

Philadelphia Green:
Reclaiming Vacant Land in Philly

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As people move out of the cities and into a more suburban setting, cities nationwide have been facing the question of what to do with the vacant land left behind. In a study by Accordino and Johnson (2002), vacant property is considered a “significant problem” by various city officials that effects multiple aspects of urban life (1). The article went on to say that though many officials had tried to make efforts to fix these problems, they often did not meet their goals and experienced problems along the way. The city of Philadelphia alone has lost approximately 25% of its population since 1950(2). This means, that instead of increasing, as the overall population of the state has since 1950, the population of Philadelphia has decreased, showing that people are actively moving out of the city during this time. Additionally, there are 40,000 vacant properties in Philadelphia (2). Typically, these properties sit empty for long periods of time, grow wild with grass and weeds, end up covered in layers of litter, and attract crime to the area. They are simply empty space, serving no purpose what-so-ever, besides a convenient place for people to throw things that they do not want. They make an area look unkempt and, by doing so, deter new residents and businesses from becoming established.

One organization, Philadelphia Green, does work to make the city of Philadelphia more sustainable and, by doing so, are revitalizing the city. The website for Philadelphia Green states that "By making the land more attractive, communities are better able to retain existing residents and businesses while attracting new ones" (3). Since 2000, Philadelphia Green has been working on many of the vacant properties of Philadelphia using two projects: Vacant Land Stabilization and Community LandCare. While these projects both work to help make vacant land more attractive to existing residents and potential new ones, they differ in several ways.

Vacant Land Stabilization is the more involved of the two projects. This project began with the American Street Empowerment Zone in the area between Lehigh, Gerard, Front and Sixth Street where residents listed the number one problem facing them as not poverty, drugs, violence, or any of they typical difficulties of life in the city, but vacant land (6). After the project was completed, the area became safer, affordable housing was



Drastic change after Vacant Land Stabilization is put into place

built, and there were noticeable positive changes in the local housing market (6). Vacant Land Stabilization selects visible sites, such as those along transit routes, near new developments and adjacent to schools. Once a site is selected, maintenance crews are assigned to the area to remove trash from a vacant lot, mow the area, and

add layers of topsoil to make it possible to grow plants there (3). Then, the area is seeded with grass, a wooden fence is built around it to prevent dumping, and trees are planted. The idea behind this project is that the land is stabilized for use in the future not a finished project. The land is more attractive while it is maintained in the way, but is considered to be in a transition state rather than a finished one (3). In the end, it is assumed that the land will either be developed for a residence, a new business or a community park (3). In the past six years, seven million square feet of land, or 5000 of the 40000 vacant lots, have been stabilized as part of this Philadelphia Green's work (3).

Community LandCare is a less intensive project, but has important impacts in addition to making 4 million square feet of land more attractive (3). Community LandCare only involves cleaning and mowing a vacant area, not seeding or planting it. These lots are maintained by community fifteen community service groups in sixteen Philadelphia neighborhoods (3). Not only do the people working for these groups make their communities more attractive, but also Philadelphia Green is working with the City of Philadelphia government to provide them with training so that they can develop marketable landscaping skills (3). Therefore, not only does this project make the areas look nicer, but it has the additional benefit of helping the people involved in the project to gain marketable skills, develop a career, and better their situation.

In addition to the benefit of keeping residents and businesses in the city and attracting new businesses and residents, opening clean, outdoor areas will give children

accessible places to be outside. The benefits to having areas outdoors to play are numerous as displayed by Louv's book *Last Child in the Woods* and include emotional and mental benefits as well as the more obvious physical ones (4). These open lots can be used as a safer alternative to children in denser areas playing on the sidewalks and near or on the streets. In this way, maintaining urban space is important not only to the future of the city, but also the future of the people living there.

According to Dr. Robert Grossmann of Philadelphia Green, the residents use their



A young man works for Community LandCare

new open space for a variety of activities including picnics, playgrounds, and social gathering areas, showing their multi-purpose potential (6). He also mentioned that for communities whose only experience with vacant land is blighted land, it gives them a positive view of open spaces. Cleaning and renewing the lots also change the sorts of activities going on in them. Dr. Grossmann says that he receives calls from people complaining that the vacant lots in their neighborhoods are increasing crime and requesting Philadelphia Green to help clean them up (6). This clearly shows that cleaning up vacant lots has a positive influence on neighborhoods as residents are spreading the word about their positive

experiences.

There are remarkably few problems faced by Philadelphia Green's Urban Renewal Projects. The biggest problem is dumping on the sites (6). Vandalism is a relatively minor problem not often encountered on the sites. Fences help keep dumping to a minimum, but they do, according to Dr. Grossmann, have occasional problems with someone hitting a fence with their car or sitting on a fence and damaging it (6).

One of the most obvious costs is monetary. Who is paying for the topsoil, the trees, the seeds, and the fencing? For projects staffed by community service groups, such

as Community LandCare, cost of workers is free, but what if the project is staffed by non-volunteer groups? The cost of workers and supplies could be a difficult amount to manage for many organizations. Luckily, Philadelphia Green is supported by the ever-popular Philadelphia Flower Show, as well as donations, government agencies, and fundraising events (3). Considering the dramatic results and the fact that the turn-around time for these properties is only a matter of weeks, Philadelphia Green considers the costs to be minimal and efficient (3). Additionally, Philadelphia Green uses competitive bidding to keep their costs down. Often times, the companies involved in bidding for the job are not only local, but also minority owned, allowing Philadelphia Green to get even more involvement from the community and provide the additional benefit of jobs to the residents (6).

Another cost that some may bring up would be land use. While the land certainly looks better when it is maintained, some might consider immediately rebuilding the area a better use instead of simply stabilizing it until a use can be determined. Though it can be argued that making new homes for people to live or new businesses would be revitalizing the city, if there are no people or business who are planning on moving there at that time, it is a waste of resources and just creating more buildings to sit empty. Leaving the land clean but vacant allows for future decisions to determine what sort of

use would best serve that area.

So far, most of the development that has occurred has been residential development. Approximately 10% of the renewed sites have been developed in some way, which is a great considering that the properties selected have been in less affluent areas (6). In addition to residential



Some lovely results from a once-vacant lot.

communities, one park has been created at 22nd and Montrose and another park is in progress at 12th and Hawthorne (6). Dr. Grossmann mentioned that creating parks helps to encourage community support for open space.

Clearly, the Philadelphia Green's projects have been successful. Not only have they revitalized many Philadelphia lots, they have also inspired other cities to implement similar measures. Cleveland has decided to follow Philadelphia Green's lead in claiming vacant lots for renewal with big hopes (5). Apparently, and understandably, cleaning and greening an area increases property value by up to 25% (5). More specifically, Dr. Grossmann mentioned a study done by the Wharton School of Business that Philadelphia Green's Urban Renewal Project increases the value of adjacent properties from negative 19 or negative 20% to positive 17% of other houses in the area. This helps residents living near revitalization projects regain wealth and build equity, as well as encouraging these residents to help keep the area clean and attractive (6).

When weighing the costs and benefits of a program like Philadelphia Green's Vacant Land Renewal projects, it is important to consider what the alternatives would be. Clearly, leaving vacant land vacant, disheveled, full of trash and un-mowed grass would be wasteful as far as space is concerned as well as unattractive. Cleaning and renewing the land is the only reasonable option if the city is to be maintained and revitalized as no one wants to live in a place with a trash-strewn lot next-door. Additionally, the benefits of decreasing crime, increasing property value, and bringing happiness to residents are impossible to argue with. While the option of having residents instead of an organization work to clean and repair their own neighborhoods could be considered, doing so would depend on said residents having the time, means, and knowledge needed to maintain an area of land. Similarly, asking the city government to revitalize the city is an option; however, it seems that the Philadelphia government has enough on their plate at this time without adding additional responsibilities. Therefore, at this point, having an organization work on renewing areas struck by urban blight seems to be the best course of action. Philadelphia Green seems a clear choice for renewing vacant urban areas and bringing a bit of nature to the city due to their strong horticultural background. The important task of making vacant lots and urban areas more attractive to current and possible future residents is placed in the hands of specialists with the funds, knowledge, and ability to complete them. Considering that this is the first major project of its kind in the United States and the numerous successes they have had, it seems that Philadelphia Green truly are the experts in this endeavor.

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