

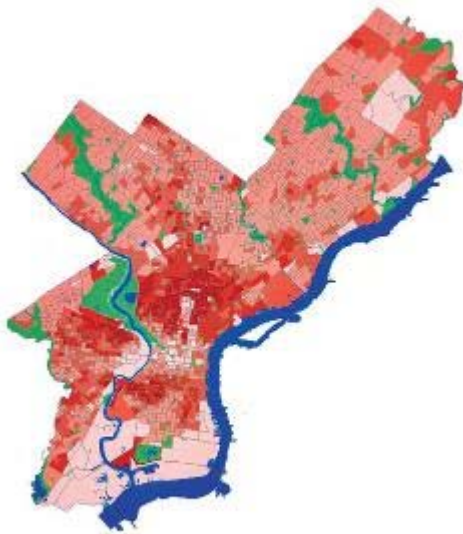


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The Ugly Truth About Philly's Vacant Lots

By Aaron Kase

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Jon Musselman stands on the corner at 19th and Berks, just a few blocks west of Temple's campus. "See up here—three city lots, two PHA lots, a couple of private lots," he says, gesturing toward an open patch of land, choked with weeds and trash. Next to the vacant lots stands a single house, comically skinny. On the other side of the house, more open space all the way up the block to Norris.

The nearly empty block with its lone dwelling is just yards away from the Habitat for Humanity headquarters, where Musselman has worked for 15 years.

"Even though we've worked here all these years, there are still places like this we can't do anything with," he says. "It can be impossible to get everyone together to get a parcel that's worthwhile to build on."

Over the last 25 years, Habitat has built about 70 houses on the blocks surrounding its office, but the streets are still lined with nearly as many vacant lots as homes. Instead of families, the properties house broken glass, rubble and who knows what else buried in the morass.

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About [40,000 vacant lots](#) are spread across Philadelphia, like scabs festering on the city grid. According to a database provided by the city, more than 12,000 (see database below; addresses are grouped by ZIP code) are publicly owned, controlled by various agencies such as the Redevelopment Authority, Philadelphia Housing Authority, Philadelphia Housing Development Corporation and the city's Public Property department. The privately owned vacant properties are the city's problem, too, with owners frequently missing or dead, meaning the only way the land can be developed is through a sheriff's sale or eminent-domain seizure. With parcels as thin as 15 feet wide, buying sufficient square footage for development from multiple city agencies is a near impossible challenge for which the city has yet to find a comprehensive solution.

"This is almost an epidemic in Philadelphia," says Carolyn Placke, director of housing and community development for Project HOME, which builds single and multi-family houses for people transitioning out of homelessness. "We're faced with the complexities of acquiring land either privately, or through RDA, or through PHA." Each method of acquisition is fraught with obstacles. "It makes it very difficult to transform or revitalize an area," Placke says.

Below is a searchable list, grouped by ZIP code, of the city's 12,000 publicly owned vacant lots.

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Vacant Properties in Philadelphia

LOCATION	ZIP CODE	AREA (FT)	OWNER	MARKET VALUE	LAST SALE PRICE
45 PLEASANT ST	191020000	2,094	PHDC	\$2,200	\$1
117A-29 N 16TH ST	191020000	10,826	PAID	\$811,000	\$1,855,900
117-29 N 16TH ST	191020000	10,826	PAID	\$811,000	\$3
2400 CARLTON ST	191020000	11,340	PUBPROP	\$850,000	\$4
200S N BROAD ST	191021121	40,000		\$90,000	\$9
110 N 16TH ST	191021500	28,500	PUBPROP	\$9,249,400	\$1
1501 JOHN F KENNEDY BL	191021501	6,400	PUBPROP	\$16,000,000	\$1
1501 JOHN F KENNEDY BL	191021501	105,000	PUBPROP	\$16,500,000	\$1
104 N 15TH ST	191021504	340	RDA	\$25,500	\$1
110 N 15TH ST	191021504	400	RDA	\$30,000	\$1
116-22 N 15TH ST	191021504	1,176	RDA	\$88,200	\$4
106-08 N 15TH ST	191021504	740	RDA	\$55,500	\$1
100-02 N 15TH ST	191021504	620	RDA	\$71,300	\$4
1513 ARCH ST	191021508	3,700	PUBPROP	\$2,931,000	\$1
1515 ARCH ST	191021508	36,907	PAID	\$4,450,800	\$1
1515 ARCH ST	191021508	34,912	PAID	\$19,700,000	\$1,855,900
1501 MARKET ST	191021509	3,301	PUBPROP	\$85,500	\$1
1501 MARKET ST	191021509	7,565	PUBPROP	\$189,100	\$1
545 N 63RD ST	191021677	1,152	PUBPROP	\$17,500	\$800
200S S BROAD ST	191023803	40,000		\$90,000	\$9
300-18 S BROAD ST	191024610	106,623	PAID	\$185,200,000	\$1
1500 JOHN F KENNEDY BL	191020007	277	PUBPROP	\$70,000	\$1

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Cicely Peterson-Mangum, executive director of the 2-year-old Logan Community Development Corporation, says the group is just delving into the complicated task of land acquisition. The CDC is trying to purchase the notorious "Logan Triangle," a 35-acre plot of land east of Broad Street that has

been empty since the 1980s, to develop an as yet-to-be determined mix of housing, retail and open space. Like other empty spaces in the city, the Logan Triangle is a mix of city, PHA and privately owned land. It's up to the city, "to assemble the land, clear title, satisfy the liens and consolidate it as one free-and-clear land tract," Mangum says. "It could take years."

The scale of the vacant-land issue was illuminated in an Econsult report released last week that sheds light on what the empty lots are actually costing Philadelphia. The 94-page report neatly sums up the city's challenge: "No single entity is responsible for acquiring, assembling, and disposing of vacant parcels, or for thinking about the entire inventory of parcels and making strategic land use decisions."

Blight can reduce property values by up to 20 percent, meaning Philadelphia is short some \$3.6 billion in property value citywide, with the greatest impact hitting already poor and vulnerable neighborhoods. What's more, the city needs to deploy services to maintain the lots, such as police, fire and the Department of Licenses & Inspections. "We estimate the cost very conservatively at \$20 million per year," says Econsult Director Lee Huang. Finally, there is a strong correlation between vacant parcels and those [delinquent on their taxes](#). Of the 40,000 empty lots, the report found that about 17,000 are behind on their taxes, two thirds of those for more than 10 years. "We're all losing," Huang says.

If the city reforms the mechanisms for property acquisition in the next five years, it could expect to see 3,400 vacant parcels turned into housing, creating 800 construction jobs per year and adding \$44 million to the property-tax base. In turn, the city would expect to see a \$35 million boost to various tax revenues over the five-year period.

Those estimates might even be low, since the analysis focused on the few areas of the city where market values for housing actually exceed building costs, where private developers would expect to jump in. Nonprofit CDCs like Habitat and others who use tax breaks and grants to reduce costs and operate in areas where private builders would never see a profit would expect to benefit from a streamlined acquisition process as well. "This larger issue of how a reformed system would facilitate affordable housing is also critical," says Rick Sauer, executive director of the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations, which commissioned the Econsult report in conjunction with the RDA. "If the amount of time to assemble those sites is reduced, that will also lower cost of development and stretch scarce dollars to allow more units to be built."

The PACDC has its own ideas about how the city can better facilitate development. "We need a single point of entry to the city, to allow a developer to submit one application to one agency and have the city assemble the site," Sauer says.

The city is working on it. "We have a strategy on how to solve the problem but we don't have a policy in place yet," says Brian Abernathy, chief of staff to the city's Managing Director's Office. "That's the goal."

Fifteen city departments and agencies have been meeting since the summer to address vacant land, Abernathy says. First, they need a method to create one combined inventory, and to decide on how to streamline the sale process. "Are there instances where we're comfortable disposing of a property at less than fair-market value and under what conditions?" he asks rhetorically.

Tax policy will also play a role. "Sheriff sales over the last several decades have been able to process about 100 properties a month," Abernathy says. "Obviously that doesn't give us the kind of numbers we need to clear up this backlog." Better coordination with PHA is also a goal. "They're part of the issue and have to be part of conversation," Abernathy says.

Past efforts by the city to address vacant properties have met with only marginal success. The John Street-era Neighborhood Transformation Initiative was supposed to use \$300 million to help the city acquire land when the owner was missing or negligent. Despite serious record-keeping flaws and management hiccups within the RDA, which was administering the program, the NTI funds did stimulate development up to a point, but there was never enough cash to go around. "We asked for 80

lots here and we got one,” Musselman says of the streets surrounding Habitat’s office.

Developers interviewed for this story credit former RDA Executive Director Terry Gillen for taking strides in cleaning up RDA record-keeping and placing properties for sale online in her two-year tenure, despite criticism that her rocky relationship with City Council caused delays on projects. Gillen’s departure two weeks ago leaves incoming Director Ed Covington with a huge task in front of him.

“With any new position, you look to get a handle simultaneously on the scope of the business and its activities,” says Covington, who came from a banking background and had spent five years in community lending for Wachovia, helping both for- and nonprofit developers acquire land parcels. Covington declines to offer his own vision of how to fix the city’s vacant land problem. “It’s a little early to be offering specifics,” he says.

However, Abernathy says that more news should be coming soon. “We’re hoping to make some high-level recommendations to the mayor at the beginning of January,” he says. As chairman of the RDA, Mayor Nutter has a special interest in finding a solution to the vacant land problem, but while his staff brainstorms, the developers can only wait and see. “Maybe I’m more optimistic than most people, but I see a lot of progress in the last two years,” Musselman says. However, he adds, “they’ve got a long way to go.”

Click [here](#) to download a copy of the entire spreadsheet from Google Documents.

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