

Philadelphia's Seventh Council District: a perfect storm of blight

Built environment includes

- Philadelphia's **historic manufacturing corridor**
- **Obsolete housing stock** built for factory workers
- Decline and depopulation
 - Some abandoned houses **demolished with bond funds, but not acquired**
 - Most left in a patchwork of **tangled title and debt**
 - Warehouse conversions **stalled by recession**

Getting our arms around the potential

Inaction is expensive

- Structures become unfixable the longer they sit
- We bear the cost of demolition, 'underwater' properties
- Vacant lots/buildings foster drug and other crime

But vacant properties create opportunity

- Expand affordable housing for a poor city
- Grow our tax base
- Encourage beneficial land uses

Control of physical space is power to shape a community



Las Parcelas gardens, Norris Square neighborhood

We have taken real steps forward

Accurate, appropriate pricing will increase revenue and save money

- Recognizes the challenges of valuing property in weak markets
- Adjusts prices to leverage investment and growth

Emphasis on strategic planning reverses a long trend

- Better communication among agencies
- Higher profile for City and Neighborhood Planning
- New Zoning Code, ongoing Comprehensive Plan

But there remain competing incentives and power structures

- **Cost of vacant properties** is spread among agencies' budgets, and **sales revenue** returns to the general fund
- Foreclosure decisions are **based on short-term revenue**, not community redevelopment or tax base growth
- Lien collection **relies on auctions** (administered by an independently-elected sheriff)
- **Data can't be consolidated** across incompatible systems yet

Trying to build on reforms, and institutionalize them

- Institutionalizing successful reforms means future administrations don't have to keep 'reinventing the wheel'
- Sharp, continuing cuts in federal and state funds force us to rethink administrative structures with high fixed costs and inefficiencies

Why a land bank?

- **Encodes** a sensible organizational structure and key priorities
- **Creates stability** across mayoral administrations
- **Shifts incentives** for foreclosure and acquisition decisions
- **Formalizes process** for adopting and updating policies
- **Ensures public participation**
- **Defines a clear role** for elected representatives in disposition and oversight

What will it take to get there?

Trust and accountability

- Joint action by executive and legislative branches, with support from private and nonprofit stakeholders
- Recent policy changes show a commitment to 'getting it right' and a framework for coordination

A sense of urgency and possibility

- Public frustration is amplified by online and traditional media
- Newly-elected legislators are open to change

We are working towards a day when this image is an artifact of a past era.



Daniel Traub, "Lots" (Print Center 2010-11)

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