

HIA Case Study Title: Vacant & Blighted Land Maintenance, LandCare Program

PHA Link: Environment, Chronic Disease Risk Behaviors and Access

Background:

“Blight is pervasive, expensive, and has damaging effects on the economic and social fabric of communities. Vacancy results in blighted blocks, high maintenance costs, nuisance issues such as crime and fire, and uncollected taxes. This creates a cycle of disinvestment with the ultimate cost paid by existing community residents.”

~TriCOG Land Bank www.tricoglandbank.org

With over 27,000 vacant lots in just the city alone, it takes a coordinated effort to care for this vast amount of vacant land. The City of Pittsburgh owns approximately 26% of Pittsburgh’s vacant lots and the URA owns another 5.2%, or around 1,400 vacant lots¹. If you haven’t really noticed a vacant lot in your community, chances are that it is being well-maintained by someone. When vacant lots are routinely cared for, they can significantly improve the quality of life for the residents in that neighborhood. In fact, recent research suggests that maintaining vacant lots in urban communities can decrease crime² and reduce gun violence³. These benefits, among others, helped to inspire a new program to maintain URA-owned vacant lots

(https://gtechstrategies.org/landcare_hazelwood/).

<https://gtechstrategies.org/projects/ura-landcare/>

In 2016, GTECH began working with the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) of Pittsburgh to improve the vacant lot maintenance process with the goal to create opportunity for community benefit. After making recommendations for a new process, GTECH worked with the URA to establish a 2-tiered program, called LandCare⁴, that separates a portion of the URA portfolio into 7 property bundles of roughly equal size (roughly 50-70 lots) and condition. The bundles are in Homewood, Larimer, Manchester, Hazelwood, and the Hill District. Two RFPs were posted in

¹ http://apps.pittsburghpa.gov/redtail/images/1760_VLTK_FINAL_10-28-15.pdf

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0143622816305707?via%3Dihub>

³ <http://www.philly.com/philly/health/reduce-gun-violence-shooting-clean-cities-vacant-lots-penn-columbia-study-20180226.html>

⁴ <https://gtechstrategies.org/projects/ura-landcare/>

June-July 2016 and contractors were selected in August to begin work in September 2016. Prior to this system, one large contractor maintained all URA-owned properties.

The LandCare contractors visit their assigned parcels every month to provide maintenance including basic mowing, clearing, removal of invasive species and dumping materials, then document that work on a mobile device. With the launch of this program, LandCare enabled seven small businesses and nonprofits to participate in localized land maintenance. Contracts are also responsible for increasing accountability and transparency in the communities where they work. They are required to attend two community meetings or events per month to promote their services and share information about their schedules and assigned lots.

The LandCare program is a model for vacant lot maintenance and is a strong option for the City of Pittsburgh to adopt for its own property maintenance program.

Decision-makers and Decision-Making process:

According to early reporting on this project, if the pilot was successful the City of Pittsburgh and the Urban Redevelopment Authority planned to expand this project to include 5,400 vacant lots owned by the city⁵. To date that has not happened. The partners are looking for opportunities to prove the benefit of this program to build a case for expansion.

- City of Pittsburgh
- Department of Public Works
- Permits, Licenses, and Inspections
- Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh

Timeline for the decision-making:

We can propose that the City consider expanding the LandCare program to city-owned properties within the next 12 months.

History of Concerns in the impacted community:

⁵ <http://triblive.com/news/allegheny/10928080-74/ura-lots-vacant>

There are more than 27,000 vacant lots in the City of Pittsburgh. Each one affects a community differently. Concerns related to vacant lots include:

- Dumping
- Crime and vandalism
- Decrease in property value
- Loss of neighborhood cohesion
- Overall quality of life, including wellbeing and health impacts

Stakeholders:

City of Pittsburgh residents

Maintenance contractors

Mayor's Office

Department of Public Works

Permits, Licenses and Inspections

Urban Redevelopment Authority

Community-Based Organizations

Resources for looking further into the policy/project:

<http://triblive.com/news/alleggheny/10928080-74/ura-lots-vacant>

<https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/pittsburgh-outsource-care-vacant-lots-blight>

<https://gtechstrategies.org/projects/ura-landcare/>