees and other professionals who work with the land acquisition process.

Findings

In 1996, the City sold delinquent tax, water and sewer liens to Capital Assets Research Corporation (CARC), including liens up through 1998. CARC liens have a significant impact on distressed neighborhoods. 21.7% of vacant lots in the City have CARC liens. These liens are worth over \$2.5 million. Fifteen neighborhoods have CARC liens attached to 25% or more of their vacant lots while six have such liens attached to 40% or more of them.

These numbers are important to consider because:

The transfer of vacant lots through the City Treasurer's Sale process is often inhibited by CARC-held liens on the property until the liens are cleared.

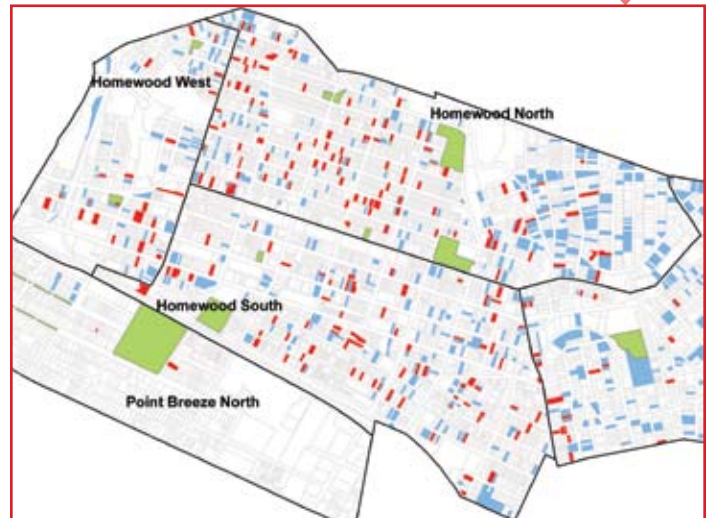
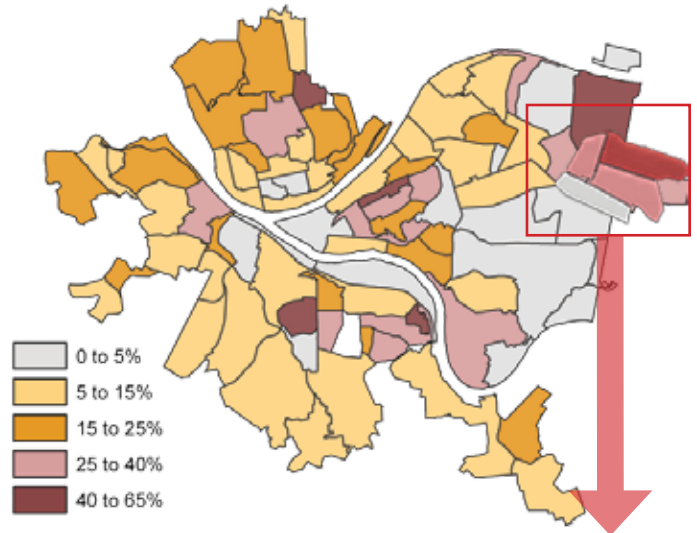
A significant amount of vacant lots with CARC-held liens have total liens that are greater than the fair market value of the lot itself. This makes purchasing these lots cost-prohibitive because it costs more money to pay off the total liens than the property is worth.

Recommendations

The City is working to resolve the issue with CARC and it is important that they continue efforts to do so. Nevertheless, it is equally important that the City consider alternative strategies to work around this barrier in the event that current efforts are unsuccessful. These strategies include:

1. **Soliciting funding from the state or federal government to buy back these liens;**
2. **Putting more money into buyback funds until buyout terms are more reasonable;**
3. **Allowing individuals and groups to lease vacant lots through the existing Garden Waiver program;**

Finally, it is important that the Three Taxing Bodies avoid selling delinquent tax liens in the future.



Homewood (above) is one neighborhood significantly impacted by CARC-held liens. Numerous vacant lots have total liens that are greater than the fair market value of the lot.

Conclusions

The last year has seen momentum grow around addressing vacant lot issues. Pittsburgh is increasingly prioritizing green strategies at the public policy, private enterprise, and community levels. The Greening Vacant Lots for Pittsburgh's Sustainable Neighborhood Revitalization team urges decision makers across the city to implement the recommendations found on the preceding pages. Greening vacant lots makes sense economically, socially, and environmentally. With 14,102 vacant lots, Pittsburgh has a significant problem - but also faces a sea of opportunity. Vacant lots can be the driver for community sustainability, changing a traditional real estate discussion into a cleaning and greening opportunity.

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Thank you Pittsburgh, for being our living laboratory.

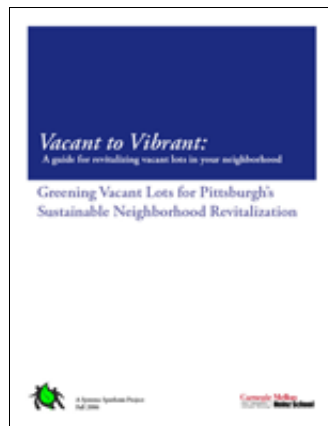
Products by the
**Greening Vacant Lots for Pittsburgh's
Sustainable Neighborhood Revitalization**
Research Team:



Pittsburgh Green Forum Report:
Sharing Ideas for a Greener
Community

Produced in partnership with
the Pittsburgh Urban Ecology
Collaborative

Fall 2006



Vacant to Vibrant:
A Guide to Revitalizing Vacant
Lots in Your Neighborhood

Fall 2006



Final Report:
Greening Vacant Lots for
Pittsburgh's Sustainable
Neighborhood Revitalization

Fall 2006

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