

Vacant Land Stewardship

Addressing Vacant Lot Inventories

We would likely never refer to a solar farm or an urban forest as “vacant land.” Yet when it comes to land within our community that sits empty, we often fail to see the potential it holds. Redefining how we understand these pieces of land are an important part of their next chapter.

Today, communities are using vacant lots to grow food, manage stormwater, create needed greenspace, produce solar energy, regenerate tree canopies, and more. Each of these projects dramatically benefit their surrounding neighborhood. Yet despite their benefits, these projects are often isolated and are rarely part of a larger, comprehensive plan or strategy.

Why is Vacant Land Stewardship Important?

The rarity of a comprehensive response often stems from an entrenched development belief that the “highest and best” use of any particular parcel is a building. This narrow view of valuable land uses, one that prioritizes physical development above all else, results in few future paths for neighborhoods with a limited market for traditional development and harms any community’s ability to realize a more environmentally and economically sustainable future. Long-term, equitable community transformation requires a more expansive and inclusive definition of “highest and best” use, one that recognizes the value of green reuses.

Vacant land stewardship most immediately benefits residents. Neighborhoods with well maintained and stewarded vacant lots realize an increase in property values, a reduction in crime, deepened resident engagement, and higher quality of life for residents.



Vacant property inclusive of vacant buildings and vacant lots.

Vacant lot is a parcel without a structure, which could include a previously developed lot or unbuildable lot.

Vacant land stewardship the comprehensive, long-term, repurposing and maintenance vacant lots.



Learn More about the benefits of vacant land stewardship at communityprogress.org/vacant-land

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Nearly two thirds of organizations report the number of vacant lots in their community is growing*. As the challenge and untapped opportunity of vacant land grows, communities must identify new uses for these lots, determine how these uses can bolster a comprehensive land use strategy, and implement a long-term stewardship model.

* O'Keefe, Rupp, Torres, Grodzinski, Zimmerman. (2020). *America's Vacant Lot Landscape: Insights from the National Survey on Greening*. Center for Community Progress.

What does successful vacant land stewardship look like?

One of the most important factors in successful vacant land management programs is understanding a community's long-term land use vision, a neighborhood's market context, and resident needs. As one survey respondent put it, "Make sure to follow the lead of neighbors. If they do not feel it is a priority, it probably won't be sustainable." That said, the possibilities are nearly limitless for vacant lots. Some of the most common categories for new uses fall into a few categories: productive uses; restorative uses; and, innovative uses.

Types of uses for vacant lots



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American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)

Why should ARPA funds be invested in vacant land stewardship?

The American Rescue Plan Act's (ARPA) \$350 billion [State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund](#) distributes federal relief to every US state, local, territorial, and Tribal government, which must be obligated by December 31, 2024 and expended by the end of 2026. This once-in-a-lifetime infusion of flexible funding is focused on catalyzing broader community recovery and rebuilding and addressing the immediate and long-term negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on low-income communities and people of color.

NEED: Vacant, unmaintained, and underutilized lots harm individual and neighborhood health, disproportionately in low-income communities and communities of color, which have resulted in poorer outcomes from the pandemic.

OPPORTUNITY: Dedicating **ARPA funds to repurposing and stewarding vacant lots** to address this need is an ideal investment given the following:

- 1** Vacant land stewardship, from basic maintenance to reuse activities, is a **proven method for improving public health and violence reduction and prevention.**
- 2** Many vacant land uses provide **economic opportunity to individuals and small businesses** – including urban agriculture, art and performance spaces, tree and plant nurseries, and energy production.
- 3** Green infrastructure on vacant lots, such as rain gardens, can **support stormwater system resiliency and watershed health**, a stated ARPA use, facilitating healthier places to live.
- 4** Community-engaged maintenance and greening of vacant lots is an evidence-based community violence intervention, which is a **presumptively eligible expense** in Qualified Census Tracts and likely eligible outside of these areas based on community needs.
- 5** Vacant land stewardship partners like **land banks and nonprofits can be recipients** since ARPA allows local or state governments to transfer funding to nonprofit organizations or other special purpose units of state or local government to carry out eligible activities.

ARPA ON THE GROUND

- [Chicago, IL](#) dedicated significant portions of its ARPA funding to vacant lot reduction strategies, urban agriculture, expansion of tree canopy, green infrastructure projects, and vacant lot environmental assessments.
- [Baton Rouge, LA](#) is planning to use over \$2 million ARPA funding to help address vacant properties including cleaning up vacant lots.
- [Houston, TX](#) will clean up illegal dumping throughout the city with \$1.5 million in ARPA funding.

POTENTIAL IDEAS FOR ARPA USE

- Develop or expand community-engaged vacant lot maintenance programs.
- Utilize vacant lot inventories to improve access to greenspaces by creating new and/or expanding existing parks and other public outdoor spaces and increasing tree canopy.
- Implement green infrastructure projects, such as rain gardens and bioswales to reduce flooding, improve climate resiliency and stormwater infrastructure, and reduce water pollution.
- Prepare vacant lots for reuse by testing for and remediating environmental contamination and clearing title issues.
- Create a workforce development program for vacant lot maintenance.
- Provide fiscal support to residents with existing or new food businesses on vacant lots.



Learn More about the American Rescue Plan Act at communityprogress.org/resources/arpa/