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To Philadelphia City Council
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SUBJECT **TRANSFORMING VACANT LAND: POLICY ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PHILADELPHIA'S LAND BANK**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Philadelphia faces a critical challenge: tens of thousands of vacant lots concentrated in historically disinvested neighborhoods. These lots perpetuate blight, depress property values, and heighten environmental health risks. Yet they also represent an opportunity to drive local revitalization and strengthen community resilience.

The Philadelphia Land Bank, created to consolidate and manage vacant parcels for public benefit, has not fully realized its equity mandate. This memo examines systemic barriers to equitable land governance and outlines actionable strategies to transform vacant lots into long-term community assets. Recommended reforms include institutionalizing participatory governance, protecting urban agriculture, expanding Land Bank authority and financing tools, and securing community land tenure. Together, these measures will repair historical harms and foster neighborhood stability. By improving vacant lot management, Philadelphia can strengthen create shared benefits—from safer streets and healthier environments to stronger property markets—positioning the city for inclusive, equitable growth.

PURPOSE

This memo provides the Philadelphia City Council with an analysis of the challenges surrounding vacant lot management and proposes reforms to strengthen the Land Bank's ability to deliver public benefit. Although the Land Bank was established to manage vacant land more efficiently and equitably, gaps in authority, financing, and governance have left many communities vulnerable to displacement and environmental injustices.

This memo seeks to:

- Identify systemic barriers that perpetuate inequity and climate vulnerability.
- Highlight opportunities for community-led stewardship and climate resilience.
- Recommend policy interventions that embed transparency, accountability, and safeguards into Land Bank operations.

Without targeted reforms, current practices risk reinforcing structural inequities and accelerating displacement. With practical changes, Philadelphia can transform vacant land from a persistent liability into a driver of social and environmental repair.

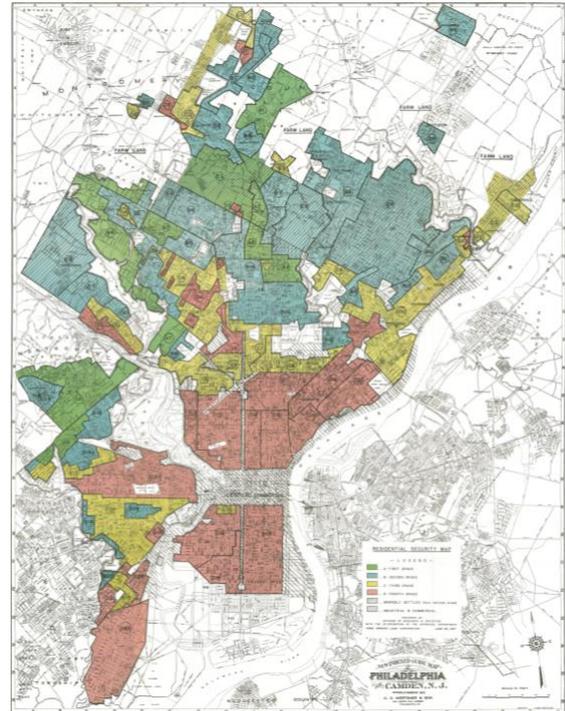
CONTEXT

Historical Roots of Vacancy

Land ownership has long been a foundation of economic security and political power. Discriminatory practices such as redlining and exclusionary lending systematically excluded Black, Brown, and low-income communities from land markets, leading to patterns of segregation and disinvestment that persist today (Fig. 1) (Hillier, 2003; Robinson & Woodin, 2024). These policies created structural barriers to wealth accumulation and contributed to deteriorating housing and environmental conditions in these neighborhoods.

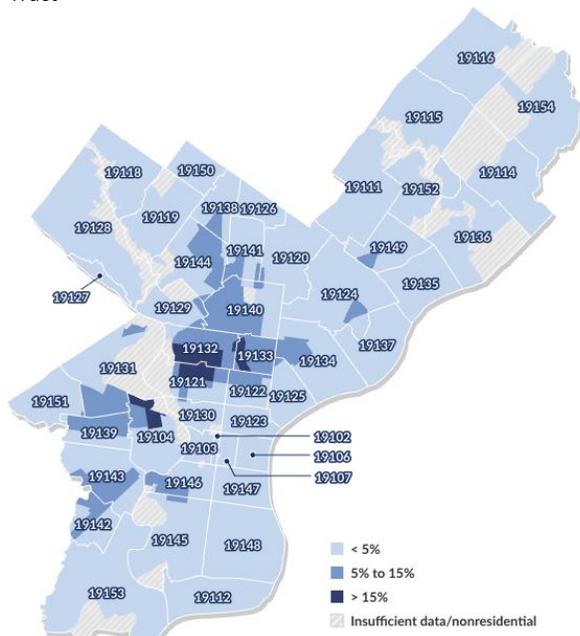
Philadelphia’s concentration of vacant lots reflects historical economic shifts. In the mid-20th century, the city was a thriving manufacturing hub with over two million residents. Industrial decline, suburbanization, and white flight led to severe job losses and a 25% population drop by 1980, leaving thousands of abandoned homes and factories (Noterman, 2022; Strauss, 2019). Many of these buildings were demolished, creating the patchwork landscape of vacant lots seen throughout the city today (Fig. 2).

Figure 1. Historical Redlining Map of Philadelphia



Source: Wikimedia Commons

Figure 2. Vacant Properties in Philadelphia, 2025, by Census Tract



Source: Pew Charitable Trusts

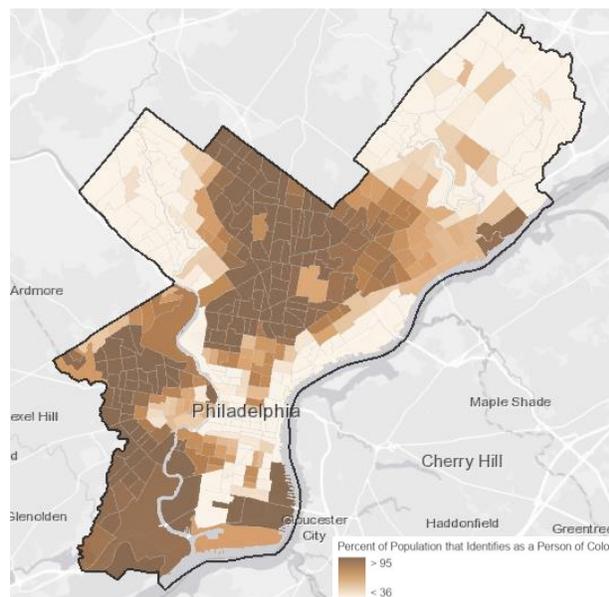
Current Scale and Distribution of Vacancy

Estimates of vacant lots in Philadelphia vary widely. Common figures estimate roughly 40,000 vacant lots citywide (Peters, 2024), with some sources reporting up to 130,000 vacant properties including housing units (Ma, 2020; Yoon, 2025). Vacancies are concentrated in North and West Philadelphia—areas with predominantly Black and Brown residents—overlapping with historically redlined districts (Fig. 3). Residents in these neighborhoods face additional barriers: limited financial resources and complex acquisition processes make it difficult for residents to secure ownership of vacant parcels, perpetuating cycles of inequality (Hachmyer, 2017; Francis, 1975).

The Philadelphia Land Bank

The Philadelphia Land Bank was established in 2014 after years of advocacy by community coalitions such as the Campaign to Take Back Vacant Land, which sought a transparent and equitable system for managing the city's extensive inventory of vacant parcels (Campaign to Take Back Vacant Land, n.d.; The Public Interest Law Center, n.d.). Its core mandate is to consolidate tax-delinquent and city-owned properties into a single entity, streamline acquisition processes, and repurpose land for public benefit, including affordable housing, green space, and urban agriculture (Philadelphia Land Bank, n.d.; The Philadelphia Code, Chapter 16-700). The Land Bank acquires properties through tax foreclosure, sheriff sales, and transfers from other city agencies. These parcels are then put up for public sale or transferred, in theory guided by criteria that prioritize affordability, community use, and neighborhood revitalization.

Figure 3. Percent of Philadelphia Population that Identifies as a Person of Color



Data source: 2020 Census
Map created by Sarah Bausmith using ArcGIS

ANALYSIS

Risks of Current Practices

Since its creation in 2014, the Philadelphia Land Bank has acquired thousands of parcels and facilitated transfers for affordable housing and community gardens. However, progress has been slower than anticipated due to administrative hurdles, limited staffing, and coordination challenges with other city departments (Herr-Cardillo, 2022). Between 2019 and 2024, the Land Bank lost its priority bid status at sheriff sales, allowing over 1,000 properties to be sold without its involvement—a major missed opportunity for strategic acquisitions (Moselle, 2024).

Recent reforms, including restoring priority bid status and allocating \$5 million in escrow for acquisitions, signal renewed momentum. Yet these changes also concentrate control without adequate safeguards against speculative resale or inequitable allocation (Robinson & Woodin, 2024). Community advocates argue that opaque processes and market-driven pressures privilege developers over residents, destabilize existing community gardens, and perpetuate procedural injustice (Herr-Cardillo, 2022; Moselle, 2024). Without strong equity measures and community-driven planning, expanded authority could accelerate displacement and environmental gentrification rather than repair historical harms (Shokry et al., 2022; Rigolon et al., 2019).

Current land management strategies in Philadelphia often prioritize market-driven redevelopment, which can unintentionally perpetuate inequality and displacement. When land banks transfer parcels to private developers without equity safeguards, speculative investment accelerates gentrification and destabilizes communities. Noterman (2022) observes that vacant land frequently becomes a vehicle for financial speculation, where parcels are treated as profit-generating assets rather than public goods. Francis (1975) similarly warns that land banking, if guided primarily by market logic, risks serving development interests over community needs. Robinson and Woodin (2024) caution that, absent strong governance and community-driven planning, land banks can shift from equity tools to mechanisms that amplify displacement pressures and erode neighborhood resilience.

Figure 4. Vacant Lot in Philadelphia



Source: Circular Philadelphia

Vacant lots themselves contribute to environmental injustice (Fig. 4). They are not neutral spaces: they often attract illegal dumping and crime, creating neighborhood blight and reducing property values, which discourages investment and erodes local tax bases (Noterman, 2022; Strauss, 2019). Beyond these social and economic costs, vacancy exacerbates environmental vulnerability. Formerly redlined neighborhoods, where vacant lots are concentrated, experience higher heat exposure due to limited tree canopy and impervious surfaces (Schinasi et al., 2022). These areas also face food insecurity and lack of green space, conditions that undermine public health and climate resilience (Nobles & Moore, 2024).

While greening initiatives aim to address these challenges, they can also produce unintended consequences. Common strategies, such as converting vacant lots into parks, community gardens, or green infrastructure for stormwater management, often increase neighborhood desirability and property values. Without equity safeguards, these improvements can trigger climate gentrification, pricing out long-term residents under the guise of sustainability (Shokry et al., 2022). Rigolon et al. (2019) emphasize that park professionals frequently struggle to balance environmental goals with social equity, noting that new green spaces can attract speculative investment and accelerate displacement. These dynamics underscore the need for planning frameworks that pair greening with affordability protections and community-led stewardship. Without intentional measures, efforts to transform vacant lots into green spaces may inadvertently exacerbate social and environmental inequities.

Opportunities for Change

If managed inclusively, Philadelphia's vacant lots present a unique opportunity to advance racial, environmental, and social equity. Land banks can stabilize property markets and guide equitable development when governance structures prioritize transparency and public accountability

(Francis, 1975). These measures are essential to prevent procedural inequities and ensure that redevelopment benefits historically marginalized communities. Secure land rights are also critical for social transformation, enabling residents to build generational wealth and exercise agency over local development (Hachmyer, 2017).

Community-led initiatives demonstrate the potential of vacant land to deliver ecological and social benefits. Even without formal recognition, temporary landscapes created by residents on abandoned parcels provide food security, social cohesion, and environmental resilience (Desimini, 2015). Philadelphia's grassroots networks have reclaimed neglected lots for urban agriculture, green spaces, and affordable housing, transforming sites of disinvestment into neighborhood assets (Fig. 5) (Strauss, 2019; Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, n.d.; Abiaka, 2024). These efforts strengthen climate resilience and local food systems while resisting speculative development pressures. Institutional support for such practices could amplify their impact, turning vacant lots into long-term drivers of community well-being.

Equitable greening strategies must integrate anti-displacement measures and prioritize historically disinvested neighborhoods, linking environmental justice to climate adaptation (Rosan et al., 2021). Without these safeguards, sustainability initiatives risk triggering climate gentrification and undermining community stability (Shokry et al., 2022). Recognizing informal land uses as legitimate forms of stewardship is therefore essential. Community leaders and advocates consistently call for transparent processes and equitable access to land, signaling strong demand for a formal framework that legitimizes and expands these successes (Philadelphia City Council, 2024). From a recognition justice perspective, policies should acknowledge the cultural and social value embedded in these practices, treating them as more than temporary fixes. This means validating the identities, histories, and contributions of communities that have sustained these spaces and ensuring they are central to decision-making rather than marginalized in redevelopment plans.

Figure 5. Community Garden in Strawberry Mansion, Philadelphia



Source: Abiaka, T. 2024

Evidence from other U.S. cities shows equity-focused land governance is practical and effective. Cleveland and Detroit expanded land bank authority to curb speculation and prioritize community redevelopment, demonstrating that stronger institutional powers stabilize property markets (Detroit Land Bank Authority, 2024; Cleveland Land Bank, 2019). Boston and Burlington implemented robust community land trust frameworks to preserve affordability and prevent displacement, offering models for long-term tenure solutions (Boston Neighborhood Community Land Trust, n.d.; Champlain Housing Trust, n.d.). Detroit and Baltimore institutionalized urban agriculture programs through partnerships that convert vacant parcels into productive green spaces, improving food security and climate resilience (City of Detroit, 2023; City of Baltimore,

n.d.). Governance innovations such as New York City’s participatory budgeting and Minneapolis’s community advisory boards illustrate scalable approaches for embedding transparency and community voice in decision-making (New York City Council, 2025; Minneapolis City Clerk, n.d.). These cases show Philadelphia can adapt proven strategies to integrate environmental justice into land policy via vacant lot management.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure Philadelphia’s vacant land serves the public good, the Land Bank should adopt a more equity-focused approach that prioritizes transparent processes, community-led land use, and long-term neighborhood stability over speculative development. The following recommendations are organized in order of feasibility and urgency:

1. **Institutionalize Participatory Governance, Transparency, and Accessibility:** Establish advisory boards with community representation, implement participatory budgeting for vacant lot projects, and streamline application processes with public reporting requirements. Inclusive governance fosters procedural justice and trust, ensuring decisions reflect community priorities (Rosan et al., 2021; Public Interest Law Center, 2024). This recommendation repairs procedural harms by embedding historically excluded voices in decision-making, promoting accountability and equitable outcomes. Accomplishing this recommendation requires sustained administrative commitment and resources, but these investments are critical for building durable systems of transparency and trust with the public.
2. **Protect and Expand Urban Agriculture and Green Infrastructure with Equity Safeguards:** Formalize protections for existing gardens and prioritize vacant parcels for food production and green infrastructure, paired with anti-displacement measures. Urban agriculture addresses food insecurity, strengthens social cohesion, and enhances climate resilience (Strauss, 2019; Rigolon et al., 2019). Equity safeguards prevent environmental gentrification and ensure benefits accrue to long-standing residents. This recommendation mitigates environmental harms, such as heat vulnerability and lack of green space, while reinforcing community resilience and local food systems. This recommendation requires zoning adjustments and coordination with Parks & Recreation but is relatively low cost compared to housing development.
3. **Strengthen Land Bank Authority and Financing Tools to Prioritize Public Interest:** Expand the Land Bank’s authority to act as the sole bidder at tax sales and equip it with financing mechanisms such as bonding authority. These measures prevent speculative acquisition and enable strategic purchases for affordable housing, gardens, and green infrastructure (Francis, 1975; Public Interest Law Center, 2024; Campaign to Take Back Vacant Land, n.d.). By consolidating control under a public entity, the city can stabilize property markets and ensure land serves community needs rather than profit motives. This approach repairs historical harms by redirecting land from speculative cycles to public benefit, creating opportunities for affordable housing and green space in historically disinvested neighborhoods. This recommendation would require City Council approval, coordination with the Sheriff’s Office, and administrative capacity.

4. **Guarantee Permanent, Community-Led Stewardship Through Secure Tenure and Appropriate Controls:** Replace burdensome mortgage requirements with deed restrictions and reversionary clauses and create pathways for affordable ownership or long-term leases through community land trusts. Secure tenure is critical for building generational wealth and resisting displacement (Hachmyer, 2017; Public Interest Law Center, 2024). Community land trusts ensure affordability while embedding local control over land use decisions. This recommendation addresses structural inequities by enabling historically marginalized residents to own or steward land, fostering stability and resilience. This action requires legal adjustments, administrative capacity, close coordination with community land trust organizations, and technical support for residents. However, it builds on existing community land management models in the city and is essential for establishing durable, community-controlled land systems.

Collectively, these actions advance climate resilience and social equity while making amends for historical injustices through equitable land distribution (Hillier, 2003; Robinson & Woodin, 2024). By enabling communities to secure land ownership and tenure, the Land Bank can help build wealth, strengthen local governance, and foster ecological resilience. These strategies align with local policy frameworks for an inclusive and climate-ready Philadelphia (Rosan et al., 2021), ensuring that vacant land becomes a tool for structural repair rather than a driver of displacement.

CONCLUSION

Philadelphia's vacant lots represent both a pressing challenge and a transformative opportunity. Left unmanaged, they perpetuate disinvestment and climate vulnerability; managed strategically, they can anchor equitable development and community resilience. The Philadelphia Land Bank was created to serve the public interest, yet current practices risk reinforcing inequities. By expanding its authority and financing tools, securing community tenure, institutionalizing participatory governance, and protecting urban agriculture, City Council can align land policy with both its moral obligation and economic future. With decisive leadership, Philadelphia can turn vacant lots from symbols of neglect into engines of equity and resilience, setting a bold precedent for cities nationwide.

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