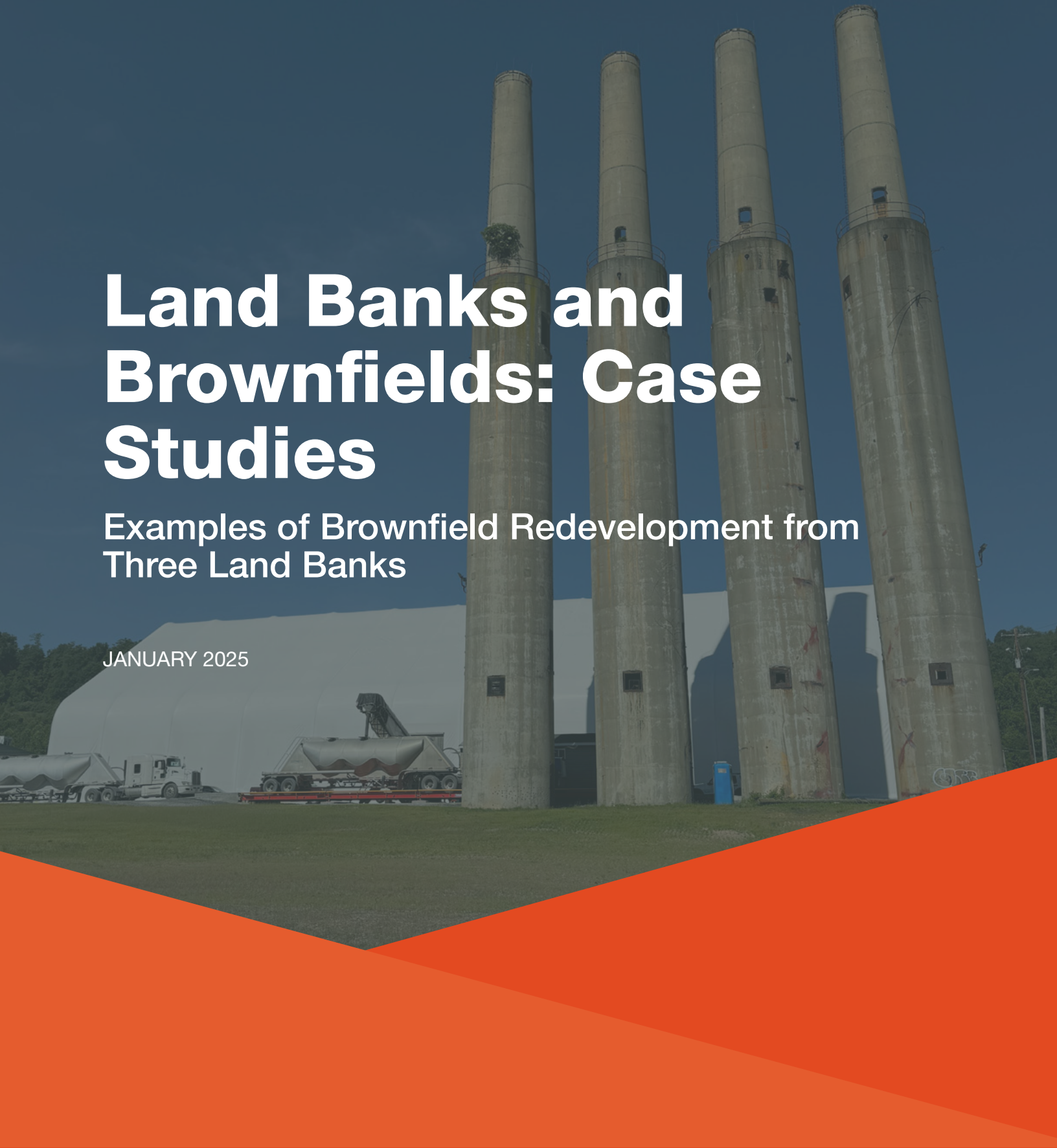


Land Banks and Brownfields: Case Studies

Examples of Brownfield Redevelopment from
Three Land Banks

JANUARY 2025



Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| INTRODUCTION | 2 |
| GENESEE COUNTY LAND BANK AUTHORITY | 3 |
| Genesee Health System Center for Children’s Integrated Services | 5 |
| From “Chevy in the Hole” to Chevy Commons | 6 |
| HOUSTON LAND BANK | 7 |
| Project Yellow Cab | 9 |
| 5th Ward Cancer Cluster | 10 |
| WEST VIRGINIA LAND STEWARDSHIP CORPORATION | 11 |
| The Smokestacks | 13 |
| Fairmont Rail Trail Project | 14 |
| ADDITIONAL CASE STUDIES | 15 |



Abandoned Fairmont Box Factory in West Virginia. (Photo: Community Progress) // Cover Photo: Community Progress

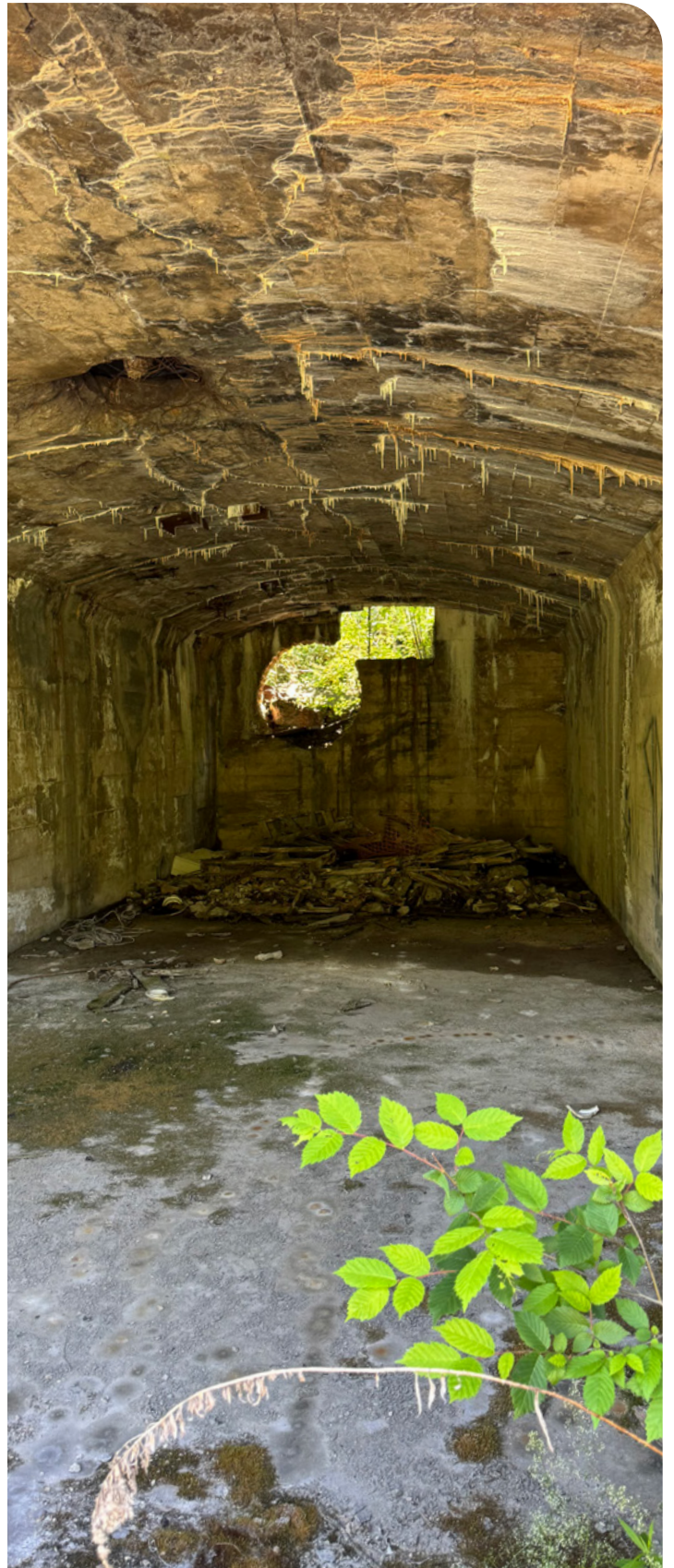
Introduction

Across the country, land banks are emerging as entities with unique abilities to tackle brownfield sites and help communities reuse these properties. A [land bank](#) is a public agency with unique powers granted by state laws to put vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties back to productive uses that align with community goals. A land bank's primary purpose is to acquire properties that some call "[blighted](#)" and temporarily hold and take care of them until they can be transferred to new owners.

In many communities, the inventory of vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties includes [brownfield properties](#). Brownfields are properties where the presence or potential presence of a hazardous chemical or pollutant threatens community health and wellbeing and makes redevelopment challenging, risky, and costly. Communities struggle with brownfield properties because of these unique challenges, but land banking approaches can help.

After speaking with land banks across the country engaging in diverse approaches to brownfield assessment, remediation, and reuse, Community Progress selected three land banks—Genesee County Land Bank Authority (GCLBA); Houston Land Bank (HLB); and the West Virginia Land Stewardship Corporation (WVLSC)—to visit and gain a firsthand understanding of their brownfields work.

This publication highlights these leaders in land banking approaches to brownfield redevelopment. Their case studies reflect the persistence required to see projects through, the importance of centering priorities and outcomes in a people-powered way utilizing community engaged planning, and the partnerships necessary to get this work done.



Part of a former glass factory in Grafton, West Virginia, now the planned site of an outdoor recreation area. (Photo: Community Progress)



Learn more about land banks and brownfield redevelopment on the Community Progress website.

Genesee County Land Bank Authority: Persistence Pays Off

QUICK FACTS



STAFFING

31 full-time staff

plus 2 contract positions and 7 board members



ANNUAL BUDGET

\$5M – 23M

based on fluctuations in grant funding



INVENTORY

14,398 parcels

of which 72% are vacant lots and 28% have structures



Christina Kelly in Flint, Michigan on a site tour. (Photo: Community Progress)



Since 2004, the Genesee County Land Bank Authority has accepted hundreds of tax-foreclosed properties in various states of disrepair. We now have an inventory of over 14,000 properties—including more than 500 commercial and industrial sites, many of which are brownfields.

Positioning these sites for reuse is not an easy task. The process can span years, and even decades, and securing funds is sometimes a challenge. Nevertheless, if the effort to develop these sites takes persistence and hard work, it is also incredibly rewarding to see a site evolve into a beautiful greenspace, a valuable community resource, or a thriving business.

Each project, whether it leads to immediate redevelopment or not, lays the groundwork for future opportunities. This work is not merely about economic development; it is about using the asset of land to create opportunities for community needs such as housing, resource centers or gathering spaces, and business expansion.

GCLBA is more than a facilitator of property transactions; we are in this for the long haul as a catalyst for community transformation.

Christina Kelly, Director of Planning and Neighborhood Revitalization, Genesee County Land Bank Authority



Community Context

Years before the Flint water crisis placed the city in the international spotlight, Flint and the surrounding Genesee County municipalities grappled with sustained and steep population loss as the auto industry shuttered plants and shed jobs. This decades-long population decline led to widespread vacancy, impacting residential neighborhoods and commercial corridors. The 2008 mortgage foreclosure crisis only exacerbated the issues of vacancy, abandonment, and property deterioration. It is no surprise, then, that the modern-day land bank traces its roots back to Flint.

Genesee County Land Bank Authority

As one of the higher capacity land banks in the country, the [Genesee County Land Bank Authority](#) (GCLBA) is involved in residential, commercial, and industrial property redevelopment. Since its creation in 2004, GCLBA has sold over 10,000 properties for productive reuse, demolished nearly 9,000 deteriorated properties, and renovated and resold over 200 residential properties. The largest property owner in Flint, GCLBA invests significant resources every year in property maintenance, such as keeping its structures boarded up and its lots mowed and clear of debris.

How GCLBA Got Involved in Brownfields Work

In Michigan, county treasurers are required to foreclose on all properties after three years of tax delinquency and offer these up for purchase in a tax sale. Through GCLBA's agreement with the County, it

automatically receives all foreclosed properties that do not sell at the tax sale. As a result, GCLBA has consistently had commercial brownfield properties in its inventory for most of its tenure. Fortunately, the GCLBA Board of Directors has always supported and understood the importance of working to assess and clean up these sites, which are an unavoidable reality of Flint's industrial legacy. Brownfield remediation is central to GCLBA's strategic priorities, but the land bank's level of activity in this space has evolved over time depending on available resources.

Approach to Brownfields Work

By leveraging data, GCLBA strategically prioritizes development of their extensive inventory of brownfield properties. For example, the land bank will select properties in their inventory with the strongest market potential, conduct Phase I Environmental Site Assessments (ESAs) on those properties, and list them with a realtor. On the other end of the spectrum, GCLBA requests cleanup assistance on highly contaminated properties from the State of Michigan since the state often has different programs to address such challenging and costly parcels. More importantly, beyond solely focusing on market potential, GCLBA prioritizes development opportunities where the proposed end use will further the public good.

Project Profile: Genesee Health System Center for Children's Integrated Services

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Former Use: Oil change facility

Future Use: State-of-the-art family and children's health services facility

Land Bank Engagement During Project Phase:

- Assessment
- Remediation
- Redevelopment

Acquired Property: Yes, accepted via involuntary transfer prior to assessment

Duration of Land Bank Involvement: 9 years

Funding Land Bank Used:

- Multipurpose
- Assessment
- RLF
- Cleanup
- Other: State blight elimination grant, Genesee Health System funding, local philanthropy

GCLBA received the abandoned oil change facility through tax foreclosure in 2011. From 1986 to 2011, it operated as a car wash, auto repair shop, and oil change facility, leaving the site contaminated with petroleum products.

Remediation began with an EPA emergency response to the on-site oil drums. The land bank utilized an EPA assessment grant to do Phase I and II ESAs. By 2014, GCLBA secured funding from Michigan's Blight Elimination Program to complete demolition and cleanup, and by 2015 the site was officially ready for development.

Challenges arose, including discovering contamination caused by a nearby gas station during Phase II, which GCLBA resolved by requesting assistance for tank removal and remediation through the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE). Despite interest in the property from several developers over the years,



Before and After: From an abandoned oil change facility (Photo: Google Maps, July 2011) to a brand new children's health center. (Photo: Community Progress)

GCLBA held the parcels for eight years, waiting for a project that truly benefited the public good. Finally, in 2019, the Greater Flint Mental Health Facilities, Inc. and Genesee Health System acquired the site for the Center for Children's Integrated Services (CCIS). This 60,000 square foot state-of-the-art facility provides mental and physical health care services to children in Flint and surrounding communities—a critical public health need exacerbated by the harms of Flint's 2014 water crisis. Children's healthcare providers that were previously located throughout the region are now centralized in one building, conveniently located next to a major highway.

While there were hurdles during the development process, like vacating sections of streets to ensure adequate parking for the center and pauses in community engagement efforts due to the pandemic, the CCIS facility ultimately succeeded because many funding and development partners came together to navigate the complexities and fulfill a community need.

Project Profile: From “Chevy in the Hole” to Chevy Commons

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Former Use: Chevrolet plant

Future Use: Genesee County’s first state park

Land Bank Engagement During Project Phase:

- Assessment
- Remediation
- Redevelopment

Acquired Property: N/A

Duration of Land Bank Involvement: 17 years

Funding Land Bank Used:

- Multipurpose
- Assessment
- RLF
- Cleanup
- Other: US Forest Service, local philanthropy

GCLBA’s longest-running brownfield project is Chevy Commons, known colloquially to residents as “Chevy in the Hole.” This 67-acre site located along the Flint River began operations in the 1930s as one of General Motors’ four large-scale Flint production facilities. It had approximately 8,000 workers at its operational peak, 17 buildings, and a large parking lot. The GM plant closings in the mid-1990s, followed by building demolitions through 2004, led to a barren, vacant, eyesore with soil and groundwater contamination and underground storage tanks. After 2004, much of the site was paved to limit movement of residual contamination.

In 2007, with funding support provided by an EPA grant, GCLBA partnered with the University of Michigan and the Genesee Institute to conduct community visioning and develop the site’s first concept plan on behalf of the City of Flint, which owned the property at the time. This concept plan also helped inform a more comprehensive riverfront revitalization plan in 2010

which reimagined this brownfield as the county’s first state park. Construction and additional remediation began in 2015 to cap and address underground contamination on the riverfront site. Remediation was completed in phases due to funding availability across multiple sources, including EPA emergency response funding and funding from EGLE.

The final phase of construction began in September 2020, laying the groundwork for Governor Gretchen Whitmer’s July 2021 announcement that the rebranded “Chevy Commons” community greenspace would be a central part of Genesee County’s first state park. The new park—to be managed by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources—is expected to encompass a total of 230 acres stretching across three miles of the Flint River and be within a nine-minute drive of every Flint home. It will also feature an extensive network of trails, unique playscapes, accessible open spaces, fishing platforms, and canoe and kayak launches along the river. While the GCLBA’s direct involvement with the Chevy in the Hole site has now concluded, the land bank played a pivotal role in the decades-long process of transforming an abandoned, contaminated industrial site into a vibrant community asset.

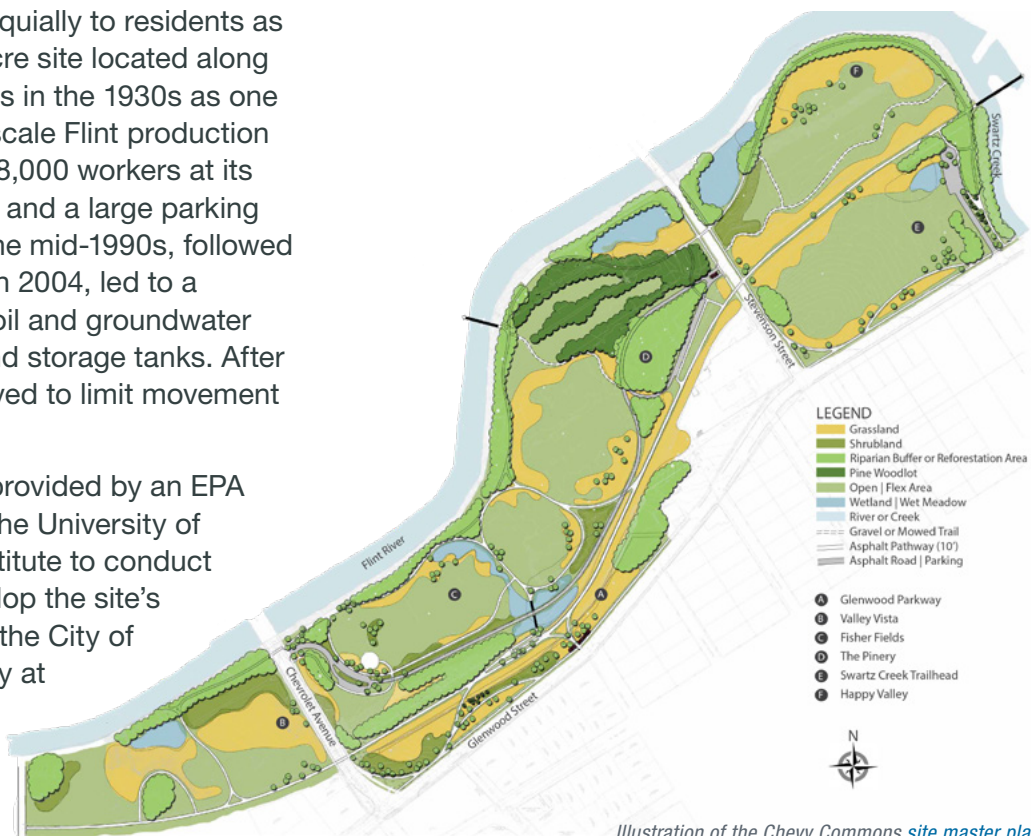


Illustration of the Chevy Commons [site master plan](#).

Houston Land Bank: Harnessing People Power to Drive Change

QUICK FACTS



STAFFING

8 full-time staff

plus 2 contract positions and 13 board members



ANNUAL BUDGET

\$1.8M



INVENTORY

413 properties

100% of which are vacant lots



Houston’s story is one of innovation and progress, but it’s also a story of inequity and environmental injustice. For decades, the communities most impacted by industrialization—predominantly Black and Brown neighborhoods—have been left to bear the toxic remnants of our city’s success.

When I took the helm of HLB, I knew we had to do more than just clean up contaminated land. We needed to lead with a vision for equity, resilience, and justice. That means putting the power back in the hands of the people. It means ensuring that redevelopment doesn’t just benefit developers or the wealthy, but serves the communities that have been historically excluded from these opportunities.

This is about more than development—it’s about dismantling systems of injustice and creating a new standard for how cities grow. We’re standing with communities to reclaim their land, their power, and their future. Together, we are creating a city where every resident has the opportunity to thrive, where no one is left behind, and where the legacy of neglect is transformed into one of empowerment.

Christa Stoneham, Chief Executive Officer and President, Houston Land Bank



Christa Stoneham addresses a group during a tour of the former Yellow Cab headquarters. (Photo: Eraw Photo)

Community Context

Houston, Texas has experienced rapid population growth over the past decade, currently at 2.3 million. However, the city's challenges include an affordable housing shortage and historic disinvestment in predominantly Black and Brown neighborhoods, which are compounded by the effects of climate change. As evidenced by Hurricane Harvey in 2017, natural disasters and other climate change harms will continue to impact the quality and stability of Houston's housing supply, exacerbate resident displacement from flood zones, and expose the need for improving stormwater infrastructure.

Houston Land Bank

Originally formed as the Land Assemblage and Redevelopment Authority in 1999 by the City of Houston, the [Houston Land Bank](#) (HLB) has sold more than 1,000 homes, restored over \$96 million in property value, and created a wide variety of initiatives to support the community, including lot activation programs, an affordable homebuying program, and an affordable housing development program.

How HLB Got Involved in Brownfields Work

In 2021, HLB received an EPA [assessment coalition grant](#) and used it to engage Adaapta (formerly Community Lattice) to administer grant compliance, facilitate brownfield community engagement initiatives, and assist in facilitating brownfield site assessment and reuse planning activities. The HLB Board of Directors supported this new engagement, recognizing the critical importance of growing operational and professional services capacity to engage in effective brownfield redevelopment.

Approach to Brownfields Work

HLB exemplifies a land bank that is truly driven by “people power.” Unlike a for-profit approach that primarily focuses on the wants of a developer, HLB prioritizes the community at the beginning of and throughout each project. HLB's goal is to create an open, transparent relationship with community members who have been disproportionately impacted by the environmental health harms of brownfields due to racist and discriminatory land use policies. They incorporate residents' feedback into solutions and empower them to be involved in the change they want to see in their community.

HLB's community-first approach includes their quarterly Brownfield Activation Committee (BAC) meetings, where local stakeholders and organizations meet to brainstorm reuse and partnership opportunities for land bank brownfield properties. Another example of their resident-centered approach is the [Hidden Gems Finder](#), a program that empowers residents to be local “brownfield investigators”; they provide residents a GIS-mapping tool to identify and upload photos and addresses of potential brownfield properties.



HLB hosts a “Juice+Justice” event to engage the community. (Photos: Eraw Photo)





Street view of the abandoned Yellow Cab headquarters. (Photo: Community Progress)

Project Profile: Project Yellow Cab

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Former Use: Yellow Cab headquarters

Future Use: Single and multi-family affordable housing

Land Bank Engagement During Project Phase:

- Assessment
- Remediation
- Redevelopment

Acquired Property: Yes, during remediation phase

Duration of Land Bank Involvement: 4+ years

Funding Land Bank Used:

- Multipurpose
- Assessment
- RLF
- Cleanup
- Other: American Rescue Plan Act

On the Northside of Houston, the defunct 6.8-acre Yellow Cab headquarters was contaminated from petroleum, underground storage tanks, and other previous machinery-related activities. The original site plans involved an affordable housing development to be led by Houston’s Housing and Community Development Department and a private developer. However, due to funding constraints and a shift in the City’s priorities, the City needed to find another public entity to lead the project and landed on the HLB.

In coordination with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), the EPA, and the

environmental consulting firm ESE Partners, Phase I and II Environmental Site Assessments (ESAs)—which involved soil testing and removal, four underground storage tank removals, and groundwater monitoring—began in 2020. The Phase II ESA culminated in a “No Further Action” letter received in early 2024. This clearance allowed HLB to purchase a portion of the site and meet residential development standards. The site owner, the Victoria Harter Phyllis Spisak Family Educational Trust, divided the property into four tracts. In 2021, HLB acquired two non-adjacent tracts for \$4.8 million, while Harris County acquired the adjoining tract for \$7.3 million.

Even before the site was acquired, HLB started community engagement, soliciting redevelopment ideas. In 2022, HLB worked with the architectural firm Perkins & Will to host a resident-led visioning session for the site. From this activity, they learned that the neighborhood desired affordable single and multifamily housing, diverse grocery store options, a community hub, entertainment venues, and safe, walkable green spaces. HLB identified Harris County as the best partner to align resources and roles, and bring the community’s vision for affordable housing and neighborhood amenities to life. HLB will develop approximately 40 single-family homes aimed at families earning up to 120 percent of the Area Median Income (AMI) on the two tracts they purchased, while Harris County will lead the multifamily housing development, aiming to provide at least 90 quality, affordable units on the third tract. Once an eyesore, Project Yellow Cab will address a neighborhood’s affordable housing needs and create a new, vibrant space for the community.

Environmental Justice Spotlight: 5th Ward Cancer Cluster

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Former and Future Use:

Relocation initiative from 5th Ward neighborhood

Duration of Land Bank

Involvement: 1+ years

Funding Land Bank Used:

- Multipurpose
- Assessment
- RLF
- Cleanup
- Other: Local government

While brownfields are an issue affecting communities of all types and sizes, Black and Brown communities are [disproportionately impacted](#). In Houston, five out of five former landfills and six out of eight former incinerator sites are located in communities of color. The intentional co-location of industry and homes [harms community health and land](#), and can devastatingly decrease residents' life expectancy. The proliferation of brownfield sites in Black and Brown communities is a prime example of the type of environmental injustice exemplified in the story of the 5th Ward, a neighborhood identified as a "cancer cluster."

In 1899, the Southern Pacific Railroad (SPRR) built a railyard and wood preservation facility on a 125-acre tract of land adjacent to a predominantly Black and Brown neighborhood known as Kashmere Gardens. Though the facility ceased operations in 1984, it left behind significant soil and groundwater contamination given its use of creosote, a known carcinogen used to treat wood.

Following a November 2019 cancer cluster analysis conducted by the Texas Department of Health and Human Services, it was discovered that the site contributed to spikes in cancers and other adverse health effects in the 5th Ward. Impacted families have filed class action lawsuits against Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR), which took ownership and responsibility for the site in 1997 following a merger with SPRR.

The state's findings prompted actions at various levels of government, from the EPA to the City of Houston. In 2024, the Houston City Council preapproved \$2 million to HLB to assist in the voluntary relocation of residents from the 5th Ward. Pending final approval, funding will be used for new construction homes to be built on available lots in HLB's inventory, an approach that allows HLB to oversee construction and replicate architectural features of the residents' current homes.

The 5th Ward is an example of how land banks, even when not directly involved with brownfield remediation and reuse, can earn trust among community members and City leaders to help relocate residents out of contaminated areas, providing them with better health and environmental outcomes.



At Houston Land Bank, community engagement isn't a box we check—it's the foundation of everything we do.

For too long, the communities most impacted by environmental injustice have been left out of the conversations that shape their futures. But at HLB, we have made it our mission to turn the tables. The residents are no longer on the outside looking in—they are the architects of their own future.

The redevelopment of brownfields is about more than cleaning up toxic land—it's about restoring power to the people who have been systematically neglected.

*Lindsey Williams,
Director of Community
Development, Houston
Land Bank*

West Virginia Land Stewardship Corporation: Power in Partnerships

QUICK FACTS



STAFFING

3 full-time staff

plus 13 board members



ANNUAL BUDGET

\$1.65M



INVENTORY

<5 properties

100% of which are vacant lots



Taylor Bennett (right) and Carrie Staton (left), a TAB provider who works closely with WVLS, visit the Smokestacks redevelopment site. (Photo: Community Progress)



During one of my earliest trips to West Virginia, a seasoned community development professional said to me, “No work gets done here unless it gets done in partnership.” And, after almost a decade of working on land reuse issues in West Virginia, I can affirm that partnerships continue to be the key to our work, especially work on brownfield remediation and redevelopment. Partnerships are the answer to limited resources, overwhelming numbers of brownfield sites, and economic conditions that make brownfield redevelopment unprofitable for private property owners. Our partners stay in touch with each other, communicating about emerging opportunities for redevelopment, and strategizing about how to connect these projects with the perfect storm of the right property owner, the right partners, and the right funding they need to be successful.

We all share one common goal: address West Virginia’s history of extractive economy, disinvestment, and environmental contamination, and create a better quality of life for the people who live here.

Taylor Bennett, Executive Director, West Virginia Land Stewardship Corporation

Community Context

For over a century, West Virginia was home to a booming coal industry—today, it is dealing with the effects of that extractive economy. Many communities across the state are economically disadvantaged and the state ranks among the top five states with the highest poverty rates. Population loss, worsened by few economic opportunities, impacts the state's ability to adequately address vacant and abandoned structures due to its shrinking tax base.

West Virginia Land Stewardship Corporation

The [West Virginia Land Stewardship Corporation](#) (WVLS) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that operates one of the few statewide land banks in the US. While its land banking powers were originally authorized specifically to support brownfield remediation, WVLS's land banking program has since evolved to carry out a variety of activities including repurposing abandoned, tax-delinquent properties to address West Virginia's housing crisis; providing support for local land banks; and granting demolition funding. In addition to its role as a statewide land bank, WVLS operates a land stewardship program to monitor and manage conservation easements around the state. To date, WVLS supports 15 West Virginia municipal and county land banks and is helping to grow the land bank movement statewide.

How WVLS Got Involved in Brownfields Work

West Virginia has a long history of industrial development and very little flat land. This combination means much of the economically lucrative land is likely to be contaminated due to previous industrial infrastructure. The Northern Brownfields Assistance Center at West Virginia University (NBAC) and the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) struggled to access EPA funding for this desperately needed brownfield redevelopment work due to challenges like, 1) there being no clear chain of title, 2) the site owner being responsible for pollution at the site, 3) or the site owner being a for-profit organization. To address these barriers, NBAC and DEP advocated to the West Virginia state legislature to create WVLS as a statewide entity with the power to acquire and hold property and be a conduit for federal resources. WVLS's status as a statewide

entity was crucial so it could be a resource and partner to communities too small for a land bank or that have land banks with limited capacity.

Often, WVLS and its partners will monitor a known brownfield site for years waiting for the opportunity to acquire and remediate the property. Once an opportunity arises, WVLS or a partner organization will complete a Phase I Environmental Site Assessment (ESA). WVLS will then acquire the property, apply for EPA funding, complete remediation, and transfer the property back to the owner (or to a new, responsible owner). A unique characteristic of West Virginia's state-enabling legislation is that WVLS is protected from assuming any state-level liability for contamination when holding a property. The enabling legislation also requires the land bank to complete all appropriate inquiries to protect them from federal liability under the [Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act](#) (CERCLA).

Approach to Brownfields Work

WVLS's Brownfield Remediation Program conducts Phase I/II ESAs, redevelopment planning, and brownfield cleanups statewide. WVLS staff are often in conversation about potential projects with local government and community-based organizations long before a project formally enters the program. Phase I and II ESAs are necessary first steps, conducted by whichever partner has access to EPA assessment grant funds at the time. If cleanup is necessary, WVLS works with partners to determine the most strategic entity to take ownership of the property and apply for EPA brownfield cleanup grant funds. In rare instances, WVLS may decline to take ownership of a property if it is unlikely to submit a competitive EPA grant application (i.e., when the cost of remediation outweighs the potential benefits of the project). However, when it does make sense for WVLS to take ownership, the land bank acquires the property and serves as the remediating entity before passing the property off for redevelopment. While WVLS has the power to conduct redevelopment activities, it typically chooses to find an "end user" instead—most often at the recommendation of the community partners who first helped identify the site—to conduct the redevelopment phase of the process, reserving the land bank's resources for the next remediation project.



Street view of the Smokestacks, overgrown prior to WVLS's cleanup and site remediation. (Photo: Google Maps, August 2019)

Project Profile: The Smokestacks

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Former Use: World War II-era chemical plant

Future Use: Loading and storage facility for an industrial park

Land Bank Engagement During Project Phase:

- Assessment
- Remediation
- Redevelopment

Acquired Property: No

Duration of Land Bank Involvement: 10+ years

Funding Land Bank Used:

- Multipurpose
- Assessment
- RLF
- Cleanup
- Other: Matching funds from private owner

Within the footprint of the Morgantown Industrial Park, the 2.1 acre “Smokestacks” property—named for its looming industrial chimneys—was once home to a World War II-era coal-fired chemical plant and water treatment facility. Though the plant only operated from 1941 to 1945 and has sat abandoned for decades, its prior function resulted in significant soil contamination, including high levels of mercury

and asbestos. The industrial park owner was [ineligible](#) to apply for EPA funding due to their small business status, therefore, in exchange for a property management fee paid by the owner, the site was donated to WVLS to apply for assessment and cleanup funding, conduct remediation, and turn the property back over to the owner once completed.

In 2019, WVLS used part of a \$300,000 EPA Brownfields Assessment Grant to fund Phase I and II ESAs and received a \$500,000 Brownfields Cleanup Grant in 2020 for site remediation that included asbestos and hazardous material removal, regrading, and revegetation. Remediation was completed successfully in 2022, but not without complications. Several settling tanks that had been part of an industrial cooling system required additional remediation, extending the project timeline and cost. WVLS leaned into existing partnerships with DEP and NBAC, allowing the land bank to access sub-grant funding through DEP’s EPA Brownfield Revolving Loan fund.

The owner developed the site into a loading and storage facility that supports the entire industrial park, with future plans to include a rail spur expected to bring approximately 1,200 new jobs to the park. Environmental testing showed that the smokestacks themselves did not need to be removed because they had no contamination, and they remain a historic part of Morgantown’s skyline.

Project Profile: Fairmont Rail Trail Project

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Former Use: Railway properties

Future Use: Waterfront recreational rail trail

Land Bank Engagement During Project Phase:

- Assessment
- Remediation
- Redevelopment

Acquired Property: No

Duration of Land Bank Involvement: 10+ years

Funding Land Bank Used:

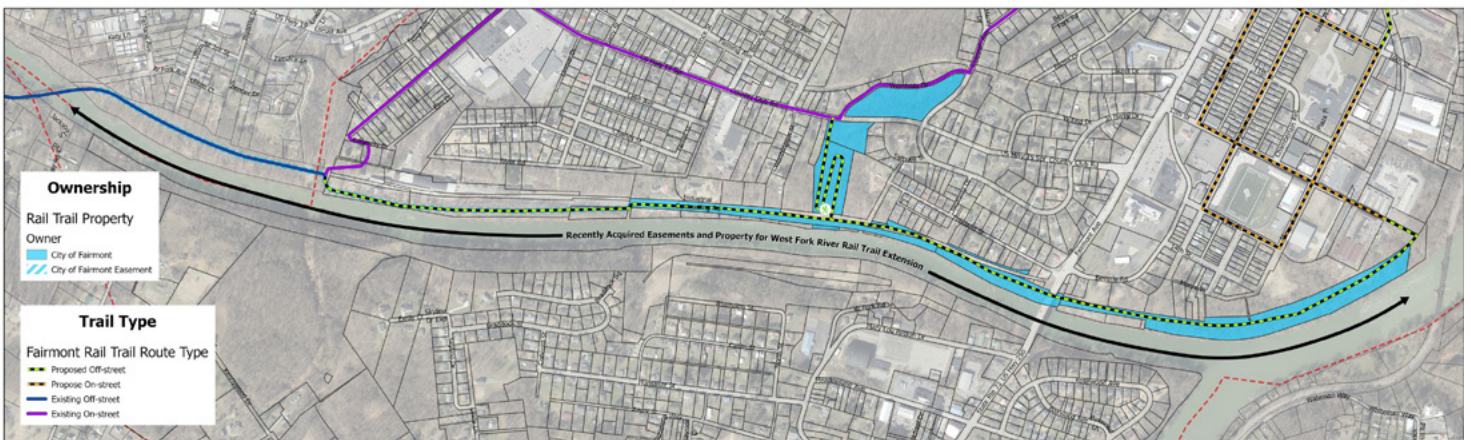
- Multipurpose
- Assessment
- RLF
- Cleanup
- Other: State brownfield assessment grants, tax increment financing, philanthropic

As part of West Virginia’s \$19 million Rail Trail project, the City of Fairmont in 2014 sought to acquire, combine, and remediate 21 parcels on the city’s west side that spanned nearly three miles along the West Fork and Monongahela Rivers. Most of the parcels had contamination concerns due to former uses by a glass factory, machine shops, petroleum storage, and an abandoned, 14.61-acre rail corridor,

formerly used for coal and chemical shipping for over a century, owned by CSX Transportation. Acquiring the rail corridor—a critical component of the project’s success—proved challenging for the City. CSX pushed for the immediate sale of the property, which put the City in a bind: To be eligible for EPA funding for remediation and reuse, applicants must be the owner and have conducted a Phase I ESA within six months of acquiring the property.

To address this challenge, the City and NBAC engaged WVLSC in 2022 to conduct the assessment needed to move the project forward. Using an existing EPA assessment grant WVLSC held specifically for brownfield assessment and redevelopment planning, the land bank completed a Phase I ESA that year. This satisfied CSX’s timeline, allowed for property transfer, shielded the City from the liability associated with acquiring the property before completing Phase I and II ESAs, and made the City eligible to apply for remediation funding in the future. Remediation is slated to begin in fall/winter of 2024 and will include the demolition of the glass factory and several additional unsafe structures, soil remediation, and trail development.

The Fairmont Rail Trail project is anticipated to connect 11 neighborhoods, provide riverfront access and trails for exercise, soccer fields, playgrounds, and equitable multi-modal transportation. It will be included in the over 255 miles of recreational trail systems stretching from West Virginia to Pennsylvania. WVLSC played a small but crucial role by assessing this property to facilitate its timely transfer to the City.



City of Fairmont West Fork River Trail Extension Project
Total Distance: Approximately 2.5 Miles

Proposed trail routes in the City of Fairmont’s [concept plan](#).

Additional Case Studies

Brownfield redevelopment work is not limited to large-scale projects. Many land banks—small and large—are engaging in brownfield projects of various sizes and end uses. With persistence, a people-powered plan, and partnerships with community stakeholders, any land bank can take on the challenge of addressing brownfields and stabilizing communities. Check out the following examples for more inspiration.

Greater Syracuse Land Bank

One of the most active and innovative land banks in New York, serving a city of 145,560 people.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Project Location: Syracuse, New York

Former Use: Gas station and auto repair shop

Future Use: Sunoco gas station and convenience store

Acquired Property: Yes, during redevelopment

Duration of Land Bank Involvement: 3.5 years

In the case of one abandoned neighborhood gas station, community stakeholders identified they wanted to reestablish the site as a name-brand gas station. After completing Phase I and II ESAs, the [Greater Syracuse Land Bank \(GSLB\)](#) found a local business owner willing to execute the community's vision and connected them with the chamber of commerce, which provided predevelopment support. Though the site would continue to be used as a gas station, GSLB removed the old, corroded underground storage tanks and completed a tank closure action with New York State Department of Environmental Conservation so the business owner could obtain construction financing. The buyer has since pulled permits and is in the process of closing on construction financing and property purchase, at which point GSLB will recoup its ~\$46,000 out-of-pocket costs.

Marquette County Land Bank Authority

A small land bank staffed by county employees serving a rural county in Michigan's upper peninsula.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Project Location: Ishpeming, Michigan

Former Use: Auto repair and paint shop

Future Use: Single-family home

Acquired Property: Yes, during assessment

Duration of Land Bank Involvement: 4 years

Every day, students walking to Ishpeming High School had to pass two long-abandoned, adjoining brownfield properties: a house contaminated by lead-based paint and asbestos, and a former auto repair and paint shop that was now a vacant lot. The [Marquette County Land Bank Authority \(MCLBA\)](#) acquired these properties from a private party. They then completed Phase I and II ESAs and site remediation that included removing an underground storage tank from the vacant lot. They led the vacant structure's rehabilitation through a partnership with the high school's Geometry in Construction program, providing students with hands-on construction experience. The total project cost approximately \$114,400, of which MCLBA covered \$36,000. After the rehabilitation, MCLBA sold the home and lot for \$90,000 and put those funds toward other community revitalization projects.

MCLBA sold the home and lot for \$90,000



Before and After: The Ishpeming property as construction began in 2016, and the single family home that sits on the site now. (Photo: Google Maps, 2016 and 2022)

Tri-COG Land Bank

One of the few regional land banks in the country, serving 30 small municipalities in the former steel region in southwest Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Project Location: Swissvale, Pennsylvania

Former Use: Commercial dry cleaning facility

Future Use: Family HVAC business

Acquired Property: Yes, during remediation

Duration of Land Bank Involvement: Ongoing

After operating for about 40 years, Hohman’s Cleaners, a commercial laundry and dry-cleaning facility, sat tax-delinquent and abandoned, filled with unclaimed clothing, dry cleaning equipment, and numerous drums of solvents. In 2017, the newly formed [Tri-COG Land Bank](#) (TCLB) joined forces with several local councils of government (COGs) working to tackle this brownfield property. Following Phase I and II ESAs and after obtaining a release of liability from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, a process that took several years because Pennsylvania laws do not exempt land banks from cleanup liability like they

do for other economic development agencies, TCLB acquired the property. After obtaining this release, TCLB invested approximately \$56,000 to clean out the property and responsibly remove the solvents. They sold the property for \$90,000 to a family-owned HVAC business in 2022. TCLB retains an enforcement mortgage on the property, which stipulates that the new owners have three years to complete the remaining remediation on the site.



Left: The soon-to-be converted gas station in Syracuse. (Photo: Google Maps, 2023) // Right: Hohman’s Cleaners, prior to redevelopment. (Photo: Google Maps, 2022)

This guide was made possible via grant funding from the US Environmental Protection Agency and with generous support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the JPB Foundation.

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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