

Center for
**COMMUNITY
PROGRESS**



The Road Ahead for Land Banks

Opportunities for Growth
and Greater Equity

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Author



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About the Author

Kim Graziani is a Senior Technical Assistance Advisor for Community Progress and President of Indigo Collaborative LLC, a national consulting firm dedicated to building trust and sharing power between local government and residents to equitably revitalize communities. For the past 15 years, Kim has worked with hundreds of land banks across the country and helped create the National Land Bank Network in her former role as Vice President and Director of National Technical Assistance.

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About the Center for Community Progress

The Center for Community Progress helps people to transform vacant spaces into vibrant places. Since 2010, their team of experts has provided urban, suburban, and rural communities battling systemic vacancy with the policies, tools, and resources needed to address the full cycle of property revitalization. As the only national nonprofit dedicated to tackling vacant properties, Community Progress drives change by uncovering and disrupting the unjust, racist systems that perpetuate entrenched vacancy and property deterioration. Community Progress has delivered customized, expert guidance to leaders in over 300 communities and provided hundreds of hours of free educational resources as well as leadership programming to help policymakers, practitioners, and community members across the country return properties to productive use. To learn more and get help for your community, visit www.communityprogress.org

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Dear friends,

I can't believe the National Land Bank Network (NLBN) is already four years old. In that time, we have quickly come to recognize that what was once a small group of practitioners nearly two decades ago has blossomed into a dynamic national movement, driven by the passion and dedication of communities like yours.

As the Director of the National Land Bank Network, I've had the privilege of traveling across the country and witnessing firsthand the remarkable work land banks are doing. Whether it's in community meetings at local churches and schools, or on bus tours through neighborhoods and commercial districts, I've seen the transformative impact of this field. The energy and commitment on the ground is undeniable—and now, it's time we share these stories far and wide.

We wrote this report to empower land bank leaders with the knowledge and tools to continue leading their communities in addressing vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties. But in addition to our research and field expertise, we filled these pages with *your* stories. Stories of innovative programs, policies, and strategies gathered from diverse communities across the country.

We hope this will be a resource you return to, share with your board members, and use to inspire funders who believe in our shared mission. It's a testament to the diversity of land banks, but by no means an exhaustive catalog of all that's happening across the field.

I'm certain you will find something in these pages that sparks a new idea or reaffirms your belief in what's possible for your community. Together, let's embrace the future and continue shaping the road ahead.

Warmly,

Brian Larkin

Director, National Land Bank Network

Acknowledgements

We thank all the land banks and land bank partners featured in this publication who graciously shared their stories with us and continue to advocate for systemic change while revitalizing their communities.

We also extend our gratitude to the advisory committee of land bank leaders whose insights, relationships, and passion for their work poured into this publication:

Winnie Branton, Senior Advisor to the Pennsylvania Land Bank Network and President of Branton Strategies LLC

Shawn Carvin, Executive Director of the Ohio Land Bank Association

Alison Goldey, Executive Director of the Chatham County/City of Savannah Land Bank Authority and Vice President of the Georgia Association of Land Banks

Michelle Thompson, Executive Director of the Benzie County Land Bank Authority and the Michigan Land Bank Association

Katelyn Wright, Executive Director of the Greater Syracuse Land Bank and President of the New York Land Bank Association

These land bank leaders, partners, and statewide associations are a testament to the collective power and potential for transformation in the field of land banking.

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Executive Summary

There are **over 300 land banks and land banking programs** operating across the United States, and the field has come a long way since the first land banks formed in the early 1970s.

For over 40 years, land banks have kept a sharp focus on removing harmful vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated (VAD¹) properties from the vicious cycle of tax sales and out of the hands of speculators. Land banks help ensure these properties are instead sold to responsible owners for uses that support community goals, building wealth for generations to come.



¹ Many in the field use the shorthand “blight” or “blighted” to describe these properties, but this term is problematic. Community Progress uses vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated or “VAD” throughout this publication instead. Read more about why in the callout box on page 9 and here: <https://communityprogress.org/blog/what-is-blight/>.

In 2023, Community Progress conducted our biennial State of Land Banking Survey to understand where the field is, how it has changed, and where it is going.² This publication highlights key survey findings with context from our extensive experience and provides examples from a broad assortment of land banks.

One of the most significant changes in the field is that land banks are doing fewer demolitions and “blight” removal and instead taking a more active role in developing affordable housing and facilitating property rehabilitation. More land banks are also developing strategies to address vacant land, which makes up the bulk of land bank inventory. Additionally, more land banks are expanding their scope beyond residential development to include brownfields and commercial vacancy, showcasing their flexibility and responsiveness to current challenges.

While some opportunities and challenges like funding, politics, and community engagement have remained consistent, others like inventory decline and racial equity and justice have emerged more recently. Other challenges, like climate change, did not surface as much in the survey results but are one of the key issues that need to be addressed moving forward.

No two land banks—and no two communities—are identical. A land bank’s flexibility to respond to local challenges and opportunities sets it apart from other entities. Land banks continue to demonstrate that they have a superpower to evolve, pivot, and respond to meet the changing needs of the communities they serve. This is now more important than ever given the realities of the real estate market and of community and economic development. Many communities are seeing increased interest from outside speculative investors and a severe lack of quality affordable housing. Property values are rising astronomically in some communities while disinvestment deepens in others; in a way, both can crush a resident’s dreams of building generational wealth.

But how can land banks *more effectively* serve their communities’ greatest needs? Are VAD properties the biggest challenge? If so, do land banks have the right legal powers, resources, and capacity to transform VAD properties into community assets for and with residents? If VAD properties are not the biggest challenge, what is? Can a land bank help tackle that challenge to achieve transformational changes that benefit neighbors and neighborhoods?

Every community will answer these questions differently, but if you do not continuously ask, land banks will not continue to evolve. Without asking these questions and having honest discussions about the effectiveness and equity of our work, true transformation is not possible. History shows that while many land banks have evolved, some remain stuck as primarily transactional entities. Change is possible, and we must continue to challenge ourselves and others to improve.

One of the most significant changes in the field is that land banks are doing fewer demolitions and “blight” removal and instead taking a more active role in developing affordable housing and facilitating rehabs.

² For more information regarding the survey results, and to review data from additional categories not included in this publication, please visit: <https://communityprogress.org/land-bank-survey>.

Introduction

For nearly 15 years, the Center for Community Progress has tirelessly worked with hundreds of land bank leaders, practitioners, partners, and allies to help land banks revitalize their communities. Through our expert guidance, resources, leadership programming, policy advocacy, and the National Land Bank Network (NLBN), we have been an integral part of making sure land banks are set up to meet their communities' challenges.

What is a land bank? A land bank is a public entity with unique powers—granted by local government and state laws—to transform vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties (VAD) according to community goals. A land bank's primary purpose is to acquire these properties and temporarily hold and take care of them until they can be transferred to new, responsible owners.³ Land banks create their own priorities and policies in cooperation with their residents and the communities they serve and are governed by a board of directors.

What is a land banking program? Land banking programs exist primarily in states without land bank-enabling legislation. They are programs of an existing agency or organization that acquires VAD properties and transforms them into community assets through new, responsible ownership and stewardship. Land banking programs may create priorities and policies but are generally governed by the existing agency or organization.

Land banks ensure harmful vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated (VAD⁴) properties are removed from the vicious cycle of tax sales and out of the hands of speculators who care primarily about profit.

Profit is not necessarily a bad thing, but too often that financial gain comes at the expense of people and communities who continue to be harmed by decades of unjust, racist, and extractive policies and practices; people who live next to VAD properties where the debt is sold and there is still no responsible owner. Land banks help ensure these properties are instead sold to responsible owners for uses that support community goals,

³ "What is a land bank?," Center for Community Progress (blog), June 15, 2023, <https://communityprogress.org/blog/what-is-a-land-bank/>.

⁴ Many in the field use the shorthand "blight" or "blighted" to describe these properties, but this term is problematic. Community Progress uses vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated or "VAD" throughout this publication instead. Read more about why in the callout box on page 9 and here: <https://communityprogress.org/blog/what-is-blight/>.

building wealth for generations to come.⁵ There are **over 300 land banks and land banking programs** operating across the United States, and the field has come a long way since the first land banks formed in the early 1970s.

In 2023, Community Progress conducted our biennial State of Land Banking Survey to understand where the field is, how it has changed, and where it is going.⁶ This publication highlights key survey findings with context from our extensive experience and provides examples from a broad assortment of land banks.

No two land banks—and no two communities—are identical. A land bank’s flexibility to respond to local challenges and opportunities sets it apart from other entities.

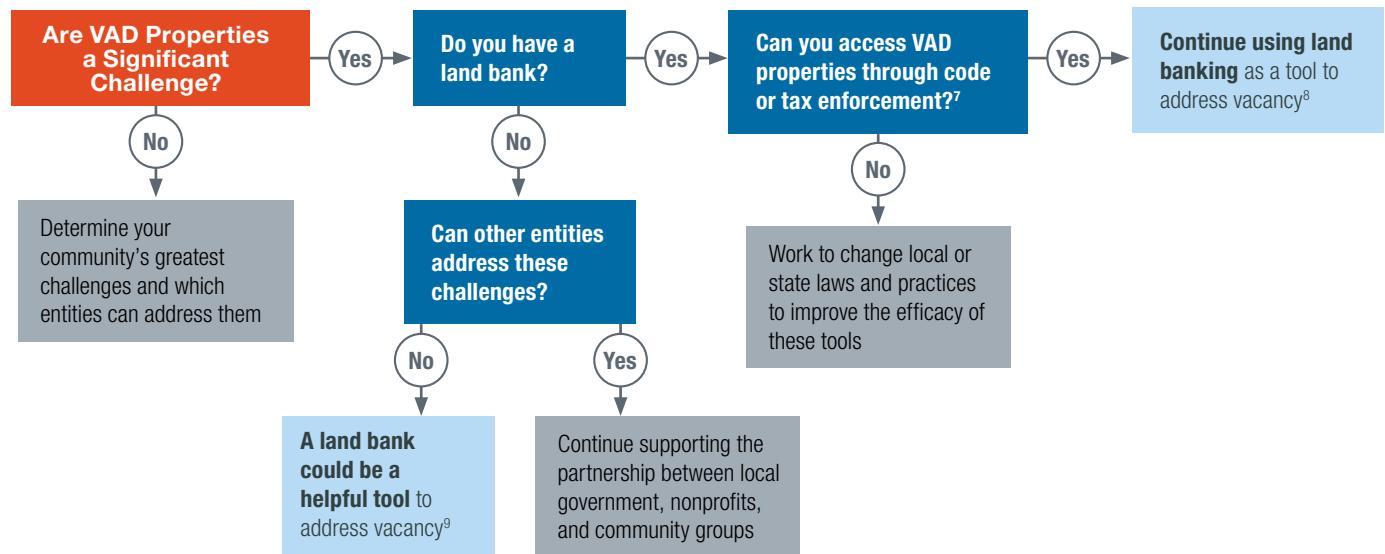
While this publication cannot represent every experience for every land bank, it offers useful insights for all land banks, large and small.

We hope this information inspires readers from all land banks to reflect on your community’s needs and challenges you to *continue* doing better.

Land banks have demonstrated over the last 40 years that they have a superpower to evolve, pivot, and respond to meet the changing needs of the communities they serve. This is now more important than ever given the realities of the real estate market and of community and economic development. Many communities are seeing increased interest from outside speculative investors and a severe lack of quality affordable housing. Property values are rising astronomically in some communities while disinvestment deepens in others; in a way, both can crush a resident’s dreams of building generational wealth.

Despite these challenges, most land banks have a strong track record of thoughtfully responding to the communities they serve.

Does My Community Need a Land Bank?



Graphic © Center for Community Progress

5 This publication uses “tax sale,” “tax foreclosure,” and “public auction” interchangeably to refer to the different ways states and local jurisdictions enforce the collection of delinquent property taxes.

6 For more information regarding the survey results, and to review data from additional categories not included in this publication, please visit: <https://communityprogress.org/land-bank-survey>.

7 Kim Graziani, *Reimagine Delinquent Property Tax Enforcement* (Center for Community Progress, 2022), <https://communityprogress.org/publications/reimagine-delinquent-property-tax-enforcement/>; *Reevaluating Code Enforcement: A New Approach to Addressing Problem Properties* (Center for Community Progress, 2024), <https://communityprogress.org/publications/code-enforcement-report/>.

8 Land Banks, Center for Community Progress, <https://communityprogress.org/resources/land-banks/>.

9 See, “How to Form a Land Bank: A 10-Step Guide,” <https://communityprogress.org/publications/how-to-form-a-land-bank/>.

But how can land banks *more effectively* serve their communities' greatest needs? Are VAD properties the biggest challenge? If so, do land banks have the right legal powers, resources, and capacity to transform VAD properties into community assets for and with residents? If VAD properties are not the biggest challenge, what is? Can a land bank help tackle that challenge to achieve transformational changes that benefit neighbors and neighborhoods?

Every community will answer these questions differently, but if you do not continuously ask, land banks will not continue to evolve. Without asking these questions and having honest discussions about the effectiveness and equity of our work, true transformation is not possible. History shows that while many land banks have evolved, some remain stuck as primarily transactional entities.

Many land banks are evolving from purely transactional entities into transformational community partners that use multi-faceted, entrepreneurial approaches to investing in people and places. Others continue to primarily deploy land banking as a precise tool to acquire available VAD properties through the delinquent tax sale process and immediately transfer them to new ownership. Still other land banks take a hybrid approach, acquiring properties through donations and direct market purchases and choosing to be a more patient steward that waits for the right opportunity to arise.

The bottom line is there are always ways for land banks to be more equitable, effective, entrepreneurial, and transformational in meeting their communities' needs. In communities that have experienced systemic and historic vacancy, land banks should not be removing legal and financial barriers to simply return property to the free market. Land banks should be reparative, thoughtful, equitable, and driven by long-term visions and goals, never just financial returns and transactional metrics.

Get involved! Become a member of the National Land Bank Network if your land bank is not already, complete future national land bank surveys, and attend the NLBN summits to ensure your voice is heard.¹⁰

¹⁰ To learn more about NLBN membership, the biennial summit, and opportunities to support this work, visit <https://communityprogress.org/nlbn/>.



Why is using the term “blight” problematic?

Blight rarely stops at describing properties. The term has been used as a thinly veiled justification to strip low-income Black and Brown residents of businesses, intergenerational wealth, and community—all in the name of urban renewal, blight elimination, and blight eradication.

Using blight to describe vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties is inaccurate: Not all blighted properties are vacant or abandoned. Many properties that could be considered blighted are still occupied.

Historically, the term blight as it applies to botanical diseases is something seen as an act of nature, difficult to predict or prevent. However, when applied to properties, blight is anything but random and blameless. It is the consequence of a legacy of intentional disinvestment, poverty, unjust policies, and racist systems.

As land banks evolve and expand, they have a responsibility to reflect on how they have developed and where they are heading. The history of government actions to address “blight” has left lasting trauma in many communities, creating a challenge. Since most land banks are government-created and work in disinvested communities, they must recognize their responsibility to understand these troubled histories and how they influence current conditions.

The community often expects a land bank will solve all problems, but even with the most effective land bank laws, a land bank cannot address every past or present challenge. At their most effective, land banks work closely with various partners, including governmental, nonprofit, financial, and philanthropic, and most importantly, the residents.

This may be one of the most challenging periods for land banks due to factors like funding uncertainty, reduced property inventory, and the need to address quality affordable housing rather than VAD properties. We must ensure communities are being served, determine if land banks are the right tool and how they can have the most impact, and who the necessary partners are.

This publication is for NLBN members—land banks—who work directly in their communities, and also for partners and allies who seek to challenge the status quo and transform neighborhoods. It is also for communities considering starting a land bank. Our goal is to spark a dialogue about the past, present, and future of land banks and ensure we do not lose sight of the mission—uplifting people, not property, who are the lifeblood of our communities.

This publication is laid out in the following sections:

- I. *Land Bank Transformation Through the Years and the Current State of Land Banking*: An overview of how land banks have evolved over the past 40 years and the state of the field.
- II. *State of Land Banking Survey Results*: Highlights from the only comprehensive survey that allows land banks across the country to tell their stories with data.
- III. *The Future of Land Banking: Where Can We Go From Here*: Recommendations for how the land banking field can continue to best serve their communities given the growing inequities and unknown forthcoming challenges.

This publication aims to acknowledge the diversity of land banks, whether in rural, suburban, or urban areas, from land banks with limited or no funding to those with substantial dedicated resources, and everything in between.

Section I

Land Bank Transformation Through the Years and the Current State of Land Banking

This section recounts how we got here, with a particular focus on the past 10 years, and where land banking is today.¹¹

Over the past decade, the field has more than doubled, growing from 120 to over 300 land banks and land banking programs. The number of states with land bank-enabling legislation increased from 5 to 18, as well as Puerto Rico. Additionally, there have been significant market shifts, with communities slowly moving from managing large portfolios of vacant homes in some stage of mortgage foreclosure to facing a severe shortage of quality affordable housing.

Transformation of Land Banks Through the Years

2000

Growing inventory of tax-foreclosed properties with no pathway to new ownership in legacy cities

County tax collectors advocate for and create early land bank legislation; land banks are created with primary focus of getting properties back on tax rolls, generally limited funding and narrow focus

2010

Massive influx of VAD properties due to mortgage foreclosure crisis and creation of new federal programs and funding

More states pass improved land bank legislation, increasing access to tax-foreclosed properties and funding options

Uneven recovery resulting in some communities rebounding and others not; increased national awareness of racial injustice

More land banks examine the opportunity for their work to have social outcomes beyond property tax production; look at their impacts, programs, policies, boards, and communication approaches in light of more explicit calls to address social inequality or racial injustice

2020

Global public health crisis (COVID-19) leads to moratoria on tax foreclosures; housing market escalation in many communities

Land banks partner with public health and social services to preserve and create quality affordable housing options

US Supreme Court weighs in on tax foreclosure processes and how to handle excess proceeds

Land banks evaluate their state and local tax foreclosure laws and acquisition practices, renewed focus on properties causing the most harm

Graphic © Center for Community Progress

¹¹ For a more thorough history of land banks prior to 2015, see Frank S. Alexander, *Land Banks and Land Banking, 2nd ed.* (Center for Community Progress, 2015), <https://communityprogress.org/publications/land-banks-and-land-banking-2nd-edition/>.

Ineffective Delinquent Property Tax Enforcement Processes Create VAD Properties, Elevating the Need for Land Banks

The land bank movement emerged from tax collectors' increasing frustration with their delinquent property tax enforcement outcomes:¹²

- The delinquent tax **debt** (not the property) was sold to speculative buyers interested in making money from collecting the debt (not owning the property). **This left the property in a state of limbo with no clear path to responsible ownership.**
- The tax delinquent **property** (not the debt) was offered at a public auction and sold to speculative buyers who did not understand the local market, or the funding needed to get the property in livable conditions. **This left the property in a state of limbo with no clear path to responsible ownership.**
- The tax delinquent **property** (not the debt) was offered at a public auction but had no interested parties. The property then defaulted to local government with no clear title which **left the property in a state of limbo with no clear path to responsible ownership** until the next public auction.

Every state and local jurisdiction had (and still has) different laws guiding delinquent property tax enforcement but they shared one thing in common: their broken enforcement processes resulted in a large inventory of vacant and abandoned property lacking clear title and no responsible owner.¹³

They needed a new tool that provided easy, affordable access to this inventory of VAD property and removed key barriers to reuse for community needs, such as for affordable housing. This required changes to state law to empower a new entity—a land bank—with the ability to extinguish public debt or liens to get clear and marketable title, and the flexibility to sell property not for the highest bid but for the best community outcome.

In the early days of land banking, vacant property issues were associated with legacy cities that had experienced significant population loss due to factors like white flight, loss of industry, deteriorating housing stock, and the early effects of the mortgage foreclosure crisis. The first generation of land banks included the cities of St. Louis, Louisville, Atlanta, Cleveland, and Flint.

Early land bank laws enabled local governments to create land banks, provided limited cost-effective access to tax-foreclosed properties, and offered flexibility in property sales.



¹² Graziani, *Reimagine Delinquent Property Tax Enforcement*.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Great Recession Creates More VAD Properties and More Land Banks

When the mortgage foreclosure crisis fully took hold, many more communities faced the Great Recession's impacts. VAD properties were not just a legacy city issue anymore. Mortgage foreclosure proceedings created many more vacant and abandoned properties, with some defaulting to the lender and being sold to the highest bidder, while others became "zombie properties" with no responsible owner and incomplete foreclosure proceedings.¹⁴ Most of these VAD properties were also tax delinquent, becoming stuck in broken, inequitable delinquent property tax enforcement processes.

In response, more states passed land bank-enabling legislation. These new land banks could acquire tax-foreclosed properties more cost-effectively, eliminate economic liabilities like unresolved mortgage or other liens, and flexibly transfer properties to responsible owners. This approach encouraged land banks to collaborate with residents to support community goals.

As more states started seeing the benefits of land banks, such as more properties back on the tax rolls, reduced public costs for securing properties and public safety, and stabilized adjacent property values, additional states passed land bank legislation. However, some of these laws lost sight of the problem that land banks were trying to solve. They failed to include easy and cost-effective access to tax-foreclosed properties and/or lacked adequate procedures for obtaining clear title so properties could be transferred to new owners and receive financing.

Uneven Recovery from the Great Recession Brings an Emerging Focus on Racial Equity and Justice

As the United States began to recover from the recession, it became clear that recovery was uneven, with significant concentrations of VAD properties remaining in communities of color. More land banks started to recognize their role in addressing historical disinvestment and racial inequities. Some organized community conversations that compared historical redlining maps of the late 1930s with current maps, illustrating the ongoing impacts of disinvestment and high concentrations of VAD or land bank-owned properties.

The nation was also confronted by the brutal murders of Black and Brown men and women by police, prompting a national reckoning with racism. Like other organizations, more land banks began explicitly discussing their role in addressing racism, focusing on people, policy, and practice. They recognized the need for staff and board members to reflect the communities they serve and acknowledged their responsibility to do more than simply acquire and sell property. More land banks realized they needed to actively combat systemic injustices and racism, using their power as a property owner to benefit communities and people, not exploit them.

¹⁴ "Explaining the Cycle of Systemic Vacancy," Center for Community Progress (blog), August 24, 2023, <https://communityprogress.org/blog/explaining-systemic-vacancy/>.

COVID-19 Pandemic Changes Real Estate Markets and Halts Land Bank Inventory

The pandemic introduced new complexity to the value proposition of land banks. To prevent further displacement of families experiencing hardship, many communities halted the enforcement of delinquent property taxes. This meant a pause in new inventory for land banks. Concurrently, massive changes in real estate markets—driven by remote work and a trend towards living in smaller, less dense communities—led to increased commercial property vacancy and increased housing demand in non-urban areas.

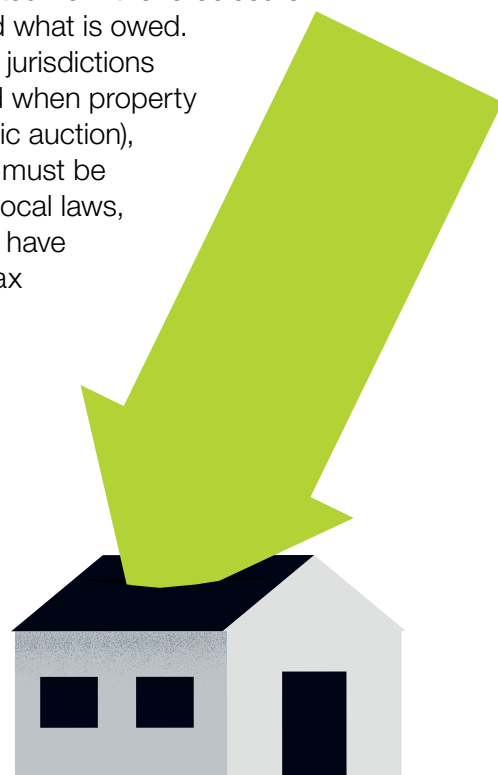
Many land banks took this time to explore their role in addressing other community needs. They recognized the potential of vacant property reuse to tackle issues like creating affordable housing, supportive housing, and community spaces. This also emphasized the need for diverse partnerships, therefore more land banks began working with local governments, health and housing agencies, and social service providers to advocate for and utilize American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds.¹⁵

In communities where elected leaders saw this once in a lifetime infusion of federal funding as an opportunity for transformation rather than merely filling budget gaps, land banks became trusted, capable partners. Despite a pause on new inventory, land banks leveraged existing inventory to advance affordable housing development; secure and rehabilitate vacant residential and commercial properties; demolish or deconstruct harmful structures; remediate environmental liabilities; and reuse vacant land for stormwater mitigation, food production, and renewable energy. Some land banks even used a small portion of their ARPA funding to scale up activities by expanding staff, partnering with workforce training and apprenticeship programs, and investing in data and technology improvements.

Tyler v. Hennepin Ruling Brings Even More Uncertainty on Future Land Bank Inventory

In May 2023, the United States Supreme Court ruling in *Tyler v. Hennepin County* created another level of uncertainty for land banks, especially those working in states with strict property tax foreclosure laws.¹⁶ Strict foreclosure laws allow local governments enforcing unpaid property taxes to foreclose on the property and then either take direct title to the property or transfer it to a municipality or a land bank without a public sale or auction.

While many properties land banks acquire through the tax foreclosure process are “underwater”—meaning the amount of unpaid taxes, interest, fees, costs, and other public liens exceed property value—the *Tyler* ruling mandates that former owners have an opportunity to recover any surplus generated from the foreclosure proceeding beyond what is owed. As states and local jurisdictions determine how and when property is valued (e.g., public auction), and what changes must be made in state and local laws, many communities have continued to limit tax foreclosures.



¹⁵ “ARPA SLFRF Update: Interim Rule Expands Eligible Uses,” Center for Community Progress (blog), October 12, 2023, <https://communityprogress.org/blog/arpa-slfrf-interim-final-rule/>.

¹⁶ *Tyler v. Hennepin Cnty.*, 598 U.S. 631(2023) <https://plus.lexis.com/api/document/collection/cases/id/689R-75K1-FGCG-S4NR-00000-00?cite=598%20U.S.%20631&context=1530671>.

Land Banking Today

Shaped by their evolving challenges, the field of land banking is stronger than ever. In their early days, most land banks were primarily tasked with acquiring harmful, tax-delinquent VAD properties to get them back on the tax rolls under new ownership. Today, land banks are increasingly recognized as transformational entities central to community and economic development, helping achieve local goals of equity, inclusion, resilience, and justice.

The growing awareness of racial injustices and systemic inequities, shortage of quality affordable housing, and impacts of climate change have prompted land banks to evaluate their legal powers, responsibilities, and partnerships. Legal challenges, such as the *Tyler* decision, and a highly competitive housing market have further complicated land banks' ability to acquire properties through tax foreclosure.¹⁷ While private market interest may seem like a positive development, many communities, particularly communities of color, remain excluded and/or displaced as a result.

The role of many land banks in this environment is vital, even if there are fewer properties entering their inventory. Land banks that continue to evolve to meet their communities' needs are integral and trusted partners that work with and for the residents most impacted by disinvestment. In smaller and rural areas, land banks are often the only entities focused on community and economic development, making them essential for future growth.

In several states, land banking is flourishing thanks to strong statewide land bank associations that advocate for the field's importance. These associations leverage the collective power of their member land banks to push for new legal powers and funding in local and state legislation, enabling land banks to better respond to these evolving challenges. Land banks are stepping up, collaborating with local government and community partners to respond to timely community needs.

With 18 states and Puerto Rico having passed land bank-enabling legislation, and even more local communities creating land banks under home rule or creating new programs that creatively utilize existing local government powers, the field continues to thrive.¹⁸ We encourage each of the more than 300 land banks and land banking programs out there to keep fighting systemic vacancy and disinvestment. At the same time, it is crucial to periodically reflect on your work to ensure you are making the greatest impact for the people you serve.

Ask yourself:

1. **What are the greatest challenges your community faces?**
2. **Does your land bank possess the right legal powers, resources, and commitment to tackle the most critical challenges effectively?**
3. **Is there an accessible inventory of properties to address those challenges?**
4. **If not, should the land bank take responsibility for addressing this challenge, or is another partner better suited?**
5. **How do you define success and who benefits most from the land bank's efforts? Who might be overlooked?**

¹⁷ For a deeper dive on *Tyler v. Hennepin County*, see page 54.

¹⁸ "National Land Bank Map," Center for Community Progress, last updated February 2024, <https://communityprogress.org/resources/land-banks/national-land-bank-map/>.

Every community will answer these questions differently, but if you do not continuously ask, land banks will not continue to evolve. Without asking these questions and having honest discussions about the effectiveness and equity of our work, true transformation is not possible. History shows that while many land banks have evolved, some remain stuck as primarily transactional entities. Change is possible, and we must continue to challenge ourselves and others to improve.

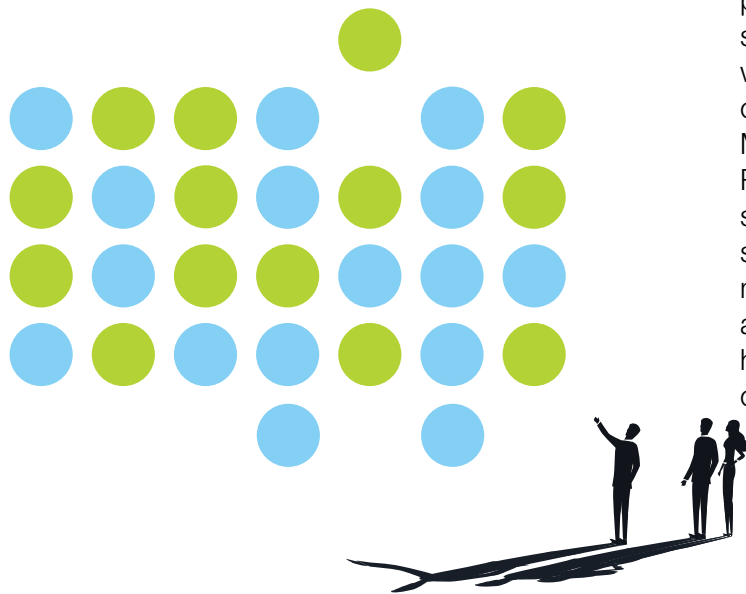
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Section II

2023 State of Land Banking Survey Results

The National Land Bank Network is committed to supporting the field, particularly through data that guides decision-making. The following section provides an overview of the 2023 State of Land Banking Survey, with insights from 112 land banks. This provides a deeper understanding of their operations, priorities, opportunities, and challenges. Survey responses are further enriched by NLBN's ongoing work with land banks nationwide.



Survey Methodology

The State of Land Banking Survey is the only source of comprehensive data on the land banking field. To date, NLBN has administered online surveys in 2021 and 2023. This publication focuses on the 2023 survey. The survey, sent via email to all known land banks and land banking programs, comprised 66 questions including multiple choice, required checkbox responses, and open-ended questions for voluntary input. For a detailed look at the quantitative results, visit the survey dashboard.¹⁹

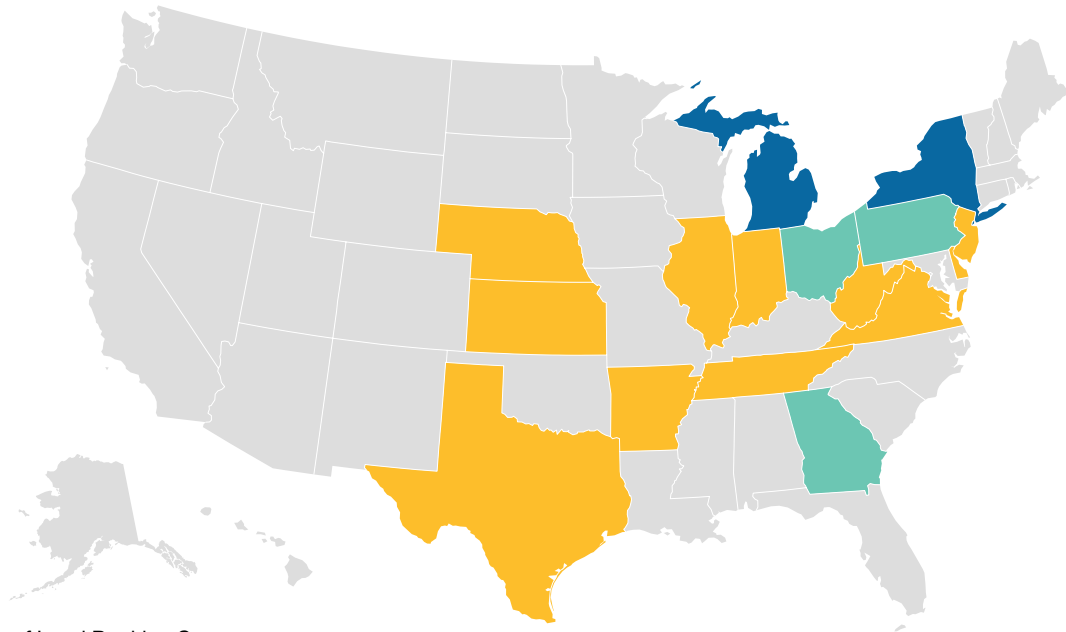
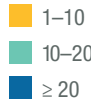
Survey Respondents

A total of 112 land banks responded to the survey, representing roughly one-third of the field. To provide a fuller picture, we supplemented the survey data with insights from our ongoing work with land banks and our publication advisory committee of land bank leaders from Georgia, Michigan, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Responses came from a diverse mix of rural, suburban, and urban communities across 15 states, covering stronger and weaker housing markets, and service areas at the regional, county, and municipal levels. This diversity highlights how land banks have adapted to meet different community needs.

¹⁹ "State of Land Banking Survey Dashboard," Center for Community Progress, accessed October 9, 2024, <https://communityprogress.org/land-bank-survey/>.

Map of Survey Respondents

Count of Respondents



n = 112

Source: 2023 State of Land Banking Survey, Center for Community Progress

OPPORTUNITY

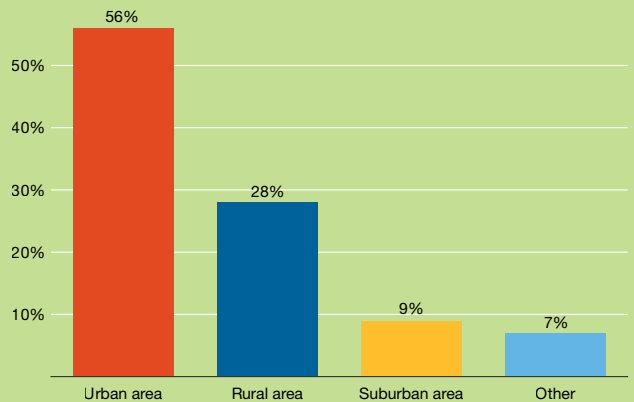
Rural Land Bank Learning Exchange

Twenty-eight percent of survey respondents stated that most of their inventory is in rural areas (i.e., population less than 50,000). This highlights a growing group of land banks in rural communities that are often overlooked in the national context.

In 2024, NLBN launched the Rural Land Bank Learning Exchange (RLBLE) to support the unique challenges and opportunities of land banks in rural areas with limited resources. A competitive program, RLBLE selects land banks operating in communities with under 50,000 people to participate in customized learning and networking events, both in-person and virtual. In 2024, participants were from Allegany County, New York; Chautauqua County, New York; Marquette County, Michigan; Thomasville-Thomas County, Georgia; and Charleston, Nitro, and the statewide land bank from West Virginia.

During the in-person convening in Charleston, West Virginia, participants discussed strategies for building affordable single- and multifamily housing, enforcing compliance with absentee landlords, aligning priorities and policies with community goals, and increasing funding through expanded outreach and relationship building. Based on the positive impact from RLBLE participants, NLBN aims to secure funding to continue this program.

Location of Land Bank Inventory



n = 87

Source: 2023 State of Land Banking Survey, Center for Community Progress

Operations

The first section of survey results and our experience in the field reveals that land banks' operations are shaped and often constrained by several factors: the legal powers granted by state-enabling legislation, available inventory, staffing levels, partnerships, and funding adequacy.

LAND BANK OPERATIONS COVERED IN THIS SECTION

- Legal Powers
- Inventory
- Staff and Boards
- Partnerships
- Funding

1 LEGAL POWERS

Nearly all survey respondents (96%) were from states with state-enabling land bank legislation, which grants land banks unique legal powers that set them apart from other nonprofits or for-profit entities. These powers include access to a cost-effective pipeline of property through delinquent tax enforcement, the ability to hold property tax-exempt, efficient direct transfers of surplus property from local government, and the ability to extinguish delinquent taxes and other public liens to get clear and marketable title.

Most land bank laws allow tremendous flexibility in how properties are sold—for the best community outcome rather than the highest bid—which also makes them unique to most local governments. Many of the 18 states with land bank legislation also allow a land bank to generate funding by collecting a portion of delinquent property taxes or recapturing a portion of future tax revenue for properties sold by the land bank.²⁰



²⁰ A sample template for land bank legislation can be found in Alexander, *Land Banks and Land Banking, 2nd ed.*, Appendix D.

Essential Powers of Land Banks

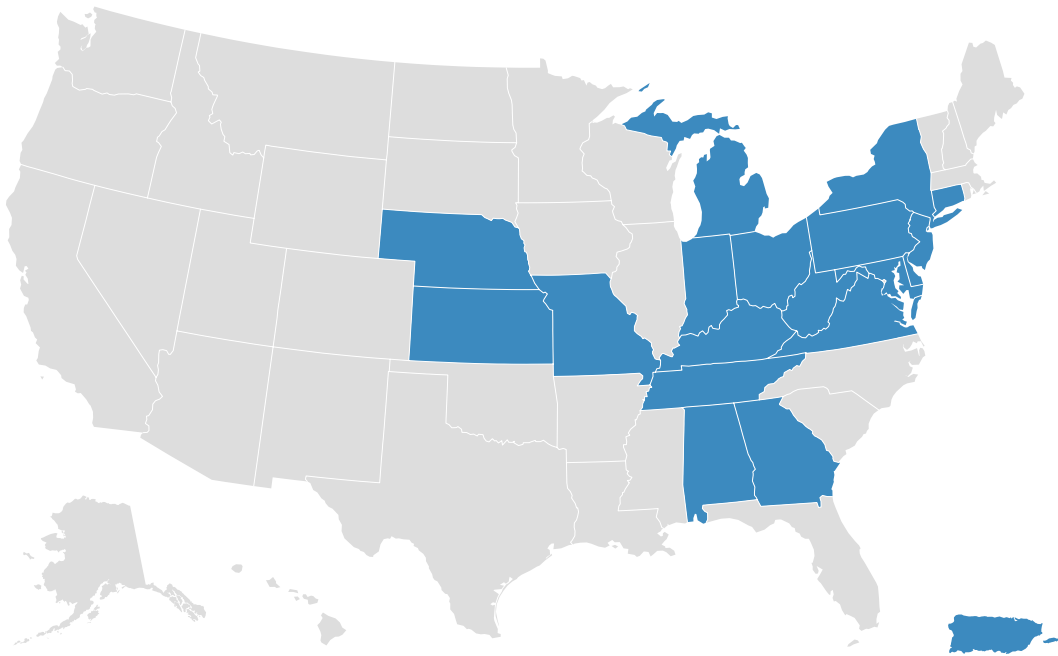
What are the key land bank powers included in the most effective state legislation?

- Acquire tax-foreclosed property cost-effectively
- Efficient direct transfers from local government
- Ability to extinguish delinquent taxes, public liens, and get clear, marketable title
- Hold property tax-exempt
- Flexibly sell property to a responsible buyer or developer, driven not by the highest price but by the outcome that most closely aligns with community goals
- Generate and collect revenue from delinquent property taxes, property tax recapture, or other funding mechanisms

Understand Your Community's Inventory of VAD Properties and Land Bank Legal Powers

It is crucial to understand your community's inventory of VAD properties and determine whether your land bank has the legal powers to intervene effectively. For example, if properties are not tax delinquent, your land bank may not be the best tool since the primary pipeline for most land banks is through delinquent tax enforcement. Similarly, if your community has few VAD properties, then determine the specific property or community challenges and whether local government, nonprofits, and other existing partners address these challenges. Regularly ask: What problem is my land bank trying to solve, and what do I bring to the table that is unique?

18 States and Puerto Rico Have Land-Bank Enabling Legislation



Note: As of August 2024

Source: Center for Community Progress

SPOTLIGHT

State Land Bank Associations Harness their Collective Power and Advocate for Improvements in Land Bank Laws

Even with the strongest state-enabling land bank legislation, challenges can arise during implementation. Over the years, state land bank associations have effectively advocated for legislative reforms to their state's land bank legislation that enhance their member land banks' powers and resources. Examples include:

- **Expediting Property Transfers:** Speeding the transfer of VAD properties (and ensuring delinquent taxes and public liens are extinguished) in the tax foreclosure process (Pennsylvania, Ohio)
- **Conservatorship:** Empowering land banks to seek conservatorship of VAD properties to bring them into code compliance (Pennsylvania)
- **Automatic Property Tax Exemption:** Allowing land banks to automatically hold property tax-exempt while working to return it to private tax rolls (Ohio)
- **Political Subdivision Immunity:** Granting land banks, like other government entities, immunity from ordinary negligence claims in the conduct of land banking work (Ohio)
- **Agency Role:** Allowing land banks to act as a local government agent for blight remediation and public safety concerns, like boarding properties up and mowing (Ohio)
- **Subsidiary Creation:** Allowing land banks to create subsidiaries for projects to limit potential liability impact, with subsidiary real estate remaining tax-exempt (New York)



Credit: Center for Community Progress

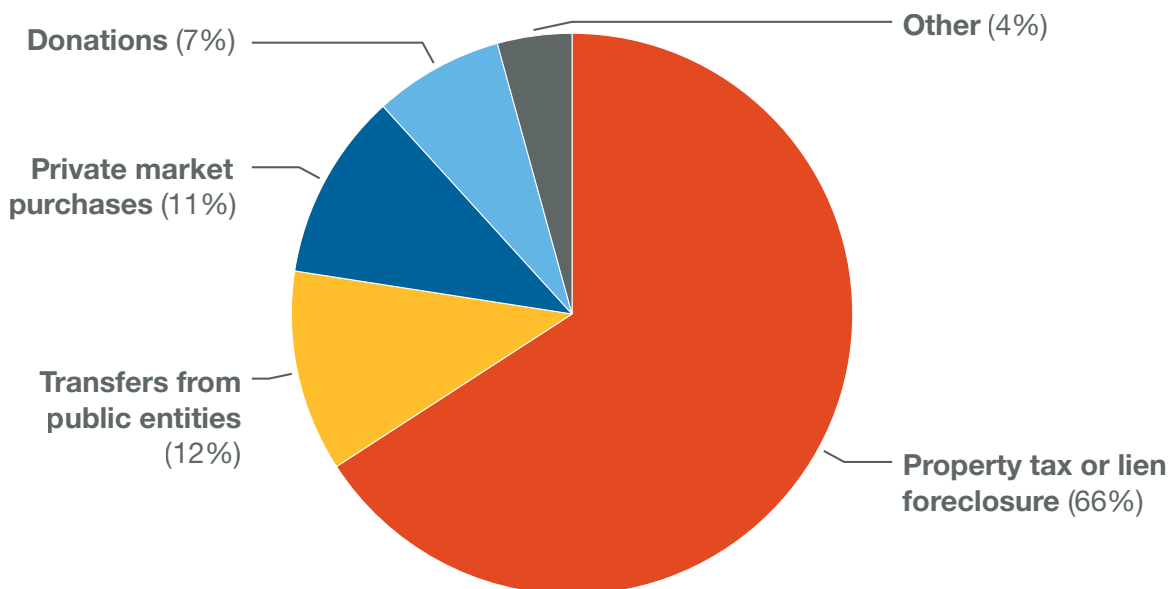
2 INVENTORY

Most land banks have relatively small inventories, with over half (53%) of land banks owning 30 properties or fewer. Vacant land with no structures comprises the significant majority (86%) of land bank inventory, likely the result of demolition. The delinquent tax enforcement process is still the primary pipeline of properties to land banks, although the availability of properties through tax foreclosures has decreased over the past two years from 80% to 66%. The remaining 34% of properties come from local government transfers (surplus publicly owned inventory), donations, and direct market purchases. A few land banks also reported acquiring properties through receivership or conservatorship, a legal process where a court appoints a receiver (like a land bank) to manage and oversee a vacant or abandoned property, usually tax-current properties creating health and public safety concerns.

Technology for Inventory Management

Just as the field of land banking has evolved over the last decade, so have the methods for mapping, managing, and marketing properties. Land banks have better options for inventory management for both staff and the public, streamlined applications and disposition processes, and can import data from other critical sources (like housing and building code enforcement, delinquent property tax collections, and neighborhood plans) to help make more strategic decisions. In fact, 64% of land bank respondents reported they have the necessary data and software to identify VAD properties in their community and manage their inventory from providers like ePropertyPlus, Property Profile System, ReGrid, Salesforce, and Tolemi.

Where Land Bank Inventory Comes From



n = 70

Source: 2023 State of Land Banking Survey, Center for Community Progress

3 STAFF AND BOARDS

Land bank staff varies significantly based on inventory and community needs. More than half of survey respondents (57%) reported having only one full-time staff person or less. These staff members often split their time and responsibilities with local government or other organizations (contingent on state land bank legislation). Some land banks outsource tasks like property maintenance and accounting/payroll. But regardless of whether staff is in-house or outsourced, land bank staff should build trust with residents, empathize with the challenges the community faces, understand the property acquisition and transaction processes, and be entrepreneurial in their operations and programming.

All land banks are governed by a board of directors, the appointment and composition of which is contingent on state law and local ordinance. According to the survey, most land banks have an average of seven board members who provide oversight and support to staff on mission and strategy, financial and administrative policies, fundraising and resource allocation, and community partnerships. Board members should be committed to inclusivity and transparency and have expertise in areas such as real estate, community and economic development, delinquent property tax enforcement, local government, fund development, and resident engagement.

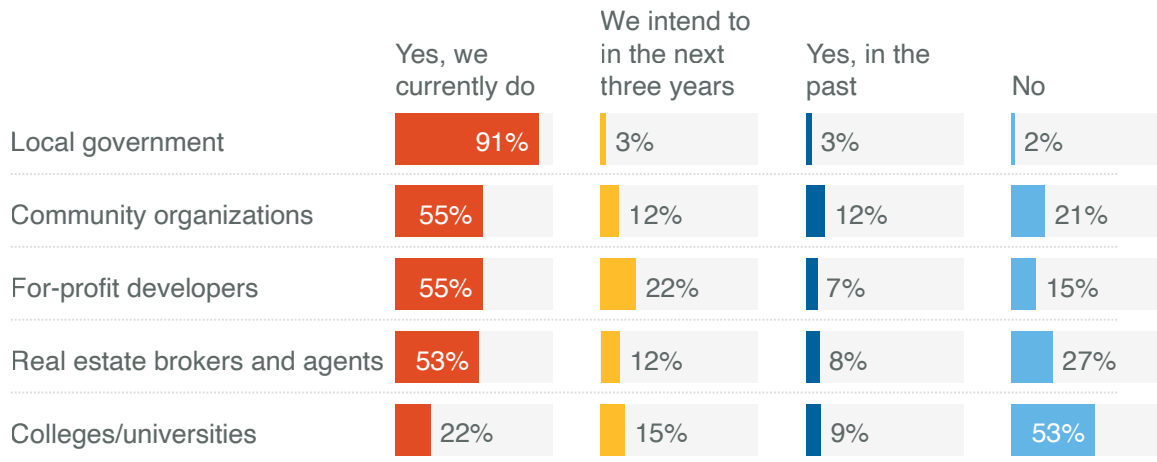
4 PARTNERSHIPS

Land banks of all sizes leverage additional capacity through resourceful partnerships with residents, local governments, nonprofit and community-based organizations, and private financial and philanthropic entities. One of the biggest mistakes among newer land banks is creating the expectation that the land bank alone will solve all their community's problems.

Utilizing and compensating residents to take on tasks like conducting community property inventories and community engagement has proven successful for some land banks. This approach not only builds capacity but also fosters trust within the communities they serve.



Entities Land Banks Commonly Partner With



n = 89

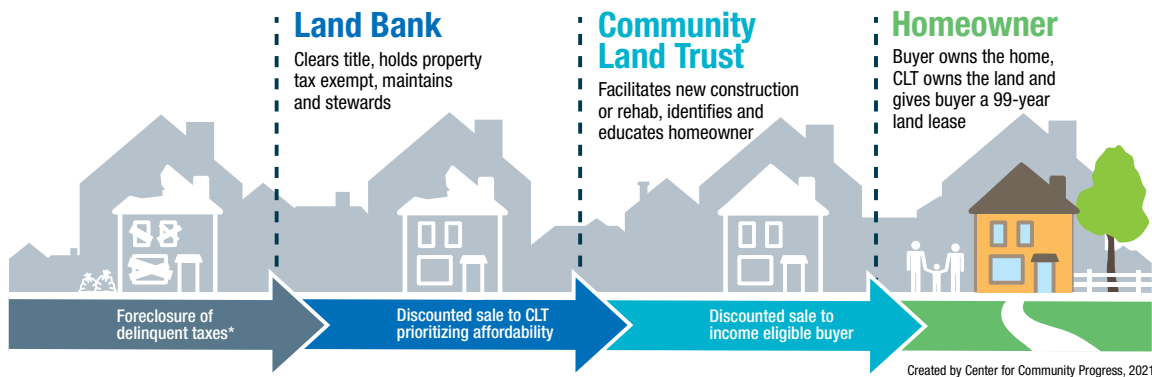
Source: 2023 State of Land Banking Survey, Center for Community Progress

Advice from the Field on Building Longstanding Partnerships

Whether focusing on preventing VAD properties or creating community-informed policies addressing racism and gentrification, land banks have embraced the inevitable conclusion they are simply one tool in a much larger toolbox that addresses the systemic challenges facing too many communities. Land banks that have partnered with various government, community, nonprofit, and private financial partners shared the following best practices:

- 1. Move the conversation beyond the technical details** and be clear about the goals you wish to accomplish through the partnership and why the work matters to your organization. The ultimate goal is not the partnership itself, but the greater impact than what each organization could achieve alone.
- 2. Identify what is unique about each organization** (mission, purpose, legal powers) and how to leverage it for the best outcomes. Understanding what each organization can (and cannot) bring to the table is important.
- 3. Acknowledge the mutual constraints and challenges**, like capacity and funding, of each organization. While they can potentially be overcome, contemplate them up front and throughout the partnership.
- 4. Understand that partnerships are based on relationships** that take time, ongoing work, and radical honesty. Having each other's back in times of turbulence makes this work worth the effort.

How a Land Bank and CLT Can Partner²¹



* While property tax and lien enforcement processes are the most common method, dependent on state law, land banks may also acquire properties through a variety of mechanisms such as governmental transfer, donation, property swap, and private market purchase.

Source: Progress Points: Land Banks and Community Land Trusts
Graphic © Center for Community Progress

OPPORTUNITY

Emerging Partnerships Between Land Banks and Community Land Trusts

Land banks and community land trusts (CLTs) working together is one example of an emerging partnership model²² creating a pipeline of vacant properties into quality affordable housing for current and future generations. Given the special powers granted by state-enabling legislation, land banks can more flexibly and efficiently acquire and sell VAD properties than other governmental or nonprofit entities.

Many communities have identified long-term affordable housing as a key need, creating an ideal opportunity for land banks to prioritize transferring property to CLTs at a discounted price. When a land bank sells property to a CLT, the property's title and ownership stays with the CLT, and new homeowners are offered a long-term lease (often 99 years). This ensures lasting affordability by placing restrictions on the resale price while providing a portion of earned equity (usually 25%) to the CLT homeowner.

Albany, New York; Atlanta, Georgia; and Columbus and Franklin County, Ohio are pioneering models of land bank and CLT partnerships that stabilize neighborhoods and prevent displacement of vulnerable residents.²³ In some communities, land banks and CLTs collaborate beyond a property sale and formalize partnerships to identify and develop properties to support mutual goals. Some land banks prioritize CLTs as transferees for their properties or have created subsidiaries to operate a CLT for a more seamless transfer of properties.²⁴

²¹ "Progress Points: Land Banks and Community Land Trusts," Center for Community Progress, <https://communityprogress.org/publications/land-banks-and-community-land-trusts>.

²² "National Land Bank + CLT Map," Center for Community Progress, last updated August 21, 2023, <https://communityprogress.org/resources/land-banks/national-lb-clt-map/>.

²³ Kim Graziani, *Land Banks and Community Land Trusts: Partnering to Provide Equitable Housing Opportunities Now and for Future Generations* (Center for Community Progress, 2021), <https://communityprogress.org/publications/land-banks-and-community-land-trusts/>.

²⁴ For more information, see: "Sample Land Bank Long-Term Housing Affordability Disposition Policy: A Resource for Land Banks and Their Community Land Trust Partners" (Center for Community Progress, 2024), <https://communityprogress.org/publications/sample-long-term-housing-affordability-disposition-policy/>.

5 FUNDING

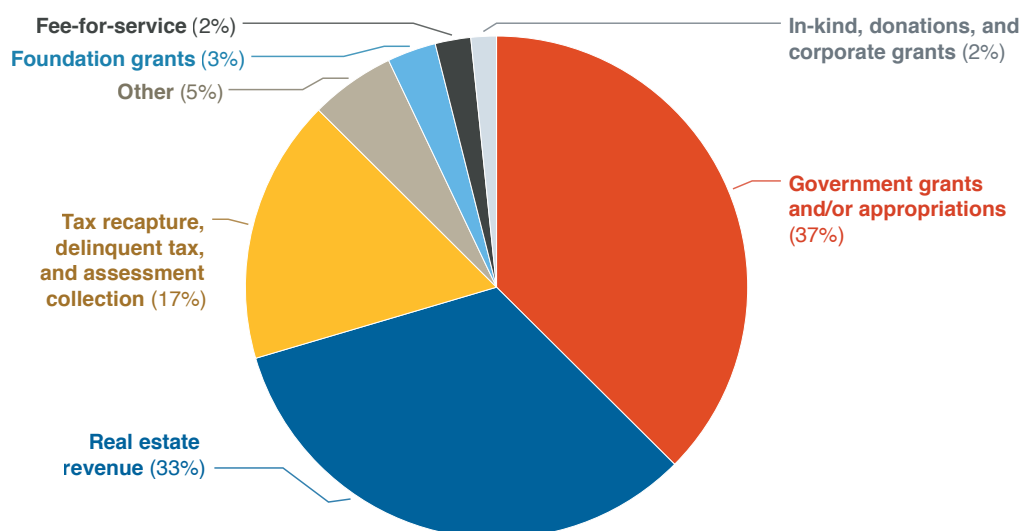
The most common funding sources for land banks are from local government (37%), property sales (33%), a percentage of delinquent property tax collection and/or future tax revenue (17%), and philanthropic or corporate grants and donations (10%). **Due to the nature of VAD property inventory and the end uses land banks prioritize; public and private subsidies and additional sources of financial support are always needed to supplement property sales.**

The properties land banks acquire have been rejected by the private market for a reason. They have typically cycled through multiple tax sales and continued depreciating in value and condition, therefore needing more repairs (than what the property might be worth) before they can be sold to new responsible owners and put back on the tax rolls. When land banks become responsible land stewards, they help local governments save taxpayer dollars, increase the tax base, and stabilize adjacent property values. Therefore,

the most effective land banks have predictable, recurring, and flexible funding commitments and direct support from their local government partners.

It seems illogical for an entity to take ownership and responsibility of VAD properties considering the tremendous financial, political, and community liabilities. But someone must. Passing the responsibility to the next mayor or county commissioner or the next budget cycle harms residents. Elected officials face public pressure to act. When a constituent calls about a property posing a public safety threat to their children, the response cannot be, “Sorry, we can’t do anything because we don’t own it.” While local government does not own the property, they do own the problem and the responsibility for the community’s well-being.

Where Land Banks Get Their Funding



n = 87

Source: 2023 State of Land Banking Survey, Center for Community Progress

SPOTLIGHT

The Return on Investment Proves Land Banks' Worth

To secure more public and private funding, land banks must tell effective stories that demonstrate their impact.

While their core work relies on public support and subsidies, land banks do provide a return on that investment—often beyond financial returns. Through annual reports, testimonies, and resident-narrated videos, land banks can show their impact: parks on former illegal dumping sites; first-time homebuyers who can now build generational wealth; and vibrant places like urban gardens, new houses, and new businesses all reusing formerly vacant spaces.²⁵

These stories highlight land banks' ability to go beyond property transfers and leverage their power and relationships to drive change that residents think might be impossible.

To demonstrate financial returns, calculate the public cost savings for a few properties the land bank has transformed. By comparing public costs prior to acquisition—like lost tax revenue, cost to send police and fire to respond to complaints, and lost equity of adjacent homeowners—to the investment in the property, increased tax revenue to the municipality, and stabilized or increased property values, land banks can make a strong case for their value.²⁶

Positive Impacts of Land Banks



²⁵ Selected examples of compelling land bank impacts include: "Building Neighborhoods," Lucas County Land Bank (video), April 4, 2024, <https://lucascountylandbank.org/news/building-neighborhoods-video>; *A Decade of Progress: Celebrating 10 Years of Land Banking in New York* (Center for Community Progress, 2023), <https://communityprogress.org/publications/a-decade-of-progress-new-york-land-banks/>; "Cuyahoga Land Bank Celebrates 15 Years of Impactful Work: Giving Buildings, Homes & Spaces New Life – Part I," Cuyahoga Land Bank (blog), August 20, 2024, <https://cuyahogalandbank.org/15-years-of-impactful-work-part-i/>; and *Quantitative & Qualitative Impact Assessment of Land Bank Activity in Michigan: With Case Study Applications in Benzie, Calhoun and Kalamazoo Counties* (Michigan Association of Land Banks, 2018), https://milandbank.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Final_Reduced-Size.pdf.

²⁶ "Progress Points: Demonstrating the Positive Impacts of Land Banks," (Center for Community Progress, 2022), <https://communityprogress.org/publications/progress-points-land-bank-impact/>.

New York land banks have returned \$135M assessed value to the tax rolls²⁷



Credit: Center for Community Progress



Credit: Detroit Land Bank Authority

The median sale price increased 11.5% and the mortgage rate increased 5.6% per year where the Detroit Land Bank renovated homes through the Rehabbed and Ready program²⁸

Saginaw County Land Bank's removal of 884 vacant and blighted homes helped reduce major crime in Saginaw by 20%²⁹



Credit: Center for Community Progress

²⁷ *A Decade of Progress*, (New York Land Bank Association, 2023).

²⁸ "Michigan Land Banks: Addressing Problem Properties to Serve Community Goals," (Center for Community Progress, 2022), <https://communityprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Progress-Points-MI-Land-Banks-2023.pdf>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

B

SURVEY RESULTS

Priorities

The second section of survey results and our experience in the field reveals that land bank priorities have shifted over the years. Land banks are using limited resources to meet their communities' evolving needs by prioritizing: affordable housing, vacant land stewardship, rehabs, brownfields, and commercial vacancy.

LAND BANK PRIORITIES COVERED IN THIS SECTION

- Affordable Housing
- Vacant Land Stewardship
- Rehabs
- Brownfields
- Commercial Vacancy

One of the most significant changes is that land banks are doing fewer demolitions and “blight” removal and instead taking a more active role in developing affordable housing and facilitating rehabs. More land banks are also developing strategies to address vacant land, which makes up the bulk of land bank inventory. Additionally, more land banks are expanding their scope beyond residential development to include brownfields and commercial vacancy, showcasing their flexibility and responsiveness to current challenges.

1 AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Quality affordable housing was a top priority for 81% of land banks. The housing need encompasses new construction, rehab, single-family homeownership, and multi-family rental. Most land banks can only accomplish this through creative partnerships, from basic property sales to affordable housing developers to formal collaborations where land banks serve as a developer or co-developer with another entity.³⁰

Rising rents and a lack of affordable housing have worsened housing security in spite of a strong labor market and rising wages. Land banks are stepping up to partner with agencies to provide land to develop safe, quality affordable housing.

81% of land bank respondents stated that quality affordable housing was one of their top priorities.

³⁰ See page 24 for details on land banks and CLT partnerships and examples of policies to support long-term affordability.



SPOTLIGHT

CHATHAM/SAVANNAH COUNTY LAND BANK AUTHORITY, GEORGIA

Pathways to End Homelessness

As more land banks prioritize affordable housing, the Chatham/Savannah County Land Bank Authority, led by Alison Goldey, is setting a high bar.³¹

Homelessness is directly related to the lack of affordable housing, and there is a huge need in Savannah given approximately 40% of households are unable to afford quality housing.³² The land bank is a key partner in the Cottages at Dundee, which comprises 39 small, furnished homes for families transitioning out of homelessness. The homes range from 164 to 240 square feet and rent, including utilities, averages \$500 per month. Residents also have access to permanent supportive services.

Utilizing the Savannah Affordable Housing Trust Fund and other resources, this project was created through a partnership between the land bank, the City of Savannah, Community Housing Services Agency, Inc. (CHSA), CHSA Development, Inc., and the Chatham-Savannah Authority for the Homeless.

Each partner leveraged their unique strengths. Given the land bank's ability to be a flexible, responsible, and tax-exempt land steward, the City used its Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) funding to install infrastructure on a 3.5 acres land parcel it owned before transferring the property to the land bank.³³ The land bank then provided a long-term ground lease to the nonprofit, CHSA Development, Inc., which used the Affordable Housing Trust Fund and its own



Credit: Chatham-Savannah Authority for the Homeless (Facebook)

resources to construct the 39 homes, caretaker house, and resident services building. The Chatham-Savannah Authority for the Homeless is fundraising to purchase and manage the completed development and will assume the long-term ground lease from the land bank. Because the land will remain in land bank ownership, the City is expected to help maintain the public infrastructure and support ongoing utility and operating costs.

The project has had incredible local support and compassion from Savannah's mayor, city council, city manager, nonprofits, and the community.³⁴ The Cottages build upon the completion of the adjacent Cove at Dundee, a community containing 47 tiny homes. Both communities are successful examples of true housing-first initiatives, prioritizing permanent housing for families and individuals with low barriers.

This partnership is a model for cities dealing with homelessness. Anita Smith-Dixon, Executive Director of CHSA explained that collaboration and a shared vision are essential: "Together we can make this happen. Think about the end result and how it will impact lives, take the egos out of it, and when one partner is successful, you all win."³⁵

³¹ The land bank has implemented guidelines to ensure at least 50% of land bank properties stay affordable for buyers at or below 80% area median income (AMI) for at least 10 years. Christian Felt, "Land Bank Authority adopts new guidelines ensuring properties stay affordable," Fox 28 Savannah, August 12, 2022, <https://fox28savannah.com/news/local/land-bank-authority-adopts-new-guidelines-properties-affordable-savannah-chatham-alison-goldey>.

³² Ibid.

³³ For more information on SPLOST, as well as its allocation of \$10 million to the land bank for acquisitions, please visit: <https://www.savannahga.gov/2568/Your-SPLOST-Penny-at-Work>.

³⁴ "Housing Savannah Taskforce Action Plan," City of Savannah, <https://www.savannahga.gov/3117/Housing-Savannah-Taskforce>.

³⁵ Conversation with author on May 20, 2024.

NEWARK LAND BANK, NEW JERSEY

Utilizing HUD’s Section 8 Program as a Launch Pad to Affordable Homeownership

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is the largest provider of funding for affordable housing, but compliance requirements deter many organizations, particularly land banks, from applying. However, seeing the potential to transform vacant and abandoned homes into quality, affordable homeownership opportunities, the Newark Land Bank (NLB, a division of Invest Newark) took on the challenge.

In Newark, the City sells tax liens on tax-delinquent properties through an auction. Tax liens that do not sell default to the City, which then forecloses on them and takes ownership. The Newark Economic Housing and Development (EHD) department manages this portfolio of publicly owned properties and transfers some of them to NLB at no cost. NLB conducts the necessary legal work to ensure clear title and then rehabilitates the single-family properties for their Section 8 Homeownership conversion program.³⁶

Less than a quarter of Newark residents own their home, which is why NLB prioritized homeownership through its disposition processes. NLB worked with the Newark Housing Authority and HUD contractors—which manage HUD’s Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program (formerly known as Section 8) for the City—to sell rehabbed single-family homes to residents who hold HCVs. Recipients are chosen from a lottery of active HCV holders who qualify for a mortgage through the Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America (NACA). The HCV program allows for voucher payments to be applied to a mortgage lender in a comparable way to how they are paid to landlords.

A new type of public-private partnership made this program possible, comprising NLB, the Newark Housing Authority, NACA, the Urban League of Essex County (ULEC), and Local Initiatives Support Corp (LISC). ULEC and LISC provide the new homeowners with mandatory HUD Certified Homeownership Counseling, which helps set them up for successful homeownership and builds their financial capability.

NLB has completed and sold 12 homes to date and hopes to grow the program. “Everyone deserves a home,” said Martha Baez, Senior Vice President of Land Bank Operations at NLB, “Regardless of your circumstances in life.”³⁷



Credit: City of Newark Press Office

³⁶ “Section-8,” Newark Land Bank, <https://landbank.investnewark.org/section-8>.

³⁷ Conversation with author on July 2, 2024.

SPOTLIGHT

BENZIE COUNTY LAND BANK, MICHIGAN

(Home) Stretching Land to Support Rural Multi-Family Affordable Housing

Partnership is essential for rural land banks that have limited capacity, land, and financial resources, and especially for those who recognize the need to support affordable housing that lets residents live closer to where they work.

Benzie County, Michigan is sparsely populated, except for when tourists flock to the area during warmer weather to enjoy Lake Michigan, parks, trails, and nearby Traverse City. While median home values are high given the abundance of seasonal homes, many year-round residents who support the tourism industry cannot afford to live near where they work.

Indeed, a recent regional housing needs assessment revealed that almost 75% of employers reported that housing impacts their ability to attract and retain employees, and expressed their willingness to hire more workers if housing issues were resolved.³⁸ Housing is a workforce development issue, particularly in rural areas where commute times are much higher, and costs associated with gas and childcare make things even more challenging to attain an affordable home.

Michelle Thompson, former Treasurer and Chair of the Benzie County Land Bank, sees the land bank as a flexible tool to help address this need. “Whatever suits the needs of your community, and whenever that land bank has no more projects, you can just put it on the shelf,” Thompson said. “You can pull it off the shelf if you have a project that needs a land bank.”³⁹

One such project occurred when the land bank acquired a vacant building known as the “Question Mark,” a highly visible run-down

building in downtown Honor Village. The land bank demolished the property using funding from the Blight Elimination Program and transferred it to HomeStretch Nonprofit Housing Corporation to develop much needed affordable, multifamily housing.⁴⁰

HomeStretch Executive Director Jon Stimson quickly saw the potential. Acknowledging the difficulties in obtaining entitlements and procuring capital, HomeStretch and the land bank entered into a purchase agreement for one dollar, but the deed would be held in escrow until the nonprofit could demonstrate a sufficient funding threshold of \$1,275,000.00. The one-year agreement had to be extended for another year and finally, in May 2021, a Warranty Deed was issued to HomeStretch.

With funding from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) and a Federal Home Loan Bank Affordable Housing Program grant, HomeStretch built Honor Village Apartments, eight new units of rental housing affordable to individuals and families between 30-80% AMI. Despite supply chain issues and higher costs due to the pandemic, HomeStretch delivered the units at only \$200,000 each, attributed to their status as a general contractor, access to tax-free materials, a small developer fee, and a commitment to delivering housing over profits.

While eight units of rental housing may not seem like much, it makes a difference in a rural community where residents on average commute 200 miles per day. The savings on gas, childcare, and energy costs add up to a dramatic difference in these families’ lives.

³⁸ *Housing Needs Assessment: Northern Michigan* (Bowen National Research, 2023), <https://www.housingnorth.org/housing-data>.

³⁹ Colin Merry, “Benzie development the mission of land bank authority,” *The Benzie County Record Patriot*, April 11, 2023, <https://www.recordpatriot.com/news/article/benzie-land-bank-turns-blight-development-17889440.php>.

⁴⁰ “Blight Elimination Program,” Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, <https://www.michigan.gov/leo/bureaus-agencies/landbank/requests-for-proposals-and-qualifications/blight-elimination-program>.

2 VACANT LAND STEWARDSHIP

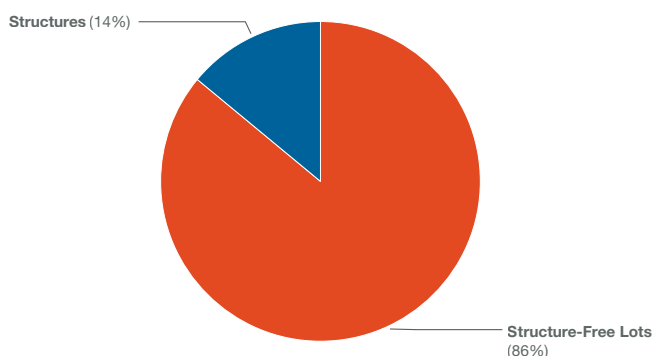
Half (50%) of land bank survey respondents listed vacant land stewardship among their top priorities, due to vacant land with no structures comprising 86% of land bank inventory.⁴¹

Much of this vacant land is the result of more than a decade of much-needed federal, state, and local programs allocating funding towards demolitions to address a backlog of condemned structures. While many land banks, local governments, and community partners now recognize the critical need for resources to intervene earlier and rehabilitate these structures before they are too far gone, they must also contend with this huge inventory of vacant land parcels that need ongoing maintenance. Unfortunately, most of these same programs and funders that funded demolition are not interested in funding maintenance.

Studies show simply cleaning and greening vacant lots can decrease gun-related violence by as much as 29%. A 2023 study conducted in Flint, Michigan compared the violent crime density around vacant lots owned by the Genesee County Land Bank Authority (GCLBA) with crime around privately owned vacant lots.⁴² The study found land bank ownership was associated with net declines in both the density of all crime and serious violent crimes over time.

Embodying their entrepreneurial spirit, land banks are increasingly partnering for interim or permanent stewardship to address issues like climate change, food deserts, violence prevention, and the need for community spaces. However, land banks must always make the case to funders for more resources to steward properties and continue being good neighbors.

Land Bank Inventory Breakdown



n = 77

Source: 2023 State of Land Banking Survey, Center for Community Progress

⁴¹ Vacant land stewardship is the comprehensive, long-term, repurposing and maintenance of vacant lots. "Vacant Land Stewardship," Center for Community Progress, <https://communityprogress.org/resources/vacant-land/>.

⁴² Gregory Bushman, Michelle C. Kondo, Laney A. Rupp, Bernadette C. Hohl, Catherine H. Gong, and Marc A. Zimmerman, "Associations between land bank ownership and stewardship of vacant properties and crime, violence, and youth victimization in Flint, MI," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 72, 3-4, (October 17, 2023): 428-442, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12706>.

SPOTLIGHT

ST. LOUIS LAND BANK, MISSOURI

The Nation's Oldest Land Bank Moves Past Demolitions to Address Green Infrastructure

The St. Louis Land Reutilization Authority, part of the St. Louis Development Corporation, is the nation's oldest land bank. They maintain approximately 10,000 parcels of vacant land, the bulk of which are located in North St. Louis, a majority-Black historically disinvested community that still faces high rates of poverty, vacancy, crime, and environmental justice issues.

To help address these issues, the land bank, City of St. Louis, Missouri Department of Conservation, and Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District (MSD) formed the Green City Coalition (GCC). GCC collaborates with nonprofits and residents to convert vacant and abandoned land into community-owned green spaces that promote healthy, biodiverse, resilient neighborhoods.⁴³

One notable GCC program is the Urban Greening Program (UGP), which guides the spending of \$13 million in demolition funding to remove impervious surfaces and reduce combined sewer overflows. MSD provides this funding through the 2012 Consent Decree, which required remediations to Clean Water Act violations.⁴⁴

Building demolitions for UGP are informed by data and community engagement. The Open Space Prioritization Model ranks city blocks based on their stormwater absorption potential. GCC engages residents through participatory mapping and open space planning workshops in high-priority neighborhoods and offers technical assistance to small-scale development projects.

All demolitions are required to meet the City standards, ensuring that no manufactured materials are buried or remain, soil is tested before being delivered to post-demo site, and contractors



Credit: Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District

attend an orientation before being eligible to bid on UGP demos.

To date, over 500 properties have been demolished under these guidelines, with a “green lien” deed restriction placed on them to limit future impervious surface coverage to 50% of the parcel's size. This rarely impacts residential construction and primarily precludes parking lots or large structures. Though if impervious surfaces must exceed the maximum, green infrastructure best practices can be employed to offset the potential loss of water absorption.

GCC is proud to have transformed over 30 acres into community green space like parks, orchards, rain gardens, and pocket prairies.

⁴³ “Urban Greening Program,” Green City Coalition (website), <https://www.greencitycoalition.org/ugp.html>.

⁴⁴ Consent Decree, *U.S. v. Metro. St. Louis Sewer Dist.* (No. 4:07-cv-01120-CEJ, E.D. Mo., April 27, 2019), available at <https://portal.laserfiche.com/Portal/DocView.aspx?id=2193043&repo=r-a96260ce>.

SAGINAW COUNTY LAND BANK, MICHIGAN

Planting Roots with the Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy

Partnering with conservation land trusts is another emerging opportunity for land banks to address vacant land inventories. Also called land conservancies, conservation land trusts are community-based nonprofits that permanently conserve, manage, and/or restore land with natural, recreational, scenic, historical, or agricultural value.⁴⁵ While historically focusing conservation efforts on rural spaces, conservation land trusts are increasingly engaging with urban areas, especially in cities like Saginaw, which has experienced decades of disinvestment and has significant amounts of vacant land.

Maintenance is one of the biggest challenges for land banks with vacant land, often considered the most “unfundable” need. To be good neighbors, land banks have a responsibility to cut grass, remove trash, and clear snow. Yet they must balance this immediate responsibility with longer-term needs such as addressing environmental health impacts like poor air quality and urban heat islands from tree loss. This

“tree inequity” is compounded in historically disinvested communities with fewer resources and more vacant land.

Since 2016, the Saginaw County Land Bank and Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy have been tackling these issues through the Pollinator Project, which has transformed nearly 1,500 vacant lots into wildflower prairies.⁴⁶ This addresses the land bank’s major concern of reducing illegal dumping on their vacant land and the conservancy’s goal of creating more wildflower prairies to support a healthy ecosystem. The project has successfully reduced the land bank’s cost for maintenance and even increased interest from buyers.

The two organizations expanded their collaboration with a formal partnership called the Better Branches Regional Tree Initiative, which focuses on growing trees on vacant land bank lots. This initiative reduces illegal dumping, restores the tree canopy, reduces heat island effects, improves climate resiliency, sequesters carbon and stormwater, and beautifies neighborhoods.



Credit: Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy and Saginaw Valley State University (Facebook)

⁴⁵ Land Trust Alliance, <https://landtrustalliance.org/>.

⁴⁶ “Pollinator Project,” Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy, <https://www.sblc-mi.org/better-branches-test-2-1>.

SPOTLIGHT

NITRO LAND REUSE AGENCY (LAND BANK), WEST VIRGINIA

Transforming a FEMA Buyout Lot to Create a Community Apiary

In Nitro, West Virginia, a small community of 6,000 residents are reimagining their future around sustainability and renewable energy. Mayor Dave Casebolt and City Planner/Land Bank Executive Director Kim Reed led tough and honest discussions with residents about the challenges facing their community, from skyrocketing utility costs and the coal industry's decline, to losing potential deals with major corporations and manufacturers due to West Virginia's lack of commitment to sustainability. Rather than seeing these as setbacks, they saw this as an opportunity to reinvent their community without losing its history.

Nitro became the first municipality in West Virginia to sign a solar power purchase agreement, installing solar panels on the City's public works and public library buildings, sharply reducing utility costs.⁴⁷ They are also working on installing electric vehicle chargers (a rarity in West Virginia) to encourage residents and visitors to make pit stops and patronize local businesses while their cars charge. Additionally, the City used a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant for green infrastructure to demolish a massive, outdated public water building and bomb shelter, and transform it into a permeable paving project.

On a smaller scale, Nitro had a vacant lot—a house on an eroding, flood-prone riverbank—that had been bought out by FEMA due to its lack of structural integrity. The City was interested in the property, due to it being adjacent to the community center, community garden, and its scenic view of the river, but a deed restriction on the property prevented any permanent development. Rather than keep discussions about

the future of the lot behind City Hall's closed doors, Kim Reed asked neighbors what they wanted to see on the lot. One neighbor, an avid beekeeper, proposed a community apiary.

With \$15,000 from the City for the infrastructure of building a shed, fencing, and tools, and \$10,000 of in-kind volunteer stewardship from Clint, the resident beekeeper, and over a dozen residents and local groups, the project took off. The site is now home to an apiary and pollinator garden, and offers workshops on beekeeping, canning, rainwater barrels, and supporting pollinators like the monarch butterfly.⁴⁸

This transformation from a liability to a treasured community asset exemplifies how proactive leadership, engaged residents, and aligned nonprofit partners can make sustainability a reality.

Working with FEMA

Does your community have any FEMA-owned lots? Start with the recorder's office and search for every deed that lists FEMA as the owner. Read the deed restrictions to understand what you can and cannot do on the property in order to save your community time and money. Then, engage your local government as the potential transferee given the requirements for FEMA grants and property transfers.

⁴⁷ Ken Silverstein, "The Dam Has Broken and West Virginia has Awoken to Solar Power," *Forbes*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kensilverstein/2021/05/16/the-dam-has-broken-and-west-virginia-is-waking-up-to-solar-power/>.

⁴⁸ Rachel Pellegrino, "What's all the Buzz about in Nitro? Teaching apiary and pollinator garden opening up," WOWK 13 News, April 17, 2024, <https://www.wowktv.com/news/local/whats-all-the-buzz-about-in-nitro-teaching-apiary-and-pollinator-garden-opening-up/>.

3 REHABS

Many land bank respondents (42%) said property rehabilitation was one of their top priorities. Historically, land banks did more demolition due to available state and federal funding, but today they are increasingly working to stabilize and rehab properties to prevent demolition and create housing opportunities. Land banks can be involved in rehabs through:

- **Creating their own rehab programs** utilizing land bank staff, outsourcing to local contractors, or creating workforce development programs to train and create jobs for residents. For these in-house programs, land banks remain the property owner until the rehab is complete and sold to a new owner.
- **Formalizing partnerships with nonprofit and for-profit organizations** by updating land bank policies to prioritize property disposition to organizations that are committed to and have the resources to complete rehabs. Some land banks have executed memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with nonprofits to collaboratively identify potential properties for land bank acquisition. Whether through disposition policy changes or MOUs, most land banks will discount the sales price if the rehabbed property is sold to a household below a certain area median income (AMI) threshold.

- **Building the capacity of local small-scale developers and residents** interested in rehabbing and living in the property, especially developers and residents of color who have traditionally faced barriers accessing capital and training. Either the property will be rehabbed while it is still owned by land bank or sold directly to a developer or resident who proceeds with the rehab. If the latter, land banks usually include some restrictions on end use and transferee (e.g., affordability threshold, homeownership) to ensure community benefits are maintained.

Land banks play a variety of roles when it comes to property rehabs indicative of the entrepreneurial nature of many land banks in the field.



SPOTLIGHT

TRUMBULL COUNTY LAND BANK, OHIO

Connecting Resident-Driven Community Revitalization with Job Creation

The Trumbull County Land Bank, managed by Trumbull Neighborhood Partnership (TNP) in the Mahoning Valley of Ohio, combines community organizing with land banking to revitalize neighborhoods and ensure residents benefit financially from these investments.

The Building a Better Warren (BABW) program connects the need for resident-driven community revitalization with job creation.⁴⁹ The program offers residents training and full-time, year-round jobs in renovation, deconstruction, landscape installation, and vacant property maintenance. The BABW participants join construction crews for networking and onsite job training, and the rehab and renovation of land bank properties, all at the same time. Program participants build marketable skills and gain long-term employment, all while directly improving their community.

TNP launched BABW in partnership with the land bank and with support from the US Department of Health and Human Services' Community Economic Development program, Chemical Bank, PNC Bank, Habitat for Humanity of the Mahoning Valley, and The John Raymond Wean Foundation.

BABW teams have also been deployed to conduct city-wide parcel surveys to document current housing and land conditions in Warren. These parcel surveys have documented a significant reduction in the number of vacant houses from approximately 1,500 in 2013 to 400 in 2024. While



Credit: Trumbull County Land Bank

historically demolitions have outpaced rehabs and renovations—both nationally and in Ohio—the BABW program and the support it has from the broader community is helping shift that trend.

Matt Martin, Executive Director of TNP, explains the focus on residents: “The key is to have people who are empathetic, have passion for their community, and understand that any anger from residents is not about you, it is about the powerlessness they feel in their neighborhoods and understanding the impacts of community level trauma.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ “Building a Better Warren,” Trumbull Neighborhood Partnership, <https://tnpwarren.org/building-a-better-warren>.

⁵⁰ Conversation with author on April 5, 2024.

TRI-COG LAND BANK, PENNSYLVANIA

Building a Collaborative of Partners Dedicated to Equitable Communities

Once a steel industry hub in the Greater Pittsburgh region, the Mon Valley has faced population loss, increased vacancy and abandonment, and growing inequities since that industry’s decline in the 1980s. The Equitable Communities Collaborative (ECC) was created in 2023 to help address those needs.⁵¹

The partnership unites five organizations—Tri-COG Land Bank (TCLB), City of Bridges Community Land Trust (CBCLT), Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh (RTP), Steel Rivers Council of Governments (SRCOG), and Turtle Creek Valley Council of Governments (TCVCOG)—to focus on stabilizing neighborhoods through coordinated code enforcement, building preservation, problem property remediation, and affordable homeownership.

ECC exemplifies the power of leveraging each organizations’ unique strengths to improve communities:

- SRCOG and TCVCOG’s shared CodeNforce program holds speculators and absentee owners accountable for property maintenance.⁵²
- RTP ensures homeowners have the resources they need to safely remain in their homes through Pennsylvania’s Whole Homes Repair program.⁵³
- TCLB acquires long-abandoned, harmful properties and gets them clear title for new responsible ownership.
- RTP and CBCLT rehab existing structures and construct new homes.
- CBCLT keeps these homes affordable for generations to come.

Below is an example of how ECC is working the full spectrum, from vacancy prevention to permanent affordable homeownership.

	WITH ECC	WITHOUT ECC
Acquisition	\$5,000 (through tax sale, extinguished back taxes, and clear title)	\$15,000 (upset bid at tax sale, including back taxes and public costs)
Holding Costs	\$1,500 (tax exempt, volunteer cleanout)	\$3,000 (taxes, minimal clean out)
Renovation	\$150,000 (full rehab)	\$50,000 (minimal repairs)
TOTAL	\$156,500	\$68,000
Sales Price/Rent	\$95,000	\$1,000 a month
Difference	Safe, affordable home available to a homebuyer making 60% or less of AMI that will stay affordable for generations to come.	In three years, this investor will recoup their “investment” with monthly rent without making the necessary repairs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Given TCLB’s powers, the property is cost-effectively acquired and cleared of any back taxes and clean title can be ensured through quiet title action.
- TCLB sells the property to RTP for \$1 and partners with them for the necessary rehab work.
- CBCLT identifies a buyer, meaning any subsidy invested in this property will stay in this property and remain affordable for generations of homebuyers to come.
- Although this project might not make sense from an immediate and purely financial perspective, this property was a severe health and safety hazard and this investment will further stabilize this block, bring in new tax dollars, and save the local government public safety costs.

⁵¹ Kim Graziani, *The Equitable Communities Collaborative: Taking a Collaborative Approach to Investing in Residents and Communities Across Allegheny County, PA* (Equitable Communities Collaborative, 2023) <https://kvq5af.a2cdn1.secureserver.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Equitable-Communities-Collaborative-Report-Final-Copy-compressed.pdf>.

⁵² “CodeNforce,” Turtle Creek Valley Council of Governments, <https://tcvcog.com/codenforce/>.

⁵³ “COVID-19 ARPA Whole-Home Repairs Program,” Pennsylvania Department of Community & Economic Development, <https://dced.pa.gov/programs/covid-19-arpa-whole-home-repairs-program/>.

NEW YORK LAND BANKS AND HOME HEADQUARTERS

How Land Banks and CDFIs can Leverage Each Other to Break Down Barriers to Homeownership

Home HeadQuarters, a nonprofit housing organization and US Treasury-certified Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI), has been tackling equitable homeownership and lending challenges in Syracuse and Upstate New York for almost 30 years.⁵⁴ What distinguishes them are their partnerships with multiple land banks across New York—including Albany County Land Bank (ACLB), Buffalo Erie Niagara Land Improvement Corporation (BENLIC), Chautauqua County Land Bank (CCLB), Greater Syracuse Land Bank (GSLB), and Rochester Land Bank Corporation (RLBC). These collaborations help small-scale rehabbers and first-time homeowners overcome barriers to lending and capacity.

It began when Home HeadQuarters redeveloped over one hundred vacant GSLB properties—a combination of substantial rehabs and new single-family construction—for new owner-occupants. They provided purchase and construction financing on favorable terms to other homebuyers, developers, and small investors developing GSLB properties for owner-occupant buyers. Word quickly spread to other land banks in New York that Home HeadQuarters was a creative problem-solver that could fill a gap left by traditional lenders who refused to underwrite loan products for rehab of formerly vacant owner-occupied housing (purchase, construction, and mortgage financing) as well for “mom and pop” investors and responsible landlords who cannot access capital.

CDFIs were created in the 1990s to provide more flexible lending solutions to individuals who have been historically denied traditional lending given racist policies that still can be felt today. Even so, it

is surprising that more partnerships between CDFIs and land banks do not exist outside of New York, given the clear mission alignment.

When asked why, Kerry Quaglia, founder and CEO of Home HeadQuarters, noted, “I have no idea given the innate synergy between both entities. If CDFIs are risk adverse and do not address the barriers to lending and racial disparities, then how are they different than a traditional bank? Particularly for those states that have more robust CDFI programs, there should be even more incentive to partner with land banks.”⁵⁵

Home HeadQuarters has provided millions of dollars of financing to buyers in Central and Upstate New York to purchase and rehabilitate land bank properties. Given the inherent challenges of first-time homebuyers managing their own rehabs, Home HeadQuarters also provides support and technical assistance. Many recipients, primarily Black individuals declined by multiple financial institutions, have benefited from programs like:

- The Equitable Ownership Program with ACLB, which serves as a single point of contact for residents, contractors, and investors looking for land bank properties, focused on historically disinvested neighborhoods.⁵⁶
- The Rehab Loan Funds for BENLIC, CCLB, and RLBC, which offers both acquisition and construction financing assistance for first-time or low-income homebuyers seeking to purchase and rehabilitate properties from the land bank.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Home HeadQuarters, <https://www.homehq.org/>.

⁵⁵ Conversation with author on April 10, 2024.

⁵⁶ “Equitable Ownership Program,” Albany County Land Bank Corporation, <https://www.albanycountylanbank.org/eopp>.

⁵⁷ Letter to the Editor, “Syracuse’s Home HeadQuarters serves land bank homeowners across NY state (Your Letter),” Syracuse.com, January 18, 2023, <https://www.syracuse.com/opinion/2023/01/syracuses-home-headquarters-serves-land-bank-homebuyers-across-ny-state-your-letters.html>; “Land Bank Partners with Home HeadQuarters to Expand Financing Options for Homebuyers,” WRFA 107.9, October 18, 2022, <https://www.syracuse.com/opinion/2023/01/syracuses-home-headquarters-serves-land-bank-homebuyers-across-ny-state-your-letters.html>.

4 BROWNFIELDS

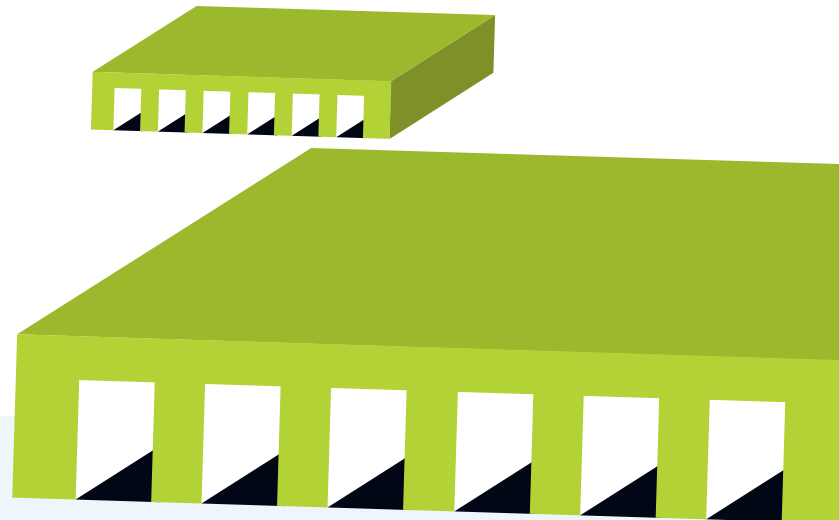
Almost one third (30%) of land bank respondents have acquired brownfield properties—properties where the presence or potential presence of hazardous substances, pollutants, or contaminants make them difficult and costly to redevelop and reuse. Fortunately, there are federal, state, and local organizations (e.g., US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and State Environmental Agencies) that offer technical assistance, grants, low-interest loans, and tax incentives to assess, cleanup, and reuse these sites.

In 2023, Community Progress received an EPA grant to provide research, education, and technical assistance services to promote brownfield cleanup and community-driven reuse through land bank partnerships.⁵⁸ These efforts have led to meaningful collaboration with many land banks involved in brownfield projects. Despite their different approaches, a common theme has emerged: powerful results come from land banks partnering with local, state, and federal organizations and engaging impacted residents to transform contaminated sites into community-driven projects rooted in environmental justice.

Some land banks are more focused on discrete projects from start to finish, such as the assessment, acquisition, cleanup, and redevelopment of a former gas station. Others use their brownfield funding to instead assess and/or remediate multiple sites, then offer those properties with clear title to new owners for redevelopment.

OPPORTUNITY

Recognizing the necessity for brownfield remediation, the Ohio General Assembly committed \$700 million to the Brownfield Remediation Program over two biennial budget cycles.⁵⁹ The largest investment in over a decade designated county land banks as primary partners in executing the program's objectives. As a result, many of Ohio's most underserved communities with long-neglected sites are now poised for revitalization. In total, 84 of Ohio's 88 counties have used these funds to address environmentally contaminated properties in their communities.



⁵⁸ "Brownfields," Center for Community Progress, <https://communityprogress.org/resources/brownfields/>.

⁵⁹ "Brownfield Remediation Program," Ohio Department of Development, <https://development.ohio.gov/community/redevelopment/brownfield-remediation-program>.

SPOTLIGHT

GREATER SYRACUSE LAND BANK, NEW YORK

Leading with Innovation and Collaboration to Respond to Community Needs

The Greater Syracuse Land Bank (GSLB) is known as an innovator, but even they were hesitant when faced with the liability concerns around acquiring brownfields. Both City and County governments were reluctant to foreclose on these properties and enter the chain of title, even if they transferred that title immediately to the land bank. Rather than stopping there, the land bank engaged with various state agencies to find a solution to the liability concerns, given the positive impact brownfield redevelopment could have on neighborhoods. The land bank also applied for and obtained two community-wide Brownfield Assessment Grants from the EPA to test and triage suspected brownfields once they do take title.⁶⁰

The resulting agreement—between the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, the State Comptroller’s Office, City of Syracuse, Onondaga County, and GSLB—frees the land bank, City, and County from liability under State law for environmental clean-up of 138 specific parcels eligible for tax foreclosure and located in key business corridors and other targeted areas.⁶¹ It is only the second agreement of its kind in New York, modeled after one by the Suffolk County Land Bank. These properties can now go through the tax foreclosure process and be transferred to the land bank, then tested using grant funds from the EPA. Sites that are “clean enough” for a private buyer to redevelop on their own are marketed for sale. In the event a site is too dirty to attract a buyer even with the incentive of state brownfield tax credits, the land bank is prepared to apply for cleanup funding. GSLB is submitting their first two cleanup grant applications this fall.

One successful project is a gas station at 900 South Ave., which had been a vacant eyesore on a high-traffic commuter corridor for decades. It was identified as a key site by the City during a 2017 economic development study, when residents pointed out that they lacked a name-brand gas station on the Southside.

The City proceeded with the tax foreclosure and conveyed the gas station to GSLB, which then used EPA resources to complete a Phase II environmental site assessment. They marketed the property for sale and found a local minority entrepreneur who grew up in the neighborhood and was interested in opening a gas station.⁶²

GSLB removed old underground tanks and obtained a “no further action needed” letter from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation so that their buyer could close on his commercial construction financing. They will recoup that cost in the property sales price and expect construction to start this fall. He plans to open a Sunoco franchise on the formerly vacant site.

⁶⁰ “Programs – Brownfields,” Greater Syracuse Land Bank, updated November 30, 2022, <https://syracuselandbank.org/programs/#:-:text=USEPA%20Brownfield%20Assessment%20Grant%20Projects>.

⁶¹ This list of addresses can be added to or amended from time to time with the agreement of all parties.

⁶² Jeremy Boyer, “Syracuse entrepreneur, fueled by self-redemption, reviving long-vacant South Side site,” Syracuse.com, November 18, 2023, <https://www.syracuse.com/news/2023/11/syracuse-entrepreneur-fueled-by-self-redemption-reviving-long-vacant-south-side-site.html>.

HOUSTON LAND BANK, TEXAS

Putting Community First in all Brownfield Work

An epicenter for oil, gas, and other heavy industries, Houston located its sprawling industrial complexes near the bayous and railroads. Many workers with limited housing options built or moved into homes close to their work, presenting health and environmental challenges for these low- to moderate-income neighborhoods. The absence of zoning in Houston complicates City efforts to relocate these industries from people’s backyards.

Land bank work is already complex, and when combined with the complexities of brownfield assessment, remediation, and reuse, it can be overwhelming. However, the Houston Land Bank (HLB) has embraced this challenge, with a focus on equity, inclusivity, and justice. Supported by a \$600,000 EPA Assessment Grant, HLB established a Brownfields Program, prioritizing the low-income communities of color disproportionately affected by brownfields due to historic and ongoing environmental racism.

As the largest land bank in terms of geographic service area, HLB is leading the way in putting residents at the heart of brownfield remediation and redevelopment. CEO and President Christa Stoneham often begins presentations by showing a map of Houston that overlays race, wealth, and designated brownfield sites, highlighting the strong correlation between brownfields, health risks, and low-income communities of color.

The HLB Brownfields Program includes a Brownfields Activation Committee and a Gems Locator, which enables residents to identify, remediate, and help plan for the redevelopment of brownfield sites.⁶³

One major project HLB is undertaking that the community identified as a priority is the



Credit: Houston Land Bank

transformation of the Velasco Incinerator site in the 2nd Ward. In November 2023, HLB entered into a land banking agreement with the City to turn the site into green space, with community involvement at every step. The City sold the site to HLB under the condition that HLB will work with strategic partners, local stakeholders, and the 2nd Ward community to create a reuse plan that promises tangible benefits for the local community and stewards the land to new responsible ownership.

HLB entered the site into the Texas Commission of Environmental Quality’s (TCEQ) Voluntary Cleanup Program (VCP) and secured \$5.5 million from the EPA for assessment and cleanup.⁶⁴ Partnership with the City of Houston, TCEQ, EPA, and the 2nd Ward Community will bring new life to this site and correct environmental issues. HLB diligently follows its established procedures while adhering to federal and state regulations for the remediation process.

To maintain transparency and meaningful engagement with community stakeholders, HLB has launched a website to communicate project status updates, reports, and other critical information.⁶⁵

⁶³ “Brownfields Program,” Houston Land Bank, <https://houstonlandbank.org/brownfields-program/>.

⁶⁴ “Houston Land Bank Awarded \$5.5 Million in EPA Brownfields Grants for Major Environmental Assessment and Cleanup Projects,” Houston Land Bank (press release), May 24, 2016, <https://houstonlandbank.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Press-Release-English.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Banking Velasco, <https://www.bankingvelasco.org/>.

SPOTLIGHT

GENESEE COUNTY LAND BANK, MICHIGAN

Transforming a 60-acre Brownfield into a Regional Park and Family Destination



Credit: Genesee County Parks

The Chevy Commons site spans 60 acres on the Flint River, a few blocks from downtown Flint. Formerly known as “Chevy in the Hole,” the site contained a manufacturing complex established in the 1930s as one of General Motors’ four Flint production facilities. At its peak, Chevy in the Hole contained 17 buildings and employed around 8,000 workers. Plant closings and building demolitions started in the mid-1990s, continuing through 2004, after which most of the site was paved to minimize movement of residual contamination.

“Reimagining Chevy in the Hole” began in 2007. An EPA grant to the Genesee County Land Bank Authority (GCLBA) funded the publication of the first concept plan, in partnership with University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment and the Genesee Institute. The plan imagined the site becoming a state park in two phases, completed by 2040.⁶⁶ With a dedicated coalition of local, state, and federal partners, the concept became an approved site plan in 2014. The first phase of construction began on 16 acres east of Chevrolet Avenue in 2015.

Utilizing EPA grants to the Genesee County Treasurer, GCLBA served as project manager for the City of Flint, the property owner at the time. The plan was designed to be developed in phases as funding became available and, together with project partners, GCLBA invested more than \$13 million dollars in capping the former industrial brownfield with a low maintenance green cover. The final phase of construction began west of Chevrolet Avenue in September 2020, laying the groundwork for the July 2021 announcement that the community green space branded as Chevy Commons would be a part of Genesee County’s first state park.

It seems impossible that such a grand vision could be accomplished so quickly after construction began in 2015. The multitude of committed partners and champions—City of Flint; EPA; Genesee County Treasurer; Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy; United States Forest Service; Genesee County Parks; Michigan Land Bank Authority; C.S. Mott Foundation; and Kettering University—made Chevy Commons and the state park a reality.

⁶⁶ “Chevy Commons,” Genesee County Land Bank, <https://www.thelandbank.org/chevycommons.asp>.

5 COMMERCIAL VACANCY

While land bank respondents did not rank commercial vacancy as one of their top priorities, field experience shows that more land banks—particularly in rural communities—are focusing on commercial revitalization. Many “main street” buildings in rural areas are either vacant or partially occupied. While the pandemic brought more attention to commercial vacancy, declining retail leases began much earlier, given the shift to online retail and working from home.⁶⁷

Land banks are increasingly targeting tax-delinquent, highly visible vacant commercial properties—often those that hold a special place in community history—to acquire through tax foreclosures.

Indeed, a thriving community includes not only quality affordable housing but also active commercial and retail business that meet residents’ needs. For commercial properties that may not be tax-delinquent but remain eyesores or a deterrent to investment, land banks should collaborate with local governments to use housing and building code enforcement to get the property owner to “fix it up, pay it up, or give it up.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *The Economic Contribution of the Retail Industry*, (National Retail Federation, 2024), <https://nrf.com/research-insights/retails-impact>.

⁶⁸ *Reevaluating Code Enforcement*, 26.

SPOTLIGHT

KALAMAZOO COUNTY LAND BANK, MICHIGAN

Engaging Community, Removing Blight, Creating Jobs, and Healthier Food Options in Washington Square

Unlike many land banks that focus initially on residential properties, the Kalamazoo County Land Bank Authority (KCLBA) has prioritized commercial property revitalization since its founding in 2009.⁶⁹ Their work in Washington Square, a commercial streetscape in the heart of the Edison neighborhood, demonstrates their creative approach to revitalize commercial parcels. To address potential businesses' concerns about crime and safety in Washington Square, the land bank began hosting art and culture events in the existing structures like Art Hop. This event, which drew over 300 people, involved 13 local artists reactivating vacant storefronts. It created a strong community presence, providing “eyes on the street.”

Another project in Washington Square was the Fare Games competition, organized by the land bank to revitalize a historic but deteriorated building at 1301 Portage Street. Local food entrepreneurs competed for the opportunity to open a new restaurant in the newly renovated space. Six competitors refined their business plans with the support and mentorship of the host committee and hosted a community tasting. Pho on the Block won the competition, bringing diverse, locally owned and sourced dining options to Edison residents, while at the same time eliminating a vacant, deteriorated property.

In 2021, Washington Square sold its final properties to Black Wall Street Kalamazoo,⁷⁰ an initiative that increases awareness and visibility of local Black businesses. New ventures like Twine Urban Winery, the area's first Black female-owned winery, and Ty's Joint, a southern soul food

restaurant, now contribute to the area's vibrant commercial landscape.

After seven years of tireless effort by the land bank and the Edison Neighborhood Association, Washington Square is now fully occupied by resident-owned, diverse businesses. “It's amazing what's going on in Washington Square right now,” said Tammy Taylor, Director of the Edison Neighborhood Association. “It was a long time coming from having it be the adult business district to making it a truly vibrant, family-friendly retail shopping area. To have Black Wall Street there is awesome. Just awesomeness.”⁷¹



Credit: Fran Dwight / Kalamazoo Land Bank

⁶⁹ “Fare Games,” Kalamazoo County Land Bank, <https://kalamazoolandbank.org/portfolio-items/fare-games/>.

⁷⁰ Black Wall Street (website), <https://blackwallstreetkalamazoo.org/gd-info>.

⁷¹ “Washington Square,” Kalamazoo County Land Bank, <https://kalamazoolandbank.org/portfolio-items/washington-square/>.

YOUNGSTOWN AND MAHONING COUNTY LAND BANKS, OHIO

Creating Third Spaces and Jobs through Coffee and Tea

Youngstown's commercial corridors, once thriving with local businesses that supported a booming population, faced significant decline following the collapse of the steel industry in the 1970s and resulting population loss. However, a partnership of local government, nonprofit, and community partners in Youngstown and Mahoning County recognized the collective urgency to stabilize this historic commercial corridor before it was too late.

One key success story is what happened in the 1500 block of Mahoning Avenue, where partnerships made it possible to attract business owner Levi Smith, Chief Roaster and Owner of Voyager Specialty Coffee and Teas, who relocated his operations from suburban Canfield to reuse several vacant and abandoned buildings in the heart of Youngstown.⁷² Along with ongoing support from the Mahoning County Land Bank, City of Youngstown, and residents, each partner leveraged their unique strengths:

- The City of Youngstown's Land Bank Program used its state legislative powers to get control of the site and clear title through an expedited, cost-effective tax foreclosure process.
- The Western Reserve Port Authority purchased the buildings from the land bank at a discounted price to support commercial revitalization efforts.
- The Economic Action Group, a local nonprofit, provided crucial support through its Commercial Property Revitalization Program to support the remediation and stabilization of these building and incentivize new business to move in.⁷³



Credit: Economic Action Group

Although this work took time and perseverance, the outcome was well worth it. Thanks to this partnership, progress and investment are evident along the 1500 block of Mahoning Avenue. Trek Coffee House offers delicious food and drinks and a welcoming space for neighbors, while next door Voyager Specialty Coffee and Teas has become a hub for training coffee shop owners from across the country on roasting and brewing processes, and distributing freshly sourced coffees and teas worldwide.

These types of transformational projects can only happen through trusted, committed partnerships, creative and flexible funding and programming, and community-minded businesses who believe in the power of investing locally and creating third spaces where everyone is welcome.

⁷² George Nelson, "Voyager Coffee Plans Winter Opening for Manufacturing Site, Café," The Business Journal - Youngstown Publishing Co, August 22, 2022, <https://businessjournaldaily.com/voyager-coffee-plans-winter-opening-for-manufacturing-site-cafe/>.

⁷³ "CPR - Commercial Property Revitalization," Economic Action Group, <https://eagworks.org/programming/cpr/>.

SPOTLIGHT

WESTMORELAND COUNTY LAND BANK, PENNSYLVANIA

Making Beer out of Blight



Credit: Sobel's Obscure Brewery

On a prominent corner in downtown Jeannette, a city of less than 9,000 residents, a 12,000 square foot building—once home to Gillespie's Department Store—sat vacant, boarded up, and underwater in value with over \$50,000 in delinquent taxes. The Westmoreland County Land Bank saw potential in this deteriorating structure, and stepped in.⁷⁴

In Pennsylvania, land banks can acquire tax delinquent properties that do not sell at the first tax sale. Due to this particular property's significant debt and the renovation cost to make it safe for occupancy, the land bank was able to purchase the building for less than \$1,500.

The land bank secured funding from local philanthropy to stabilize the building—repairing the roof, windows, and foundation—to prevent its demolition. When the property was advertised it caught the interest of the Sobel family, local craft brewing enthusiasts. They saw potential to transform the historic building into a craft brewery but were cautious to move forward given the

overgrown vacant lot and condemned building next door. In response, the land bank worked with local government partners to acquire these adjacent properties and raise demolition funds through a Pennsylvania law that permits counties to adopt a resolution or ordinance authorizing the recorder of deeds to charge and collect an additional fee not to exceed \$15 for each deed and mortgage recorded.⁷⁵ This funding can be used exclusively for the demolition of VAD property.

In 2018, the Sobels and the land bank entered into an agreement for all three properties. Over the next few years, renovations focused on preserving the historical character of the building while retrofitting the space to accommodate a distribution warehouse, brewing facilities, a tasting room, and retail shop. Despite challenges and supply chain issues due to the pandemic, the Sobels opened Obscure Brewery in 2022.⁷⁶ Additionally, the land bank worked with local and state government to turn a vacant lot across the street into a small amphitheater that brings food trucks, live music, and community together.

This community success story was made possible by the special acquisition powers of land banks through the Pennsylvania Land Bank Act, the Westmoreland County Land Bank's resourcefulness, the Sobel family's dedication to their craft and community, and the support of local and state programs and partners.

⁷⁴ Westmoreland County Land Bank, <https://www.westmorelandcountypa.gov/1977/Land-Bank>.

⁷⁵ 42 P.S. § 21052.2, <https://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/li/uconsCheck.cfm?yr=2016&sessInd=0&act=152>.

⁷⁶ Stephen Huba, "Jeannette's Gillespie Building to get new life as microbrewery retail site," *TribLive*, December 13, 2018, <https://archive.triblive.com/local/westmoreland/jeannettes-gillespie-building-to-get-new-life-as-microbrewery-retail-site/>.

Land banks are developing strategies to address vacant land, which makes up the bulk of land bank inventory. Additionally, more land banks are expanding their scope beyond residential development to include brownfields and commercial vacancy, showcasing their flexibility and responsiveness to current challenges.





SURVEY RESULTS

Opportunities & Challenges

The final section of survey results and our experience in the field explores the larger opportunities and challenges land banks face. Examples are offered on how land banks are addressing: funding, decline in inventory, politics, community engagement, and racial equity and justice.

LAND BANK OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES COVERED IN THIS SECTION

- Funding
- Decline in Inventory
- Politics
- Community Engagement
- Racial Equity and Justice

While some challenges and opportunities like funding, politics, and community engagement have remained consistent, others like inventory decline and racial equity and justice have emerged more recently. Others, like climate change, did not surface as much in the survey results but will be discussed in the next section.

1 FUNDING

The number one challenge facing land banks continues to be the need for predictable, multi-year flexible funding. In fact, 65% of land bank respondents identified underfunding as their biggest threat to success. Stabilizing and revitalizing disinvested neighborhoods is not an overnight fix; it requires long-term planning, patience, partnerships, and the resources to pursue meaningful strategies. Dedicated, recurring funding allows land banks to engage with communities, be entrepreneurial, and explore innovative partnerships.

The reality is that land banks deal with VAD properties that have been rejected by the private market due to high tax debt and cost to stabilize often exceeds the property's value. **While some land banks receive revenue from property sales, self-sustainable funding is an unrealistic fantasy for most land banks.** Honest discussions about funding should begin early in the creation of any land bank initiative.

Additionally, land banks should calculate cost savings and increased revenue resulting from their work to strengthen the case for dedicated, flexible funding. After all, by maintaining their property inventory, land banks reduce the financial burden on local governments. Their transformative efforts also put properties back on the tax rolls and help preserve the value of neighboring properties.

Funding from Delinquent Property Taxes

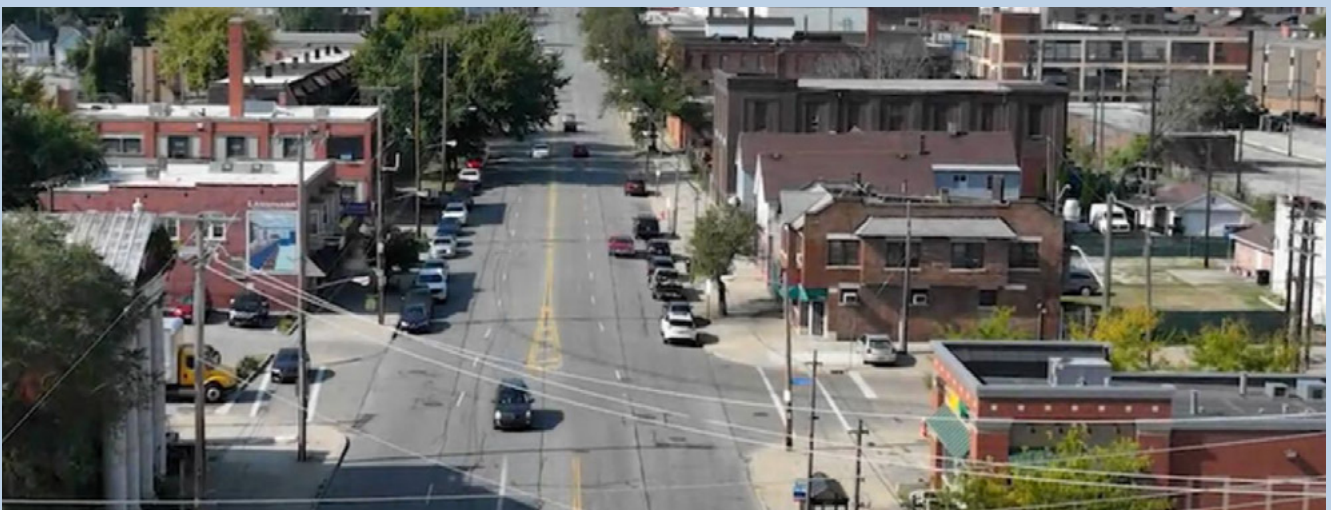
Ohio is the only state that allows counties, as part of its state land bank legislation, the option to direct a portion of their delinquent taxes back to land banks. This funding method aligns with one of the primary goals of land banks: putting properties back on the tax rolls. The Delinquent Tax and Collection (DTAC) provision allows a county (land banks can only be created at the county level in Ohio) to annually direct up to 5% of delinquent property taxes, interest, and penalties to the county’s land bank for discretionary use.⁷⁷ While county treasurers in Ohio still must opt in to DTAC, nearly 70% of operating land banks in Ohio receive this funding, which can range from less than \$100,000 to over \$5 million annually.

In Pennsylvania, the Tri-COG Land Bank uses a similar model, though it is not part of the state land bank legislation. Instead, as a membership condition, municipalities, school districts, and the County remit 5% of delinquent taxes collected (principal only) each year as part of their membership fee. This ensures members remain invested and that the land bank continues to demonstrate its value to its members.

Breakdown of DTAC Across Ohio, as of April 2024

Courtesy of Ohio Land Bank Association

OHIO ALLOCATIONS	
DATC	# OF LAND BANKS
No DTAC	22
\$1–\$100k	15
\$100k–\$150k	14
\$150k–\$250k	4
\$250k–\$500k	5
\$500k–\$1M	2
\$1M–\$5M	5
Greater than \$5M	1



Credit: Cuyahoga Land Bank

⁷⁷ Ohio Revised Code, Section 321.621, <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-321.261>.

Funding from State Allocations

While there are some federal funding proposals meant to support land banks, partisan gridlock has hindered progress. Fortunately, many states have stepped in to fill the gap, creating new programs geared to support land bank work.

- **New York:** After mortgage settlement funds directed toward land banks by the Office of the New York Attorney General were depleted in 2019, the New York Land Bank Association (NYLBA) successfully advocated for direct state budget allocations.⁷⁸ Over the past three years, over \$100 million in flexible funding has been secured, administered by the New York State Division of Homes & Community Renewal (HCR). HCR's Land Bank Initiative (LBI) funds support general overhead costs, renovations, stabilizations, demolitions, and property maintenance expenses. NYLBA members have built strong relationships with the governor's office and their state legislators and hope to see that this funding will become a routine annual allocation.
- **Michigan:** The State Land Bank Authority's Blight Elimination Program allocated \$150 million to projects across the state, guaranteeing money for each local land bank for demolition, stabilization, rehabilitation, and gap/match funding for environmental remediation.⁷⁹ Additional funds were available on a competitive basis, allowing land banks to tackle more ambitious projects.
- **Ohio:** The Ohio Legislature launched the Welcome Home Ohio Program, investing \$150 million over two years to support land banks in renovating or building new qualifying homes for much-needed affordable homeownership opportunities.⁸⁰ The program encourages collaboration between land banks, local governments, and nonprofits to address Ohio's housing crisis, increase homeownership rates, and contribute to the long-term community stability.

Funding from Local Allocations

Other land banks in Michigan, like Wayne County, use a formula detailed in their Intergovernmental Agreements (IGA) between the land bank and the County Treasurer. Every property the treasurer's office transfers to the land bank through a tax foreclosure proceeding receives an initial, and then annual, disbursement to cover the ongoing maintenance and administrative costs. The treasurer's office remits an initial payment of \$700 for structures and \$450 for vacant land, then an annual payment of \$450 for all properties to the land bank.

⁷⁸ New York Land Bank Association, <https://nylandbanks.org/>.

⁷⁹ "Blight Elimination Program," Michigan State Land Bank Authority, <https://www.michigan.gov/leo/bureaus-agencies/landbank/requests-for-proposals-and-qualifications/blight-elimination-program>.

⁸⁰ "Welcome Home Ohio Program," Ohio Department of Development, <https://development.ohio.gov/community/housing-and-homelessness/welcomehome>.

OPPORTUNITY

Selected Federal Legislation Impacting Land Banks

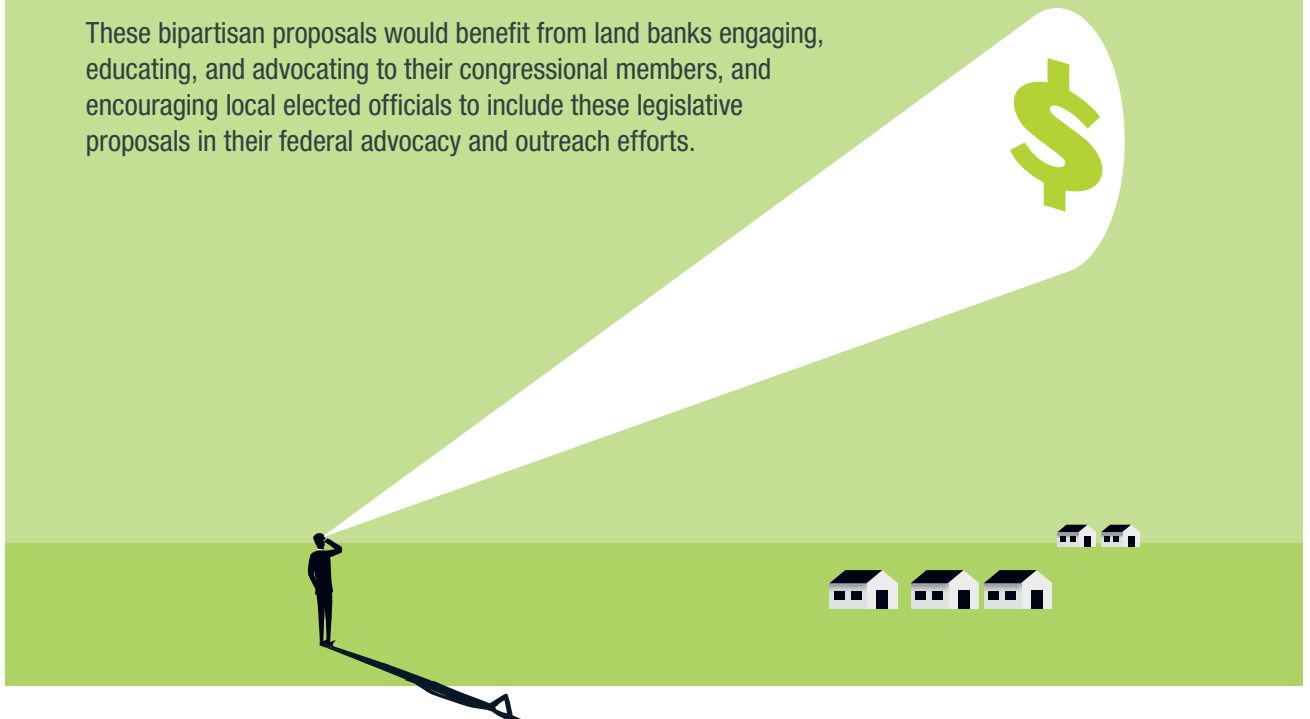
While some land banks have had success leveraging existing federal funding sources, several bipartisan federal legislative proposals would bring much-needed resources to the field if enacted:

The **Neighborhood Revitalization and Land Banking Act (NRLBA)**, introduced by Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA) and Sen. Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV) in April 2024, would create two new federal grant programs eligible to land banks, including property conditions mapping grants, and \$100,000-\$250,000 planning and \$2 million-\$15 million implementation grants for land bank-led neighborhood revitalization.⁸¹ It would also create a blighted properties remediation fellowship program to develop new leaders in the land bank field, and offer free technical assistance to land bank grantees and grant applicants.

The **National Land Bank Network Act (NLBN Act)**, first introduced by Rep. Dan Kildee (D-MI) and Rep. Drew Ferguson (R-GA) in 2020, would support the field-building work already happening through the NLBN, and create a modest federal grant program administered by the NLBN to support existing land banks and help launch new land banks.⁸²

The **Neighborhood Homes Investment Act (NHIA)** has had deep bipartisan support in both the House and Senate since its original introduction in 2019. It would create a new federal tax credit in targeted geographies to support the rehabilitation and development of affordable single-family homes, particularly addressing the appraisal gap in weak markets where acquisition and rehabilitation costs exceed post-rehabilitation home values.⁸³

These bipartisan proposals would benefit from land banks engaging, educating, and advocating to their congressional members, and encouraging local elected officials to include these legislative proposals in their federal advocacy and outreach efforts.



⁸¹ Neighborhood Revitalization and Land Banking Act of 2024, S.4146, 118th Congress. (2024).

⁸² National Land Bank Network Act, H.R. 2832, 118th Congress. (2023).

⁸³ Neighborhood Homes Investment Act, S.657, 118th Congress. (2023). See also <https://neighborhoodhomesinvestmentact.org/>.

2 DECLINE IN INVENTORY

About a quarter (24%) of respondents stated the decline in property inventory was a major challenge, largely because less property is coming through the tax foreclosure or tax sale pipeline. Over the past two years, land bank respondents reported a 14% decrease in inventory through the enforcement of delinquent property taxes. Conversely, over this same period, respondents reported a 100% increase in inventory from direct transfers by local government (surplus properties) and a 17% increase in donations.

During the pandemic, many state and local jurisdictions enacted moratoriums on any delinquent property tax enforcement to help property owners experiencing financial and other hardships. Although many of these moratoriums issued during the pandemic have been lifted, there are new moratoriums due to the Supreme Court's May 2023 *Tyler v. Hennepin County* ruling, contributing to the decline in inventory as at least a dozen states evaluate their policies to comply and in the meantime limit property transfers through tax foreclosure to land banks.⁸⁴

Tyler v. Hennepin County

Before diving into the implications of the *Tyler* ruling for land banks, we must give a disclaimer: The impact of this ruling and jurisdictional responses are still unfolding at the time of this report's publication.

The *Tyler* ruling posits that property tax foreclosure is solely a debt collection tool, and local governments can recover only what they are owed in a tax foreclosure and no more. This narrow interpretation means if the property is worth more than what is owed to the government in the foreclosure proceeding (including unpaid taxes, interest, fees, costs, and other public liens), the former owner or interested party must be able to recover any cash generated from the

foreclosure sale. The Supreme Court ruled the failure to return this "surplus," if any exists, violates the "Takings Clause" of the Fifth Amendment.

Why does this matter to land banks? Some of the special powers local governments and land banks have relied on to acquire tax-foreclosed property, such as the right of first refusal, are now called into question. Right of first refusal powers allow land banks to take title to VAD property post-tax foreclosure in advance of any kind of public sale or auction of the property.

The Court's ruling is not explicit on how or when local governments must determine whether there is surplus value owed to the former owner or interested parties, however, it is clear that powers like the right of first refusal are susceptible to future *Tyler*-related challenges because they do not provide a process to determine whether surplus value exists. **While most properties acquired by land banks do not have surplus value because they are underwater or require costly rehabilitation,** *Tyler* requires a process to be in place to assess values and, if it is determined that there is value that exceeds the amount owed in the tax foreclosure, to return that value to the former owner and interested parties.

A likely (and perhaps the most legally "safe" tool to determine value in terms of ability to withstand a former owner's lawsuit claiming surplus) is to subject every property to public auction. This might mean that the county, municipality, or land bank would only acquire VAD properties if (a) the private market fails to bid, or (b) the public entity bids competitively against speculative purchasers and pays any surplus to the former owner. As a result, jurisdictions with more competitive housing markets or where speculative investors are especially active might see fewer VAD properties available for public acquisition and revitalization.

As states and local jurisdictions figure out the need for changes, like shifting to public auctions for all properties in tax foreclosure, the tax foreclosures and tax sales have slowed or stopped in many

⁸⁴ *Tyler v. Hennepin Cnty.*, 598 U.S. 631(2023) <https://plus.lexis.com/api/document/collection/cases/id/689R-75K1-FGCG-S4NR-00000-00?cite=598%20U.S.%20631&context=1530671>.

states. This slowdown is compounded by previous moratoriums during the pandemic.

Jurisdictions are exploring legislative solutions to comply with *Tyler*. Most seem to agree that some form of public auction or property valuation is needed to assess if there will be any surplus value. However, whether this means exposing every tax-foreclosed property to public auction, requiring former owners to request an auction before the foreclosure is concluded, or conducting appraisals, will vary by jurisdiction. Community Progress has developed resources on the *Tyler* ruling, explaining its background, implications, and potential policy reforms for local and state officials.⁸⁵

Unfortunately, reforms prompted by *Tyler* will complicate efforts to address VAD properties, where the most effective intervention is to swiftly stabilize and transfer a property to new responsible ownership in alignment with community goals—like a land bank.

Of course, land banks should prioritize keeping people in their homes by supporting local efforts like fair assessments, property tax payment plans, appropriate and adequate tax exemptions, and credits—that help vulnerable homeowners avoid losing their family’s land and wealth.⁸⁶

However, land banks must also continue to address properties where owners have long since walked away and where the public now bears the cost of stabilizing them. Local governments must continue foreclosing on tax-delinquent VAD properties, and protect key interventions, like:

- **Documenting the public costs incurred on each of these properties** (e.g., nuisance abatement or demo/board up costs) to verify that no surplus equity exists, and to secure those costs as a lien against the property that is enforced during tax foreclosure.
- **Ensuring the foreclosing local government or land banks have a default, credit bid in public auctions**, in the amount of the opening bid for the property (usually the

amount of the foreclosure judgement plus sale costs), allowing them to acquire the property if no private bidders are interested.

- **Allowing foreclosing local governments to bid at the public auction**, requiring them to pay in cash the difference between the winning bid and the foreclosure judgment.
- **Assessing property value for properties in the tax foreclosure process that may have equity** (meaning the value is worth more than the delinquent taxes and public liens) to determine any surplus. This process should take place as close to the date of foreclosure as possible.

Ultimately, the *Tyler* ruling should not divert attention from the need to quickly address VAD properties. The sooner these properties can transfer to new responsible ownership, the better the outcome. Finally, as with most strategies that deal with deteriorated properties, approaches must be clearly different for occupied versus vacant properties.

Land banks should consult with local legal counsel and elected officials to determine whether the current process of enforcing delinquent property taxes is impacted by the *Tyler* ruling. They should also explore strategies to prevent VAD properties from getting stuck in limbo, continuing to deteriorate and harming neighbors. If your state practices strict foreclosure, meaning tax-foreclosed properties can be transferred directly to a land bank without a public sale or auction, the minimum bid should account for all public costs incurred. This ensures that every taxpayer dollar spent to prompt property owners to “fix it up, pay it up, or give it up” is recorded against the property as a lien. If your community proceeds with public auctions for all tax-foreclosed properties and the property does not sell, consider having a land bank be the default bidder and receive the property.

⁸⁵ “*Tyler v. Hennepin County*: Updated Analysis and Policy Reform Options,” (Center for Community Progress, 2024), <https://communityprogress.org/publications/2024-tyler-hennepin-policy-brief/>.

⁸⁶ Graziani, *Reimagine Delinquent Property Tax Enforcement*, 11.

SPOTLIGHT

STATEWIDE BLIGHT TASK FORCE IN PENNSYLVANIA

Putting Politics Aside in the Fight Against Blight

Yes, even the most divided political figures can unite around tackling VAD properties, as seen in Pennsylvania for over 15 years.

One of the clearest examples of bipartisan collaboration is the Statewide Blight Task Force. Formed in 2007 and eventually led by Pennsylvania Senator Dave Argall (R-29), the task force brings together bicameral and bipartisan group of legislators, administration and agency representatives, and public and private stakeholders that develop and advocate for laws that help municipalities tackle VAD properties. Over a dozen laws have passed that address all aspects of VAD properties—expediting delinquent tax enforcement, strengthening code enforcement, developing conservatorship/receivership models, authorizing land banking, and creating numerous opportunities for funding these tools.

“When it comes to fighting blight, it doesn’t matter one damn bit if you’re a Republican or Democrat,” said Senator Argall. “We’re forging a bipartisan

consensus to find a way to breathe new life into these old towns.”⁸⁷

Success has hinged on strong personal relationships, especially among legislative staff, ongoing education, and making sure VAD properties remain a top concern for constituents. Finally, being inclusive and putting political differences aside has also been critical to achieving impact.

Although lawmaking is often compared to “watching a sausage get made,” the Statewide Blight Task Force has demonstrated that success comes from listening, negotiating, compromising, and tailoring your message to your audience. Some may want to know the bottom line or direct economic argument for why VAD is a problem, and others may only want to hear the personal stories of how people—their constituents—are impacted.



Credit: Dough4872 (Wikimedia)

“When it comes to fighting blight, it doesn’t matter one damn bit if you’re a Republican or Democrat. We’re forging a bipartisan consensus to find a way to breathe new life into these old towns.”

⁸⁷ “This month’s Argall Report: Fighting blight is a bipartisan battle,” Senator Dave Argall, (blog, archived), March 3, 2020, <https://www.senatorargall.com/2020/03/03/this-months-argall-report-fighting-blight-is-a-bipartisan-battle/>.

3 POLITICS

Land banks are not alone in their frustrations regarding the political landscape, as 16% of survey respondents identified the leadership, policy, and funding changes that may come with each election as major challenges. Since land banks are formed as public entities—depending on state land banking laws and/or local ordinances they can be authorities or nonprofits—that can usually only be created through local government support, a shift in City or County leadership can directly impact their ability to acquire properties or secure promised funding.

Sometimes, land banks and their partners are drawn into political tension, particularly when elected officials fear losing control of publicly owned properties to a land bank, or perceive favoritism toward certain community groups. Despite this, land banks have endured by continuing to demonstrate that VAD properties impact everyone regardless of political party. In fact, almost all states that have passed land banking legislation have done so with bipartisan support, including in states like Georgia, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania that may seem more politically polarized.

To navigate political shifts, land banks must consistently communicate and advocate for the need and economic and social impact of their work—and not just in election cycles. Communicating regularly and transparently with all stakeholders about how a land bank makes its decisions will help strengthen relationships and mitigate the disruption caused by changes in political leadership.

Additionally, garnering strong community support and advocacy for the land bank can help ensure continuity in support of the land bank through local and statewide elections, as elected officials will feel more pressure to continue or increase support to an institution beloved by constituents.

4 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Although land bank respondents did not highlight community engagement as a top challenge in the survey, it remains both a challenge and an opportunity in the field. Many residents living next to VAD properties often feel overlooked, despite all the discussions about engagement. Local governments and land banks struggle with how to engage residents when they do not have all the answers or funding to solve every problem. However, that should not stop them from showing up and being honest, accountable, and empathetic.

In communities where land banks work, trauma lingers, tied to family land and property taken by government, or sold for “public purposes” like highways or utilities. When residents are angry or untrusting of a land bank, it is important not to take it personally, but recognize that this reaction stems from these past traumas. Land banks must acknowledge and learn from mistakes, commit to doing better, and engage with residents more meaningfully.

Never underestimate the positive impacts of simple gestures like timely follow-ups or personally knocking on doors. More land banks than ever are involving the community in setting priorities and finding solutions together, rather than just talking at residents about the good work of the land bank.

Never underestimate the positive impacts of simple gestures like timely follow-ups or personally knocking on doors.

SPOTLIGHT

CALHOUN COUNTY LAND BANK, MICHIGAN

Creating Impact at the Neighborhood Level

Like many communities, Calhoun County has areas impacted by vacancy and abandonment, including the Washington Heights neighborhood in Battle Creek. The Calhoun County Land Bank Authority (CCLBA) owns over 200 properties in Washington Heights, a neighborhood with one of the highest concentrations of Black residents in the city. With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, CCLBA launched a three-year initiative to focus on Washington Heights. To empower residents most impacted by vacancy to shape the initiative and define priorities, CCLBA created the Washington Heights Neighborhood Advisory Committee (WHNAC).

The WHNAC consists of 17 neighborhood residents with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. They gather community input, review data, and help shape projects and policy direction for the properties in Washington Heights (and the land bank overall). WHNAC has voting

rights to recommend CCLBA policy changes for the neighborhood and on a neighborhood land use plan it co-created with the land bank, which CCLBA's Board of Directors considers when making decisions. WHNAC can also recruit new members and collaborates with partners like the City of Battle Creek, Habitat for Humanity, Neighborhoods Inc., and local faith-based groups.

One key issue WHNAC helped elevate was heirs' property,⁸⁸ where lack of clear title and ownership can prevent heirs from accessing home repair or tax foreclosure prevention programs, often leading to the loss of intergenerational wealth, property deterioration, and vacancy. In Battle Creek, several former heirs' properties are now held by CCLBA. With WHNAC's guidance, CCLBA is developing a program to enable sales of land bank vacant lots to "legacy buyers," relatives of those who lost property.⁸⁹



Credit: Calhoun County Land Bank

⁸⁸ "Progress Points: Heirs' Property; How Tangled Title Can Lead to Property Vacancy, Abandonment, and Deterioration," (Center for Community Progress, 2024), <https://communityprogress.org/publications/progress-points-heirs-property/>.

⁸⁹ "Washington Heights," Calhoun County Land Bank Authority, <https://calhounlandbank.org/washington-heights/>.

OMAHA MUNICIPAL LAND BANK, NEBRASKA

Engaging Community as Ambassador to Inform Policies and Practices

In 2021, the Omaha Municipal Land Bank (OMLB) created its Ambassador Program to increase the number of stakeholders and community members engaged with the land bank.⁹⁰ The program provides ambassadors with information about OMLB's work and impact, while also helping the land bank become a better neighbor. Each year's cohort—which always includes at least one person from each City Council District—attends training sessions over nine months, on a variety of topics. Since its inception, 65 people have become Ambassadors, with some even becoming board members, funders, and property buyers.

OMLB sought to expand the program by involving more residents in shaping policies that reflect community needs, particularly advancing opportunities for underserved residents, and better supporting emerging developers. **Instead of merely scheduling meetings to gather input, OMLB took it several steps further. They hosted mock committee meetings where ambassadors and the public made acquisition and disposition decisions based on hypothetical yet largely representative property scenarios OMLB considers on a routine basis.**

Leslie Smith, Executive Director of OMLB, highlighted the success of this approach: “It was incredible to witness how powerful this mock process was in helping residents understand the property sales process and to put them directly in the delicate process of evaluating property applications and deciding which applicant should be approved and whether a discount in sales price was warranted.”⁹¹ These sessions also revealed that residents tended to be more restrictive for out-of-state applicants, given their firsthand



Credit: Omaha Municipal Land Bank

experiences with investors who flipped properties with little regard for the community.

Following these community-informed discussions, OMLB introduced a scorecard for evaluating property applications, which includes community-identified criteria such as whether the project benefits the local area, and criteria to consider when providing discounts on property. Additionally, applications must now include a social impact statement as well as an intent to use local contractors.

Since joining OMLB, Smith has focused her passion on building generational wealth, particularly in North and South Omaha where there are high concentrations of Black and Brown residents and land bank properties. Another vital component of OMLB's engagement was educating the community about redlining and its ongoing impact on disinvestment in communities of color. One point of overwhelming consensus from these sessions was the need to prioritize legacy residents in historically redlined communities during property sales, particularly when there are multiple applications for one property.

⁹⁰ Omaha Municipal Land Bank, <https://omahalandbank.org/get-involved/>.

⁹¹ Conversation with the author on June 27, 2024.

5 RACIAL EQUITY AND JUSTICE

More land banks are actively pursuing the goals of racial equity and justice in their work, and doing so in different ways. Several respondents noted efforts to build more racially diverse staff and boards, and revise policies and programs to eliminate barriers and access to land bank properties for historically marginalized groups.

Advancing racial diversity, equity, and inclusion is inextricable from land banks' function of addressing entrenched vacancy and abandonment. Because of a legacy of unjust policies and racist systems, communities of color bear an unfair share of the burden of VAD properties.

However, this work has become more difficult in areas where racial equity and justice is being politicized, especially for land banks working in jurisdictions where new laws ban public entities from working on or advocating for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Community Progress is committed to helping land bank practitioners understand this history and the ongoing inequalities that contribute to systemic vacancy.⁹² Building this understanding, along with the necessary skills to disrupt racial injustice, is essential for equitable change. Land banks are a part of the solution in creating investment opportunities that build wealth for legacy residents and future generations.

Six Strategies Land Banks Can Use to Center Racial Justice



Graphic © Center for Community Progress

⁹² "Lessons from 2023 VAD Academy: Systemic Racism is a Root Cause of Vacant Properties," Center for Community Progress (blog), July 20, 2023, <https://communityprogress.org/blog/2023-vad-academy-systemic-racism-vacant-property/>.

LUCAS COUNTY LAND BANK, OHIO

Racial Equity and Justice is in our DNA

When you spend time with the Lucas County Land Bank staff, you quickly realize their passion and commitment to racial equity and justice is undeniable.⁹³ This commitment is embedded in their work, especially in Black and Brown communities in Toledo and Lucas County, where they focus on reducing the racial homeownership gap and addressing the effects of redlining.

Their efforts range from hiring organizers from the community, to investing in communities like The Junction, a quintessential example of urban renewal which divided the neighborhood from the core of downtown Toledo.

Historically, the racial wealth gap made it difficult for community members to access land bank properties to become homeowners. To address this, the land bank created the Neighborhood Justice Fund (NJF) in 2020, seeding it with \$1.5 million from the land bank's operating budget. This fund, available to residents in neighborhoods where the majority are people of color (which represents almost half of Toledo's population),

has provided grants for a variety of projects, from small home repairs to full rehabilitations. The land bank focuses NJF on creating block-wide impacts by strategically engaging residents who live near land bank properties that are receiving investments.

According to Shantaé Brownlee, Senior Vice President for Operations and Chief Financial Officer, the NJF is a true partnership between the land bank and the community. "We're creating a pot of money and not attaching our hopes and expectations to it but [instead] attaching a community need...The tool is not just a wrench, it could be a screwdriver, it could be a hammer."⁹⁴

The NJF helps fill a significant equity gap in Lucas County. For land banks shaping their practices to better meet their community's needs, Brownlee suggests "understanding where you're serving, who you're serving... and being willing to be open, honest, and brave enough to communicate where your organization is not meeting that gap."



Credit: Lucas County Land Bank

⁹³ "Building Neighborhoods," testimonials by residents of the impact of the Lucas County Land Bank, posted April 1, 2024, by Lucas County Land Bank, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PNEbVUQzSw>.

⁹⁴ Conversation with NLBN staff on November 1, 2023.

SPOTLIGHT

ROME-FLOYD LAND BANK AUTHORITY, GEORGIA

Words Leading to Actions

Spurred by nationwide calls for racial justice in 2020, the Rome-Floyd Land Bank Authority moved to name and address the racial inequities in the predominantly Black and low-income neighborhoods they served.⁹⁵ During a strategic planning session with staff and board members, stakeholders confronted the history of redlining and segregation in their community, naming the direct impact this legacy has on their work. Following the planning session, Rome-Floyd Land Bank Authority updated their mission statement to commit the land bank to fostering equitable and inclusive communities.

Their mission statement now reads:

“The Rome-Floyd Land Bank Authority’s mission is to eliminate all evidence of redlining in the community by creating equitable, inclusive opportunities for all by returning tax delinquent, underutilized and abandoned properties back to productive use.”

Community Development Director, Bekki Fox, views the mission statement as the first step of many, stating, “Every time we read our mission statement it always brings us back to remind us of what we’re doing.”⁹⁶ The mission statement led to renewed efforts to diversify their board, resulting in the recruitment of two leaders of color enmeshed in community organizations, to the board.

The mission statement also helped drive the creation of a board committee on program development and partnerships, led by a board member and community leader. One notable



Credit: Rome-Floyd Land Bank Authority (Facebook)

accomplishment of the committee was leading the transformation of a vacant lot in a neighborhood many walked away from given public safety concerns. The land bank knocked on doors and asked neighbors what they wanted to see on that vacant lot, which turned out to be a pocket park. The land bank worked with residents to create the pocket park and connect it to a nearby trail system.

Amanda Carter, Manager of the Land Bank shared, “It all starts with values and why you believe in this work...the purpose of our land bank is to do the hard things that no one else would and even when you make mistakes, there is always a lesson learned.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Rome-Floyd Land Bank Authority, <https://www.rome-floyd.us/425/Land-Bank-Authority>.

⁹⁶ Conversation with NLBN Staff on October 30, 2023.

⁹⁷ Conversation with the author on June 17, 2024

LOUISVILLE LANDBANK, KENTUCKY

Utilizing a Racial Audit Review

For years, the Louisville-Jefferson County Landbank, among the oldest land banks in the country, was like many land banks, focused on quantity and speed of transactions. In 2019, however, the community started to question who the land bank prioritized in property disposition and outcomes. While nearly all the properties held by the land bank are in neighborhoods with predominantly Black households, staff analysis revealed that Black homeownership rates actually decreased in those same neighborhoods from 2000 to 2020.

In response, the board passed a resolution in 2020 initiating a racial equity review of all land bank policies and practices.⁹⁸ According to the City's Office of Housing and Community Development Director Laura Grabowski, having the board pass an official resolution helped the land bank preserve the practice of applying a racial equity lens to all future policies and programs, regardless of future leadership or staff changes.⁹⁹

The land bank completed the racial equity review over the next two-and-a-half years, using a racial equity toolkit created in a 2015 City-led initiative.¹⁰⁰ The review considered the land bank's policies through the lens of four different stakeholder groups: initial property purchaser, end users, neighbors of the property, and professional servicers or contractors for the property.

The land bank made some of the biggest recommended changes to its sales policies, moving from a "first come, first served" approach to a set of scoring criteria that prioritizes owner-occupants and favors neighborhood residents. Additionally, the land bank developed a homeownership program that would provide

downpayment assistance for legacy residents seeking to become first-time homebuyers.

As a result of the review, the land bank began collecting socioeconomic information from buyers and end users to improve transparency and accountability, and equipping the land bank to set and communicate progress towards benchmarks for property disposition.

Two years following this exercise, the land bank is again reviewing their policies and programs. Through routine evaluation, they can better meet community needs as they arise. Grabowski says one key to success is starting with an open mind, avoiding pointing fingers or placing blame, and gathering a variety of stakeholders at the table.



Credit: Eva Ho / Center for Community Progress

⁹⁸ "Landbank Racial Equity Review," City of Louisville, <https://louisvilleky.gov/government/community-development/landbank-racial-equity-review>.

⁹⁹ Conversation with NLBN Staff on May 14, 2024.

¹⁰⁰ "Racial Equity Toolkit," City of Louisville, <https://louisvilleky.gov/downtown-revitalization-team/document/racial-equity-tool>.

Section III

Future of Land Banking: Where Can We Go From Here

Although we cannot predict the future, we can make informed choices to anticipate upcoming opportunities and challenges. Think about how we want to see land banks transformed ten years from now: What do land banks need to continue addressing systemic challenges, to act as caring and responsive community partners, and to remain transparent in both successes and failures?

Failure is a part of the process when organizations are honest, evolving, and tackling entrenched systemic inequities.

Even if there are fewer than 300 land banks in the next ten years, this does not mean the field has failed. Knowing when a land bank has fulfilled its mission, or when its powers and resources are mismatched with the challenges, is a powerful realization. By examining historical trends, we can prepare for future challenges and respond with an entrepreneurial, community-focused mindset.

What Might VAD Look Like in the Coming Years?

There will likely be an increase in commercial vacancy, particularly in office and retail spaces as remote work and online shopping trends continue. Residential vacancy will likely rise in smaller

cities, towns, rural areas, and inner-ring suburbs of legacy cities, while urban areas will likely see an overall reduction in vacancy, except for in neighborhoods with a history of disinvestment.

New Partnership Opportunities for Land Banks

Housing Justice for Vulnerable Populations

There is a real opportunity for more land banks to focus on creating housing and job opportunities for returning citizens, refugees, and people experiencing homelessness. Land banks could play a larger role in converting vacant properties into temporary or permanent affordable housing, partnering with organizations to address housing insecurity. While this may not be the core expertise of land banks, collaboration with groups seeking land could help fill the gap.

Climate Change

As severe weather events continue to become more common, they will leave more VAD properties and vacant land in their wake, particularly in flood plains. Homeowners may relocate or become displaced, leaving behind land that cannot be built on due to FEMA guidelines. In this environment, land banks can take on various roles in response, such as implementing intentional greening strategies like stormwater infrastructure or tree planting on vacant land to promote climate resiliency. Additionally, land banks should take advantage of the billions of federal dollars distributed to low-income communities as part of the Green Gas Reduction Fund.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Lara Heard, "What's Happening with the Billions in Climate Funding for Low-Income Communities?", *Shelterforce*, August 23, 2024, <https://shelterforce.org/2024/08/23/whats-happening-with-the-billions-in-climate-funding-for-low-income-communities/>.

COMMUNITY LAND BANKS, PUERTO RICO

Community Land Banks in Puerto Rico: Leading the Way on Climate Change

Following Hurricane Maria, nonprofits, community-based groups, and local governments united to advocate for the creation of Community Land Banks (CLBs) in Puerto Rico. Their efforts were spearheaded by Centro para la Reconstrucción del Hábitat, Inc., (CRH) the only nonprofit organization in Puerto Rico dedicated exclusively to stopping the problem of vacant and abandoned properties, which led to the passage of legislation in the 2020 Municipal Code. To date, five municipalities have adopted land banking ordinances—Toa Baja, Vega Baja, Isabela, Yauco, and Hormigueros.¹⁰² Since then, CLBs have become a key part of Puerto Rico’s five-year housing plan, as well as elevating the issue to an island-wide priority.¹⁰³

Philanthropic and nonprofit organizations have also created a revolving loan fund to help CLBs

rehabilitate abandoned properties for affordable housing. This initiative targets the housing shortage while addressing the unique funding needs of start-up CLBs that traditional lending institutions often overlook. The fund enables CLBs to transform neglected properties into affordable housing options that would otherwise be out of reach.¹⁰⁴

The Vega Baja Community Land Bank has successfully partnered with the local government and nonprofits to leverage \$1 million in EPA funding to address climate change in Vega Baja. The Vega Baja CLB maps vacant properties in vulnerable areas, facilitates property acquisition, deconstructs dilapidated buildings, and promotes nature-based solutions on vacant lots, enhancing the community’s resilience and sustainability.



Credit: Center for Community Progress

¹⁰² Centro para la Reconstrucción del Hábitat, Inc., <https://www.crhpr.org/en>.

¹⁰³ Carlos Berríos Polanco, “Community Land Banks: An Alternative to Displacement in Puerto Rico?” *Nueve Millones*, February 11, 2024, <https://www.9millones.com/en/story/bancos-de-tierras-comunitarias-una-alternativa-al-desplazamiento-en-puerto-rico>.

¹⁰⁴ “Fund launched to rehabilitate public nuisance properties,” *The San Juan Daily Star*, May 31, 2024, <https://www.sanjuandaily.com/post/fund-launched-to-rehabilitate-public-nuisance-properties>.

SPOTLIGHT

Pennsylvania's Whole-Home Repair Program

Introduced by State Senator Nikil Saval (D-01) in March 2022, Pennsylvania's Whole-Home Repairs Program was signed into law in July 2022 with an initial \$125 million appropriation in the state budget.¹⁰⁵ Targeting one of the oldest housing stocks in the nation, this program establishes a one-stop solution for home repairs and weatherization, while expanding the local workforce with family-sustaining jobs.

The program addresses three main gaps in existing repair and weatherization programs:

- Grants for homeowners and forgivable loans to small landlords (with affordability restrictions) to make necessary repairs and improvements to energy efficiency and accessibility.

- Resources for support staff to ensure applicants access the appropriate programs in the right order maximize their access to holistic repairs.
- Support for retaining workers in home repair and weatherization training and pre-apprenticeship programs, including cash stipends to trainees so that Pennsylvania can build the local workforce needed to meet demand.

The Whole-Home Repairs Program is a housing security initiative, an energy initiative, an anti-blight initiative, a jobs initiative, and a community safety initiative. It tackles many of the root causes of community instability by keeping people in their homes and keeping these homes safe and healthy.



Credit: Center for Community Progress

¹⁰⁵“COVID-19 ARPA Whole-Home Repairs Program,” Pennsylvania Department of Community & Economic Development, <https://dced.pa.gov/programs/covid-19-arpa-whole-home-repairs-program/>.

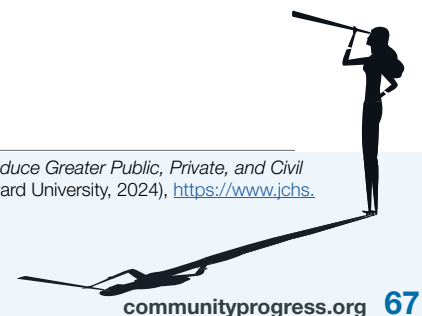
Occupied Deteriorated Properties

The numbers of deteriorated occupied properties—both owner-occupied homes and tenant-occupied rentals—are expected to rise. This will be particularly prevalent in areas with older housing stock, older occupants, and more low- and moderate-income families. A whole-block or neighborhood approach by land banks must support increased funding and programs for critical home repairs for owner-occupants experiencing hardship.¹⁰⁶ In addition, land banks should work closely with local housing and building code enforcement departments to ensure local landlords are providing tenants with safe housing, using both a compliance-focused code enforcement approach and proactive rental inspection and licensing programs. Land banks should also continue advocating for increased funding and outreach for home repair programs.

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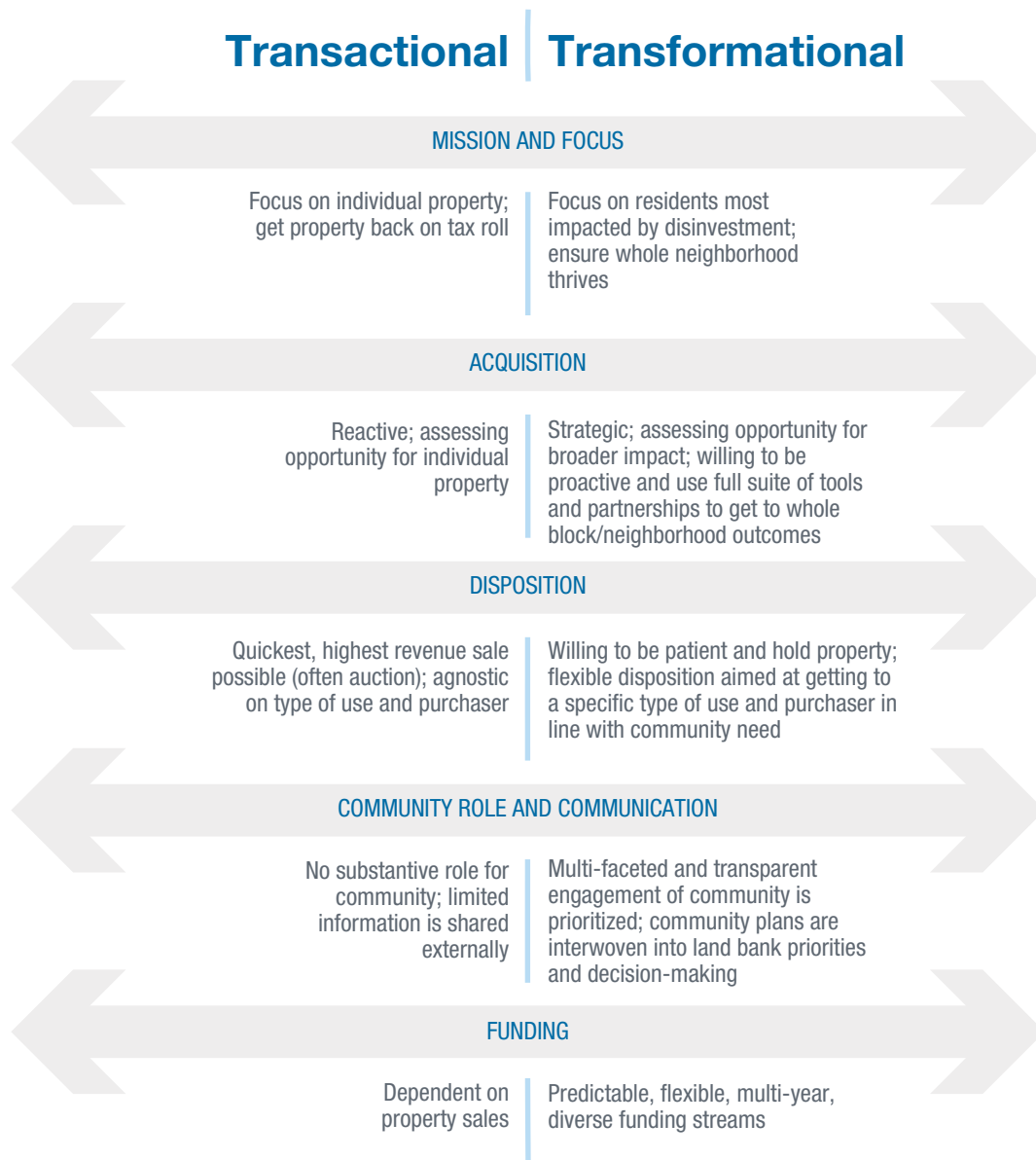
¹⁰⁶Carlos Martín, Alan Mallach, Todd Swanstrom, Austin Harrison, and Sophia Wedeen, *Catalyzing a Movement to Produce Greater Public, Private, and Civil Resources to Improve Housing Conditions Through Home Repair Programs* (Joint Center for Housing Studies, Harvard University, 2024), https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/research/files/harvard_jchs_home_repair_programs_martin_etal_2024.pdf.



Transactional or Transformational? The Land Bank Spectrum

Most land banks today fall somewhere between the two ends of this spectrum. Where a land bank is at (or should be at) on the spectrum depends on:

- 1) severity of VAD properties,
- 2) landscape of partner capacity, and
- 3) state and local policy framework.



Graphic © Center for Community Progress

From Transacting to Transforming

Land banks can and should play a special role in addressing these challenges. They can prioritize and **value** equity and inclusion, placing themselves at the forefront of reparative and justice-focused work. They can support alternative ownership models, and turn land into opportunities for creativity, resilience, and community-building. Our hope is that the examples in this publication will inspire land banks to reflect on their role in tackling their communities' unique challenges and identify who benefits and who might be left out. If land banks do not continuously ask, they will not continue to evolve.

We also encourage land banks to move beyond simply transactional work and focus on becoming entities of *transformation*. This means engaging with, listening to, and following through on commitments to the community, and putting people first—not properties. Some land banks may feel stuck, but change is possible with the willingness to do and be better. While land banks cannot solve all problems, they must take risks and leverage their capacity, resources, and superpowers to assemble and steward land to support the most vulnerable residents and their communities' pressing needs. There will always be resistance to changing the status quo, but we are here to help land banks navigate these challenges.

For land banks to truly become entities of transformation, they will need additional resources: community and political support, funding and partnerships, and grace to innovate—even with the possibility of failure. The 2023 survey highlighted that some land banks want to expand their inventory pipeline beyond traditional property tax foreclosure, take a larger role in rehabilitating and constructing affordable housing, and embrace community conversations about race, poverty, and gentrification. Flexibility, innovation, and accountability will be key in addressing these uncertain times.

A Call to Action

We believe in the impact land banks have each and every day and appreciate their continued leadership, honesty, and dedication. The past has made it clear that land banks can continue evolving to meet their communities' changing needs. Where some land banks may be afraid to change or do not know how to be most helpful to their community, this is where the National Land Bank Network and the Center for Community Progress can help.

Creating thriving communities requires collective effort and continued support from all sides—funding, political allies, and community partners. It has taken decades to reach this point, and reversing the damage caused by disinvestment will take time. But there is no better time to start than now.



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