

Land Access and Acquisition

Lessons from the Field on Vacant Lot Greening

Nearly two-thirds of survey respondents reported that their vacant lot inventories increased over the last two years. This growing inventory requires action to ensure lots are used to achieve community goals. Facilitating community access provides opportunities to implement a wide range of projects and uses.

Why Land Access and Acquisition Matters

1. Lack of Formal Access Increases Risk

Vacant properties with absentee owners often undermine neighborhood conditions and stability. With few options for gaining site control, some organizations and neighborhood groups take on legal and safety risks to maintain vacant, privately owned lots.

"One of our biggest obstacles is that the city doesn't own a lot of the vacant land in our neighborhood...It's owned by private, absentee owners that are unresponsive and don't keep their properties maintained."

"When someone drives down a block, they have no idea which lots are publicly owned and which lots are privately owned, they just see the condition of the neighborhood, so if you can't keep private properties in good condition through regular code enforcement, you are really pushing the rock up the hill in terms of trying to stabilize the neighborhood."

"We've made the decision to just move forward, to cut and clean lots owned by absentee private owners, but there are other organizations that struggle with that because of the liability."



2. Public Ownership Supports Reuse

When public entities, such as land banks or local government, acquire vacant properties in an efficient, consistent, and timely manner, it can increase access for community groups, minimize problem property owners, and support strategic reuse.

"The hardest part of the process is handling the tax foreclosure but it's really necessary."

"More streamlined tax foreclosure processes have helped to strengthen our work...There is an understanding that we have to act sooner rather than later to recover properties to keep them from declining."

"The city retains control of local vacant properties, rather than relinquishing them to the control of an outside speculator. Having land under the control of a local entity will afford critical autonomy and resources as the city moves forward...Land is a critical asset and must continue to be viewed that way."

Practitioner Insights

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Understand Public Acquisition Processes

Build relationships with government partners to help ensure timely acquisition and transfer of publicly-acquired properties to local entities.

“Because we have a strong partnership with the prosecutor’s office and there is significant political will, we have been able to streamline the tax foreclosure process down from 18 months to 9 months.”

“The Land Bank is working closely with the Clerks of the Circuit Courts, lead judge, and County Clerk’s office to more efficiently take thousands of tax certificates to deed. Never in the history of the Tax Certificate program has there been this volume.”

Prioritize Local Stakeholder Access

Make properties available to residents and established local stakeholders such as community organizations and small businesses first. Even if not immediately profitable, this can advance social equity and other holistic community benefits.

“When we sell the property to neighborhood groups we know we may not break even. But we look at the bigger picture and try to make it affordable, because we know that will bring the greatest good by supporting the creation of a revitalized space or a community garden.”

Provide Multiple Options for Stewardship

Greening organizations often have limited options to formally access or acquire vacant lots. By providing a range of access methods, land owners can facilitate a wide range of reuse activities. To expand opportunities for community stewardship, create transparent policies and processes, have accessible staff, and set affordable lease and purchase prices.



The Keys to Success guides are companion products to *America’s Vacant Lot Landscape: Insights from the National Survey on Greening*, which can be found at www.communityprogress.org/vacantland.

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