



CLOSE TO HOME

Supporting the Neighborhood Residents Who
Are Reviving Philadelphia's Vacant Side Yards

Stephen and Sandra
SHELLER



PREPARED FOR IGLESIAS GARDENS BY THE SHELLER CENTER

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Figure 1. Ms. Ginet and her family have stewarded their lot for over 40 years, which includes cultivated flowers and trees, and has small outdoor structures that her children and grandchildren have used over the years.

Introduction

LAND STEWARDS AND THE REVITALIZATION OF SIDE YARDS

Across Philadelphia, a grassroots greening movement is underway. Community gardeners and green space advocates have made compelling arguments about transforming vacant side yards in neighborhoods into gardens and green spaces to grow healthy, affordable food and make communities stronger. Philadelphia has responded positively in several ways, by creating the Land Bank to streamline acquisition of vacant lots, establishing the Philadelphia Food Policy Advisory Council to coordinate food system initiatives, and implementing various initiatives to protect existing gardens from development.

Among the players in this movement are neighborhood residents who have stepped up to care for some of the City's vast stock of vacant side yards. (In this report, we use the phrase "side yard" to refer to a lot that is adjacent or near to a person's home, typically either at the side of or behind the house.)

In low-income communities of color long neglected by the City, "land stewards" take care of vacant side yards by mowing grass, removing trash, planting gardens, and creating safe, vibrant spaces where there were once only hazards (Figure 1)¹. In doing so, land stewards perform essential labor on a side

yard in the absence of City action. Their labor transforms urban blight into community wealth.

Yet while these land stewards invest time, energy, and resources into bettering their blocks, they do not legally own the land they are stewarding. If there are unpaid taxes on the property, as there often are, the space may suddenly be lost at a sheriff's sale. Moreover, it is difficult for land stewards to navigate the legal process for acquiring ownership rights, especially because land stewards have little to no access to affordable or pro bono legal help in such matters. For these and other reasons, developers with money and skill can outmaneuver community members and do so often in certain "hot" neighborhoods. Such developer-driven gentrification displaces the very people who made their neighborhoods greener and safer. And Philadelphia's Land Bank, which is supposed to facilitate the process of land transfer to community members, has opaque and confusing processes that do not work for land stewards.

This policy brief describes this grassroots movement by Philadelphia land stewards. It details the benefits of land stewardship to local communities and identifies the roadblocks that prevent land stewards from acquiring ownership rights. We conclude with recommendations for ways in which the City could support land stewards through policy initiatives, outreach, and—most importantly—fixes to the Land Bank.

Figure 2. Process of transforming a vacant lot.



Promoting easier paths to land ownership for these stewards sends a clear message: Philadelphia cares about equitable solutions that recognize local residents involved in community betterment.

Land Stewardship Is Good for the City

1 LAND STEWARDS INVEST TIME, ENERGY, AND RESOURCES INTO IMPROVING VACANT LOTS

Ideally, the City of Philadelphia would maintain all vacant lots in its inventory and ensure that these spaces are safe, clean, and functional. However, this is an insurmountable challenge with an estimated 27,000 vacant lots citywide², which another estimate puts at 42,100³. Even though there are obvious benefits to greening and managing these spaces, persistent resource constraints and political inaction leave the majority of these lots neglected.

In this void, land stewards have stepped up. They have taken charge within their own communities to invest the time, energy, and resources to transform dangerous, vacant lots into safe, usable spaces (Figure 2).^{4,5}

There are no reliable data on how many stewarded side yards there are in Philadelphia. However, it seems that the number is substantial.

A canvassing project conducted by Iglesias Gardens (IG) from 2019 to 2020 that focused on 485 vacant lots at risk of foreclosure found that one-fifth (in District 7) to one-third (in District 3) of those properties were side yards being cared for by community members (a total of 139 side yards).⁶ This survey covered only a portion of the side

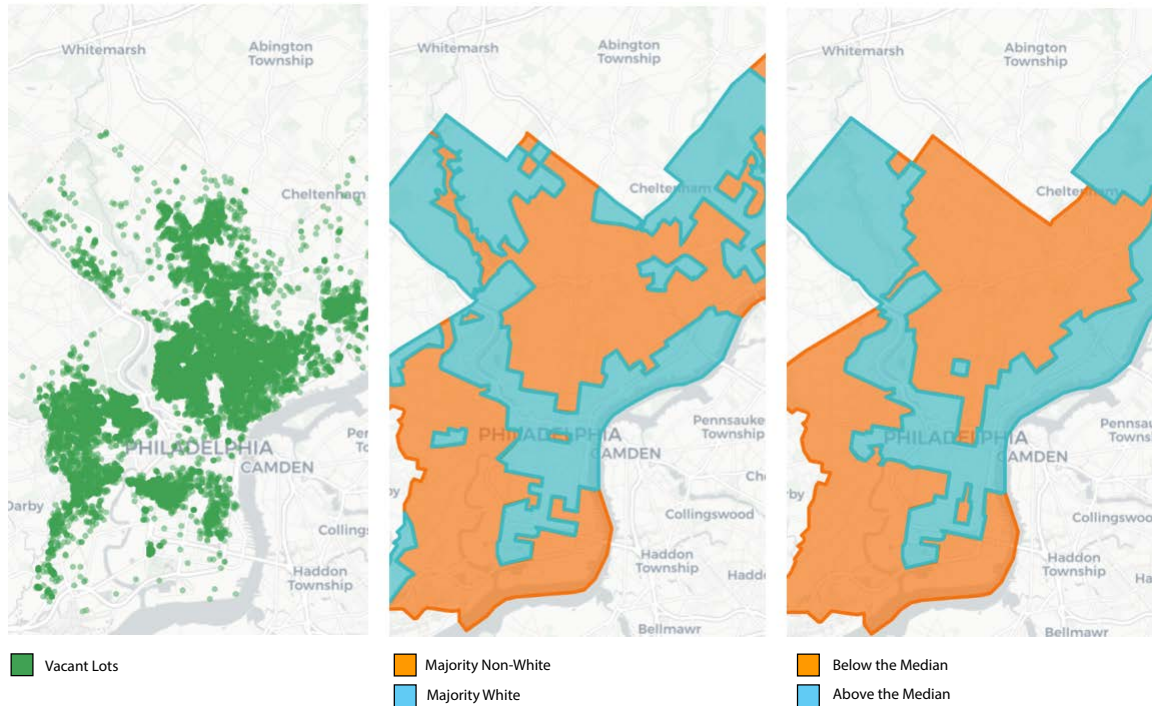


Figure 3. Mr. King has stewarded the land next to his house since 1961. The lot had a house that burned down due to a drug war, and was then abandoned after falling into disrepair. He and his wife cleaned it up, built a beautiful garden, and fenced it off to prevent further drug dealing.

yards in only two of the ten councilmanic districts. Subsequently, in 2025, a survey by the same organization in two zip codes (19122 and 19133) found that 275 of 767 vacant lots (or well over one-third) were being stewarded.⁷

According to IG, these surveys revealed that land stewards invest substantial time, labor, and personal resources into creating and maintaining side yards. They clear trash, erect fences, create flower beds and gardens, decorate, install playground equipment, basketball hoops, or pools, and sometimes pay people to landscape or mow the grass.⁸ They may use lots as a gathering place for neighbors and pool money together for maintenance.⁹ The canvassing has also revealed that many land stewards have maintained these lots adjacent to their homes for years or even decades (Figure 3).^{10,11}

Figure 4. Comparative maps of vacant land, race, and income.



The time, energy, and resources spent by land stewards benefit the entire community. Yet the City has failed to recognize this substantial investment by community members. Research also shows that there are additional community members who are interested in becoming stewards of vacant side yards, but do not know whether they are allowed to do so or how to get help navigating the process.¹²

2 LAND STEWARDSHIP PROMOTES HEALTHY NEIGHBORHOODS

Vacant lots, including vacant side yards, pose serious threats to health and safety.¹³ In neighborhoods across Philadelphia, residents identify these uncared-for spaces as a primary risk to well-being.¹⁴ Vacant lots contribute to physical dangers such as trash buildup, injury hazards, and rodent infestations.¹⁵ Vacant lots also contribute to mental health risks, including fear, isolation, and stress.^{16,17}

By contrast, stewarded lots reduce these harms. Research shows that even small greening efforts can transform a neighborhood.¹⁸ In Philadelphia, residents living near cared-for lots report a significant increase in positive interactions, increased use of

outdoor spaces, and significantly improved perceptions of safety.¹⁹ Critically, studies have also shown actual reductions in crime and gun violence near greened lots.²⁰ Land stewards often step in when vacant lots create opportunities for dangerous activity, such as drug dealing (Figure 3).

These spaces also promote relaxation, social cohesion, and improved mental health, which are benefits that ripple outward to support overall community wellness. Even residents who do not directly use these spaces benefit from reduction in the “urban heat island” effect, i.e., the high temperatures that occur in areas without plant coverage.²¹

3 LAND STEWARDS TEND TO BE MEMBERS OF LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

Vacant lots are not evenly distributed across Philadelphia (Figure 4).²² They are disproportionately concentrated in majority non-white neighborhoods. Further, they are disproportionately concentrated in low-income neighborhoods. These are the same neighborhoods that often have a history of redlining by the Federal Housing Administration

Figure 5. Ms. Gutierrez and her family served as lot stewards for a vacant lot adjacent to their home on Lipincott Street for 18 years. They cleaned and cared for the lot, planted and cultivated a garden, built a small shed, and had a swimming pool in the summer. They were not notified when the lot was going to sheriff's sale so it was purchased by a land speculator who eventually boarded it up.



in the 1930s and consequently faced less investment.²³ On a local level, the 2018-19 IG canvassing project, which occurred primarily in the Kensington and Fairhill neighborhoods, similarly found that the majority of land stewards are low-income people of color.²⁴

The work of land stewards, however, helps to keep wealth within communities of color. Research has shown that greening vacant lots, including side yards, not only increases safety and enhances mental health, but also increases property values without driving displacement.²⁵ “Properties within a 1,000-foot radius of a greened lot experience, on average, a 4.3% rise in value after the first year and a 13% cumulative increase after six years.”²⁶ This amount is not enough to contribute to displacement of a large number of residents but “works to

reclaim some of the value these neighborhoods have lost through disinvestment.”²⁷

Land stewardship ultimately is a community-driven solution. Local community members steward vacant lots, rather than looking to the City or private developers to solve the problem. Cleaning and maintaining such lots have been a source of pride and community mobilization for residents.²⁸ Philadelphia residents interviewed in a vacant lot study spoke positively about gathering their neighbors to work on a project.²⁹ Rather than allowing the rewards of revitalization to bypass those who made it possible, supporting land stewards, who often have deep roots in the neighborhood, redirects value and ownership back into the communities that have historically borne the cost of vacancy.

Land Stewards Risk Losing Land

Land stewards often exercise control over their land with little interference for many years, the lot owner having abandoned the property long ago. Yet land stewards risk losing their land because many of these lots have been accruing unpaid property taxes for years. The City (or another lienholder) can choose to foreclose on the property at any time. Over roughly the past decade, the city has filed foreclosure actions against over 10,000 tax delinquent vacant lots.³⁰

In theory, a land steward may be able to intervene in the foreclosure proceeding and assert an ownership claim to the property via the legal doctrine of “adverse possession.”³¹ Making this kind of ownership claim, however, is highly challenging because it requires that land stewards have notice of the foreclosure, can meet the very challenging eligibility criteria for adverse possession, and have an attorney to help them navigate the complicated court process.³² And since none of Philadelphia’s legal non-profits currently has the funding or staff to assist with these cases, most land stewards – who typically lack the funds to hire an attorney on their own – are blocked from asserting adverse-possession claims.

If no one stops the foreclosure, the property is listed for sheriff’s sale. The city uses Bid4Assets.com, a digital auction platform, to host its sheriff sales. Land stewards, however, report not knowing that their side yard is up for auction until it is too late (Figure 5).^{33,34}

After a pause in sheriff sales during the pandemic, they resumed as of July 2024.³⁵ From that point through August 2025, a thirteen-month period, over 1,000 tax delinquent properties have been put up for sheriff’s sale.³⁶ And while the Sheriff’s

Office does not specifically record which of these properties were vacant lots, a cross-comparison of the sales data with data from the Office of Property Assessment suggests that vacant lots comprise a not-insignificant proportion of the properties put up for sale. For example, of 100 properties put up for auction for tax delinquency between January and August 2025, 16 were vacant lots.³⁷

Further, the displacement of longtime residents from certain neighborhoods in Philadelphia has made some stewarded land more valuable. Competition in these neighborhoods has skyrocketed in recent years as property values have risen. In a report by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition about gentrification and Black cultural displacement, Philadelphia was ranked among the top six U.S. cities for neighborhood racial turnover and displacement.³⁸ Virtual auctions by Bid4Assets.com have made bidding available to buyers nationwide, with 750,000 registered users.³⁹ As property values rise in these areas, online auctions may favor out-of-town real estate speculators over local residents seeking to maintain ownership.⁴⁰

The Philadelphia Land Bank is supposed to address this problem. Created in 2013, its mission is to facilitate the transfer of vacant tax-delinquent land with the goal of revitalizing neighborhoods by making land ownership more accessible to local residents, including land stewards.⁴¹ To this end, the Land Bank acquires vacant property on behalf of the City government and then provides it to new owners.

In theory, once the Land Bank acquires a vacant side yard, an adjoining property-owner can apply to the

Land Bank for title to the land. If the applicant meets certain criteria, such as committing to use the property as a side or rear yard, the property is placed in a process that is not open to private developers.⁴² The process, which is supposed to be simple enough that the applicant will not need a lawyer, conveys title free of any municipal liens or tax obligations, which would otherwise be a huge cost impediment for low and medium-income residents.⁴³ The process also imposes deed restrictions requiring that the property be used as a side yard, and comes with a 30-year mortgage designed to prevent people from stewarding just to acquire land to flip in the real estate market.⁴⁴ The mortgage does not require payment so long as the buyer complies with the deed restrictions.

If the Land Bank process worked as designed, land stewards could greatly benefit from it. In practice, however, the process is complex, slow, and opaque. While the Land Bank can theoretically acquire side and rear yards,⁴⁵ the process by which land stewards can get their parcels into the Land Bank inventory is not entirely clear. For years, the Land Bank system for acquisitions failed to work at all due to complications navigating Bid4Assets, the online site used by the sheriff for land sales.⁴⁶ Further, the Land Bank's processing of applications for existing inventory is problematic. Individual land stewards report that they struggle with how to express interest in acquiring a property and how to navigate the process from that point forward.⁴⁷ Since it was created in 2013, only 1,017 properties have been transferred out of

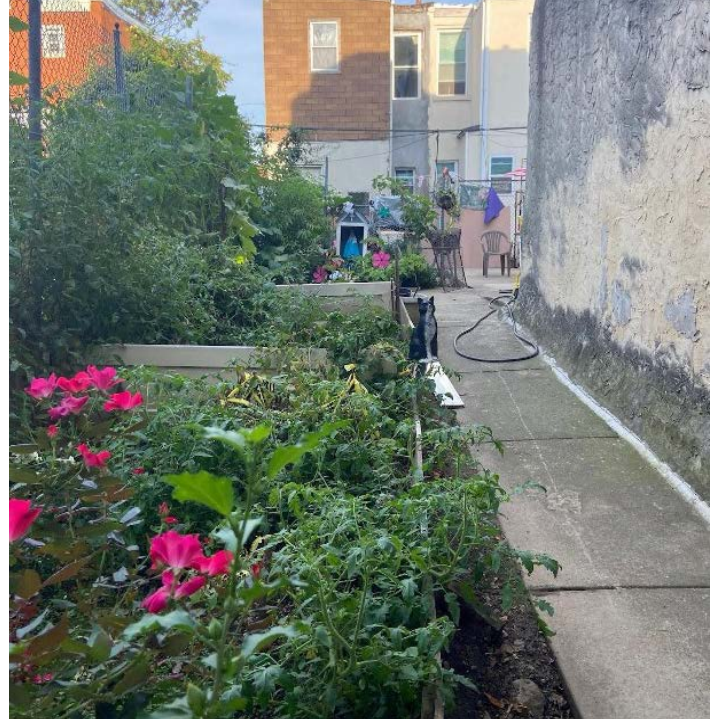


Figure 6. Ms. Vega has maintained this vacant side yard since September 1976. She uses it as a garden to grow flowers, tomatoes, and other vegetables.

the 8,000 publicly held parcels documented during the Land Bank's creation.⁴⁸

When the Land Bank process fails to function, developers and land speculators, who are well resourced and well versed in navigating City bureaucracies, frequently outmaneuver community members in acquiring properties.⁴⁹ This undermines long term residents' investment in their communities and leads to displacement.⁵⁰

Recommendations

SUPPORTING LAND STEWARDS THROUGH POLICY, OUTREACH, AND AN IMPROVED LAND BANK

Development alone will not solve Philadelphia's vacant lot crisis, much less do so in ways that support lower-income communities and

communities of color. Promoting land stewardship and awarding ownership rights to longtime stewards improves neighborhoods without leading to displacement (Figure 6).⁵¹ Supporting existing residents in securing ownership of the land they

have cared for is one way to ensure the benefits of greening do not come at the cost of community loss.

The good news is that a coalition of community gardeners, growers, and land stewards have been working hard on getting the Land Bank to improve and solve these problems. They have urged the City to reform the Land Bank to better support community gardens, side yards, and green spaces. In a 2024 letter to Mayor Parker, advocates called for:

- Clearing the backlog of pending Land Bank applications.
- Streamlining and making the application process more accessible.
- Prioritizing the acquisition of tax-delinquent land for existing land stewards.
- Giving land stewards the right of first refusal.
- Appointing garden stakeholders to the Land Bank board.
- Dedicating staff to manage garden and side yard applications and community outreach.⁵²

Advocates are working hard to make these changes.⁵³ At this point, the Land Bank has reached a deal with Bid4Assets,

restoring their ability to acquire properties,⁵⁴ and City Council has held multiple hearings aimed at resolving the hurdles that prevent the Land Bank from functioning.⁵⁵ The hope is the Land Bank will continue to be responsive to such advocacy.

Further, while reforms to the Land Bank are certainly key, there are additional steps that the City could take—mostly at modest if any cost. These include:

- Adopting an official policy of supporting land stewards.
- Disseminating information about how land stewards can explore acquiring title to the properties they maintain.
- Designating an office within City government that land stewards can contact for help and guidance.
- Creating a program through which land stewards can obtain free or low-cost legal assistance with adverse-possession claims.
- Publicly recognizing and celebrating the efforts of land stewards.

Conclusion

Philadelphia has the opportunity to support its grassroots greening movement. It can ensure that land stewards are able to acquire the land. Doing so not only rewards those who have spent the time, energy and resources to care for their communities, but it also acknowledges and honors their role in improving public safety, health, and environmental outcomes. Recognizing their stewardship through easier land acquisition is a cost-effective and equi-table policy that promotes neighborhood stability and reparative justice.

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- 20 Id. at 2949.
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- 34 Photo and information provided by Iglesias Gardens.
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