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Vacant Spaces into Vibrant Places

Revitalizing Commercial Corridors

A Guide to Public Strategies for Vacancy and Reuse

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Vacant Spaces into Vibrant Places

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Foreword

The Rise and Fall of Commercial Corridors

By Alan Mallach

Today's commercial corridors face daunting challenges. Many have lost most of the businesses that once sustained them, and a growing number of storefronts and buildings are underutilized or sit vacant. At the same time, many local governments and neighborhood organizations are investing resources to restore these corridors to their once-vibrant condition. For these efforts to succeed, the people pursuing them must understand the history of commercial corridors, the reasons for their present condition, and their potential for revival. This foreword covers this background, which provides vital context for the specific tools and examples that follow.

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The Origins of the Neighborhood Commercial Corridor

Many American cities east of the Mississippi are products of the 19th century industrial age, an era of pedestrians, horses and buggies, and slow-moving horse-drawn (later electric) streetcars. These cities largely comprised densely populated immigrant neighborhoods, each with its distinct ethnic or racial identity and institutions. Neighborhood commercial corridors emerged to serve the people who lived in those neighborhoods. In some cities, like Cleveland and Detroit, corridors grew along major, arterial streets that radiated from downtown, while in others, like Chicago and Philadelphia, they were situated at intervals along a grid.

These commercial corridors, or "strips," served the neighborhood's families, who lived along the residential streets on either side of the corridor, rarely more than three or four blocks away. They included not only grocery stores and taverns, but also churches and synagogues where families worshipped, parochial schools and centers of neighborhood civic and cultural life, like Buffalo's Dom Polski (Polish Center). That building stood on Broadway, known as "Polish Main Street." According to one account, Polish Main Street contained nearly 3,000 Polish-owned businesses and 14 community banks. With the exception of the special trip to a department store downtown, the neighborhood strip met all of a family's needs. This was as true of urban Black neighborhoods as white ethnic ones.





LEFT: Historical photo of a Black business district in Detroit, Michigan, taken in 1942. Photo: Arthur S. Siegel / Library of Congress

RIGHT: Historical photo of Dom Polski at 1081 Broadway Street in Buffalo, New York, circa 1920. Photo: Broadway Fillmore Alive / Facebook

Postwar Decline

Although many ethnic neighborhoods started to change during the 1920s and 1930s, most neighborhood commercial corridors remained largely intact through World War II and for some time after. But beginning in the late 1940s and 1950s, a series of interrelated forces began to undermine their vitality: suburbanization, the automobile, changing retail models, and the simultaneous depopulation and income declines in the central city.

The postwar era saw the great suburban migration and the dominance of the automobile. In the migration that has come to be known as "white flight," an estimated 15 million people left the central cities of the northeast and Midwest between 1950 and 1980 for the city's suburbs and the growing Sunbelt. While the Great Migration was drawing Black families to the cities at the same time, their numbers were far smaller. Only one Black family moved in for every three white families that left.[1] The cities thinned out, with the poorest neighborhoods thinning out the most. By the 1980s, many once-thriving urban immigrant neighborhoods had barely a third of their 1930s and '40s population. Few of their residents had disposable income to spend on anything more than necessities. Many of those neighborhoods are little different today.

Car ownership not only fueled the suburban migration, it changed people's shopping habits. Instead of running down to the corner store for milk one day, a dozen eggs and a head of lettuce the next, people drove to new shopping centers sprouting up in the suburbs and at the edges of central cities. In one trip, a family could buy all the food they needed for the week, along with shoes, clothing, and more, with no need to carry it any further than from the store to the car, and the car to the house.

In addition to being car-oriented, shopping centers changed buying patterns in other ways. Instead of patronizing a local butcher and baker along with

1 Leah Platt Boustan, "Was Postwar Suburbanization 'White Flight'? Evidence from the Black Migration," Quarterly Journal of Economics 125, no. 1 (February 2010): 417–43, https://lboustan.scholar.princeton.edu/sites/g/files/toruqf4146/files/lboustan/files/research02_whiteflight.pdf.

the grocery store, it became far simpler to go to the supermarket and handle all one's food and related needs at once. Today, freestanding butcher shops and bakeries are a rarity, typically existing only in the most upscale neighborhoods.

By the 1970s, most urban and suburban families had at least one car,[2] and the majority had access to a shopping center in the city or in a nearby suburb. That put neighborhood commercial corridors at risk, even in otherwise viable urban neighborhoods. As a result, many urban neighborhoods with a strong homeowner base and attractive residential streets ended up with struggling commercial corridors. While these families had enough income to support a neighborhood commercial corridor, they typically owned one or two cars and bypassed the local commercial strip to do their shopping by car.

Neighborhood commercial corridors found themselves in a vicious cycle. As stores closed, the retail density of the strip declined, making people progressively less likely to patronize the remaining businesses. Churches might remain, but their congregations increasingly lived in the suburbs, drove to services, and drove home. Instead of retail stores or restaurants, which need street visibility, the low rents allowed street-frontage to be occupied (if at all) by building contractors, churches, or social service agencies, which further diminished the neighborhood's walkability. Vacant storefronts, and eventually vacant buildings, proliferated. As vacant buildings were demolished, the streetscape was increasingly perforated by vacant lots. In the worst cases, all that remained, along with perhaps a gas station, was a small grocery store or bodega where people went for a carton of milk or a pack of cigarettes.

It is important to stress that reality is the *worst* case. While few neighborhood commercial corridors are what they were a century ago, many still retain some vitality and a viable but more limited commercial presence, though interspersed with vacant buildings and empty lots.

The question is, can these trends be reversed and vitality restored to neighborhood commercial corridors? The answers are complicated.



America's older cities have far more neighborhood-based commercial space than can possibly be absorbed by today's populations.

Future Possibilities

It is important to recognize that even under the best circumstances, not all neighborhood commercial corridors can ever regain the vitality they once had. The number of such corridors, and the volume of commercial space they contained, reflected the needs of far larger and less mobile populations. Put simply, America's older cities have far more neighborhood-based commercial space than can possibly be absorbed by today's populations.

That does not mean, however, that some corridors cannot be revived and many vacant or underutilized buildings successfully reused. Many urban commercial corridors have been revived by immigrant communities, replicating in some ways the immigrant-based strips of the early 20th century. In Detroit, Conant Street has become the vibrant shopping hub of a neighborhood

2 Bureau of Transportation Statistics, "Figure 2-8: Household Vehicle Ownership: 1960–2010," in Passenger Travel Facts and Figures 2015 (Washington, DC: US Department of Transportation, 2015), https://www.bts.gov/archive/publications/passenger_travel_2015/chapter2/fig2_8.

known as Banglatown, where over the past decades Bangladeshi and Yemeni immigrants have opened more than 100 small businesses—restaurants, grocers, travel agencies, and clothing and jewelry stores, along with medical offices and mosques.[3]

Those commercial corridors may not be replicable in other areas, nor may they be sustainable over the long term if their immigrant populations follow in the footsteps of earlier generations, becoming more car-oriented and dispersing to the city's suburbs. But there are other models for reviving commercial corridors, particularly if they still maintain some vitality as the neighborhood's main street. Some of the models include:

- Intensifying residential uses along the corridor, both filling excess space by building on vacant lots or rehabilitating buildings for residential or mixed use and creating a pool of potential demand for commercial facilities
- Locating community-serving institutions along the corridor, such as recreation centers, senior centers, and health care centers, both filling excess space and adding foot traffic to the corridor
- Creating a shopping or food destination that will bring people from outside the neighborhood to patronize the corridor's establishments
- Creating a neighborhood hub, such as a restaurant or music venue, to draw people to the corridor

All of these can be combined with physical improvements to the corridor as well as support that helps existing businesses upgrade their operations.

Reviving a commercial corridor demands a thought-out strategy grounded in an understanding of today's market realities and opportunities, rather than a nostalgic effort to recreate what once existed. Within the framework of that strategy, the ideas, tools, and examples presented in this guide should help any public agency or community-based organization working to make their commercial corridor an asset to the community where they live.

3 MJ Galbraith, "'Everyone knows about Banglatown': Why this dynamic Detroit-Hamtramck community continues to grow," *Model D Media*, August 16, 2022, https://modeldmedia.com/banglatown-street-view-22/.



Executive Summary

Neighborhood commercial corridors provide essential goods and services, support local businesses and jobs, generate tax revenue, and serve as gathering places that contribute to neighborhood identity and quality of life. Yet many corridors face persistent vacancy, deteriorating properties, and declining investment as economic shifts, changing consumer behavior, population loss, and other forces reshape demand for commercial space.

Local governments have a role to play in addressing these challenges by developing strategies and coordinating tools for intervention, as opposed to waiting for the market to recover. The central challenge for local governments is not simply how to fill vacant buildings, but how to shape the future of commercial corridors so they remain assets to the communities they serve.

This guide offers local governments and their partners an approach for moving from reactive, property-by-property interventions toward coordinated strategies for commercial corridor revitalization. It focuses on small-scale, neighborhood-serving commercial properties—including storefronts, mixed-use buildings, and neighborhood shopping centers—and provides a framework for understanding local conditions, setting a vision, and selecting public tools that advance community priorities.

Start with a Corridor Strategy, Not a Single Property

Effective intervention begins with understanding why vacancy and deterioration are occurring. Communities should assess conditions at three interconnected levels:

- **Market:** What does current and anticipated demand suggest about the types and amount of commercial space the area can support?
- **Corridor:** How do infrastructure, accessibility, safety, public spaces, surrounding neighborhoods, and other conditions affect business activity and investment?
- **Property:** What physical, financial, environmental, legal, and ownership barriers prevent individual properties from being occupied or reused?

This analysis should be paired with meaningful engagement with residents, businesses, property owners, and other stakeholders to identify community priorities and establish a realistic vision for the corridor's future.



THE MARKET



THE CORRIDOR



THE PROPERTY

Based on this assessment, communities can pursue one or more strategies:

- **Revitalize** corridors with potential for renewed or expanded commercial activity by building on existing assets and attracting investment.
- **Stabilize** corridors where broad redevelopment may not be feasible but existing businesses, properties, and community-serving functions can be sustained.
- **Reposition** corridors where traditional commercial uses are unlikely to return at the same scale, intentionally transitioning some spaces to other productive uses, such as housing, community services, or green space.

> **The central challenge for local governments is not simply how to fill vacant buildings, but how to shape the future of commercial corridors so they remain assets to the communities they serve.**

Match Public Tools to the Barriers and Desired Outcomes

Once a corridor strategy is established, local governments can coordinate public tools and partnerships to address specific barriers to reuse. This guide organizes those tools into four categories:

- **Prevention and Early Intervention:** Help owners address barriers before properties become vacant or deteriorated through incentives, proactive monitoring, code enforcement, business support, and corridor improvements.
- **Compelling Compliance or Transfer:** Hold owners accountable for significant violations and, when appropriate, use legal and enforcement mechanisms to facilitate a transfer to responsible ownership.
- **Public Ownership and Control:** Use land banks, redevelopment authorities, or other public entities to acquire, stabilize, or reposition strategically important properties when private owners cannot or will not return them to productive use.
- **Enabling Reuse:** Address financial, physical, environmental, regulatory, and other barriers through rehabilitation and tenant-improvement financing, remediation, zoning changes, permitting, property preparation, and other interventions.

No single tool will resolve every vacancy challenge. Communities should first assess their existing authorities, programs, funding, and partnerships before creating new ones. Effective implementation also requires coordination across departments and sectors, including economic development, planning, code enforcement, legal services, property owners, developers, financial institutions, and community-based organizations. Stronger real estate and redevelopment expertise can help communities connect these efforts and move complex properties toward viable reuse.

Commercial corridors will change with or without a strategy. By grounding decisions in market realities, community priorities, and property conditions, local governments and their partners can help shape that change rather than simply react to it. The goal is not to recreate every corridor's past, but to build a future in which commercial spaces—and the neighborhoods around them—can thrive.

Introduction

Understanding Today's Neighborhood Commercial Corridors

Commercial corridors play a critical role in neighborhood vitality and health. They provide essential goods and services, create jobs, generate tax revenue, support local entrepreneurship, and contribute to a community's identity and sense of place.

Beyond their economic function, commercial corridors have historically served as the social infrastructure of neighborhoods by providing gathering spaces, "third places" outside of home and work, and opportunities for connection and community building.

While commercial corridors were once the center of neighborhood activity, their role has changed. Over the past several decades, shifts in how we live, work, and spend money have fundamentally altered the landscape of neighborhood retail and commercial activity. The growth of e-commerce, changes in consumer preferences, suburban development, remote work, and evolving demographics have reshaped demand for traditional commercial spaces.

Many corridors designed for a different era no longer align with current market conditions or community needs, with some experiencing widespread vacancy. Communities must move beyond addressing single properties and instead develop strategies that respond to today's market realities, build on local assets, and position commercial corridors for their next chapter.

What Types of Corridors Does This Guide Cover?



Graphic: Center for Community Progress

Much of the national conversation surrounding commercial vacancy since the COVID-19 pandemic has focused on the challenges facing downtown office markets.[4] Headlines have centered on declining office occupancy, remote work, falling property values, and the resulting fiscal impact on major cities. These issues are significant, but they represent only one segment of the commercial real estate landscape.

This guide focuses instead on small-scale, neighborhood-serving commercial properties—the storefronts, mixed-use buildings, neighborhood shopping centers, and traditional commercial corridors that residents encounter in their daily lives. They are often along main streets, commercial avenues, and neighborhood business districts. They house local retailers, restaurants, service providers, professional offices, and community institutions that contribute to neighborhood identity and quality of life.

4 National research has focused on office buildings and downtown business districts driven by the rise of remote and hybrid work and the resulting decline in office occupancy. For example, Moody's projects that US office vacancy rates will peak at approximately 24 percent in 2026. However, these figures say little about the vacancy challenges experienced in neighborhood-scale commercial areas. Todd Metcalfe, Anthony Spinelli, and Thomas LaSalvia, *What Will Be the Impact on Office Demand from WFH?* (Moody's, 2024), https://ma.moodys.com/rs/961-KCJ-308/images/What%20will%20be%20the%20impact%20on%20office%20demand%20from%20WFH.pdf. See also Arjun Ramani, Joel Alcedo, and Nicholas Bloom, "How Working from Home Reshapes Cities," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 121, no. 45 (November 2024): https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2408930121.

5 US Census Bureau, "E-Commerce Retail Sales as a Percent of Total Sales," FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, accessed October 27, 2026, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/ECOMPCTSA.

6 Jose Maria Barrero, Nick Bloom, and Steven J. Davis, "SWAA July 2026 Updates," WFH Research, updated July 5, 2026, https://wfhresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/WFHResearch_updates_July2026.pdf; Jose Maria Barrero, Nick Bloom, and Steven J. Davis, "Work from Home Rate," FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, accessed October 27, 2026, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/WFHCOVIDMATQUESTION.

7 Nate Berg, "Many US Stores Will Close Forever. That's a Good Thing," *Fast Company*, November 10, 2020, https://www.fastcompany.com/90573407/many-u-s-stores-will-close-forever-thats-a-good-thing.

8 "Indie Impact Study Series," Civic Economics, accessed October 27, 2026, https://www.civiceconomics.com/indie-impact.html. Civic Economics' local impact studies since 2002 consistently found that independent retailers recirculate roughly three to four times as much revenue locally as chains.

The Changing Demand for Commercial Space

6.5x

growth in online purchases since 2006, as a share of all purchases.[5]



nearly 4x

as many paid workdays were spent working from home in 2026 as in 2019.[6]



That affects foot traffic to businesses.

nearly 5x

as much retail space per person in the US as in the UK.[7]



That points to an oversupply of retail space.

Why Local Retail Matters

$50

of every $100 spent at a locally owned and operated retailer stays in the local economy, compared with about $14 at national chains.[8]

Local retailers are those most likely to reuse the commercial structures referenced in this guide.



Who Is This Guide For?

This guide is for local government leaders and partners looking to develop new approaches to addressing commercial property vacancy and deterioration. For those just beginning to explore strategies for vacant and deteriorated commercial corridors, this guide offers a roadmap for identifying local challenges, setting a vision for the future, and choosing the right public tools to ensure commercial corridors contribute to vibrant, stable neighborhoods.

For communities already deeply engaged in commercial revitalization, this guide offers case studies and emerging approaches to take inspiration from and build on your efforts. This guide builds on the expertise of practitioners like you who help the field continue to adapt and evolve.



Commercial vacancy challenges look different depending on local context. Smaller rural communities that have experienced population loss may have difficulty attracting and retaining essential businesses. Historically Black communities continue to experience the impacts of decades of discriminatory land use policies, disinvestment, urban renewal, and the displacement of Black-owned businesses and community institutions.[9] Even affluent communities are grappling with changing retail markets and persistent vacancies due to aging infrastructure, obsolete buildings, and changes in consumer demand.

Vacant and deteriorating commercial spaces are symptoms of deeper economic and social changes. In some communities, underperforming commercial corridors are where broader challenges—housing instability, public safety concerns, substance use, and other impacts of concentrated disinvestment—are most visible. These conditions reinforce the need for communities to think critically about the future of their commercial properties and identify interventions that reflect current realities.

Commercial vacancy and deterioration exist along a spectrum of occupancy and physical conditions that must be understood at the parcel level (see **Understand Parcel Conditions**). The national field of practice, local jurisdictions, policies, and programs use a variety of terms to describe these conditions. These terms are often intertwined with both structures and land. For clarity and conciseness, this guide uses "commercial vacancy and deterioration" as an umbrella term encompassing the range of occupancy status and conditions identified in Figure 1, unless otherwise noted.

9 "Challenges and Opportunities to Revitalizing Historic Black Commercial Corridors," Center for Community Progress, December 16, 2025, https://communityprogress.org/data-stories/black-commercial-corridor-revitalization/.

FIGURE 1

The Problem Is More Than Vacancy: Occupancy Status and Condition

Occupancy Status: How is the owner using it?	
Underutilized	The owner is using the property below its potential, such as leaving upper floors vacant, holding excess space, or using it primarily for parking or storage.
Vacant	The owner has shown willingness or interest in reoccupancy, though has not been motivated to act.
Abandoned	The property has been vacant for several years, and the owner has shown little to no investment in maintaining it or returning it to productive use.

Physical Condition: What shape is it in?	
Marketable	Appears suitable for occupancy or reuse with minimal repairs or improvements.
Deteriorated	Shows signs of deferred maintenance or physical decline, whether occupied or vacant.
Structurally Unsound	Significant structural deficiencies that may compromise safety or require substantial rehabilitation.
Obsolete	No longer meets its original purpose or current market, functional, or code requirements without significant adaptation.

Communities must move beyond the assumption that the market will eventually resolve vacancy on its own.

The Costs of Inaction

Addressing commercial vacancy is complex, requiring coordination with property owners, businesses, residents, developers, local governments, and other partners. It also requires investments in buildings, infrastructure, public spaces, business support, and market development. But letting these complexities delay intervention can make the challenge harder to solve and more expensive over time. Long-term vacancy can lead to deferred maintenance and disinvestment that spreads to surrounding blocks, particularly where demand is already weak or the area has a history of disinvestment. Communities must move beyond the assumption that the market will eventually resolve vacancy on its own. Vacant properties beget larger challenges.

The long-term cost of doing nothing about vacancy and deterioration often exceeds the cost of strategic intervention. Local governments and their partners have tools and strategies to support reinvestment in commercial corridors. The right intervention will vary based on local market conditions and the underlying causes of vacancy.

There is no arguing that commercial corridors matter for a neighborhood's long-term vitality. The charge for each community is to determine what future role disinvested and underperforming (or even totally abandoned) corridors can play, and what public intervention and partnerships can realistically support.

DEEPER DIVE

The Costs of Commercial Vacancy



Vacant and deteriorated properties burden municipal budgets, threaten public health and safety, and erode confidence in surrounding neighborhoods and commercial corridors.[a] When weighing whether to invest public resources in these properties, communities should also consider the cost of doing nothing. Left unaddressed, vacant and deteriorated commercial properties can trap corridors in a cycle of decline that grows more expensive over time.

Hypothetical Example: 123 Main Street

123 Main Street sits at the gateway of an older commercial corridor that once served as a neighborhood shopping district. Several businesses remain open, but a growing number of storefronts are vacant or underutilized. The vacant properties interrupt the continuity of the corridor, discourage private investment, and make it harder for existing businesses to attract customers.

The property is a former auto repair facility that has been vacant for several years. The building and site have visibly deteriorated, and utility records show little to no recent use. Public records indicate it has changed ownership several times and is now held by an LLC that has neither paid property taxes in years nor complied with the municipality's vacant building registry. Code enforcement has documented repeated complaints regarding the condition of the building. Although the municipality has taken the owner to court and a judge has issued fines, the owner has not acted.

Police have responded to multiple reports of trespassing, vandalism, and other nuisance activities at the site. The municipality has paid to board broken windows and secure the property.

Finally, the site's history as an auto repair facility raises concerns about environmental contamination, but no recent environmental assessment has been completed. Because of this uncertainty, the municipality has not moved toward tax foreclosure, wary of taking title to a potentially contaminated property.

Estimated Annual Public Costs and Lost Revenue at 123 Main Street

Public safety costs (police and fire calls)	$2,500
Boarding, maintenance, and nuisance abatement	$7,000
Code enforcement and legal action (staff time)	$3,500
Cost of administering the vacant building registry	$650
Staff time and administrative burden spread across multiple departments	$2,750
Unpaid taxes	$12,350
Estimated direct municipal costs	**$28,750+**

These direct costs do not capture the broader spillover costs imposed on area properties, businesses, and the corridor, including:

- Reduced nearby property values
- Lost property tax revenue from surrounding properties associated with devaluation
- Lower private investment, business confidence, and business revenue
- Negative impacts on corridor revitalization efforts

One property costs the municipality approximately $28,750 annually. Across 10 similar properties, that adds up to more than $287,500 a year in direct costs alone, before accounting for broader impacts on the corridor. These are true costs communities should weigh when deciding whether to invest in a corridor revitalization strategy.

a "The Costs of Vacant and Abandoned Properties," Center for Community Progress (online resource center), accessed October 12, 2026, https://communityprogress.org/resources/library/vacant-properties/cost-of-vacant-blighted-properties/.

Evolving the Vacancy Field to Address Commercial Properties

Over the past 15 years, communities have built effective tools for addressing vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties, including land banks,[10] strategic code enforcement practices,[11] and efficient delinquent property tax enforcement systems.[12] These tools were designed largely for residential properties, and communities should not assume they will work the same way for commercial ones. Owners of distressed commercial properties often stay current on taxes, making tax foreclosure a less viable intervention point. Meanwhile, rehabilitation costs can exceed market value, and environmental contamination increases risk and raises the cost of acquisition.

The lesson from residential property revitalization still holds, however. The market alone will not solve the most difficult properties. Meeting this challenge requires continued investment in real estate and redevelopment expertise, alongside stronger coordination across local government departments.

The work should be guided by a vision for the corridor: Should it be the neighborhood hub for cultural experiences, a restaurant or retail destination, a centralized location for health and other social services, green infrastructure with trees and bioswales, or something completely different? This guide provides local governments and their partners with the information needed to assess the status of commercial corridors, develop a strategy based on a future vision, and leverage tools and partnerships to ensure they are contributing to healthy, equitable communities.

> **The right intervention will vary based on local market conditions and the underlying causes of vacancy.**

10 "Land Banks," Center for Community Progress (website), accessed October 27, 2026, https://communityprogress.org/resources/land-banks/.

11 Tarik Abdelazim, Libby Benton, Matt Kreis, and Danielle Lewinski, *Reevaluating Code Enforcement: A New Approach to Addressing Problem Properties* (Center for Community Progress, 2024), https://communityprogress.org/publications/code-enforcement-report/.

12 Kim Graziani, *Reimagine Delinquent Property Tax Enforcement* (Center for Community Progress, 2022), https://communityprogress.org/publications/reimagine-delinquent-property-tax-enforcement/.



Part 1:
Developing a Corridor Strategy

Understanding the Root Causes of Vacancy

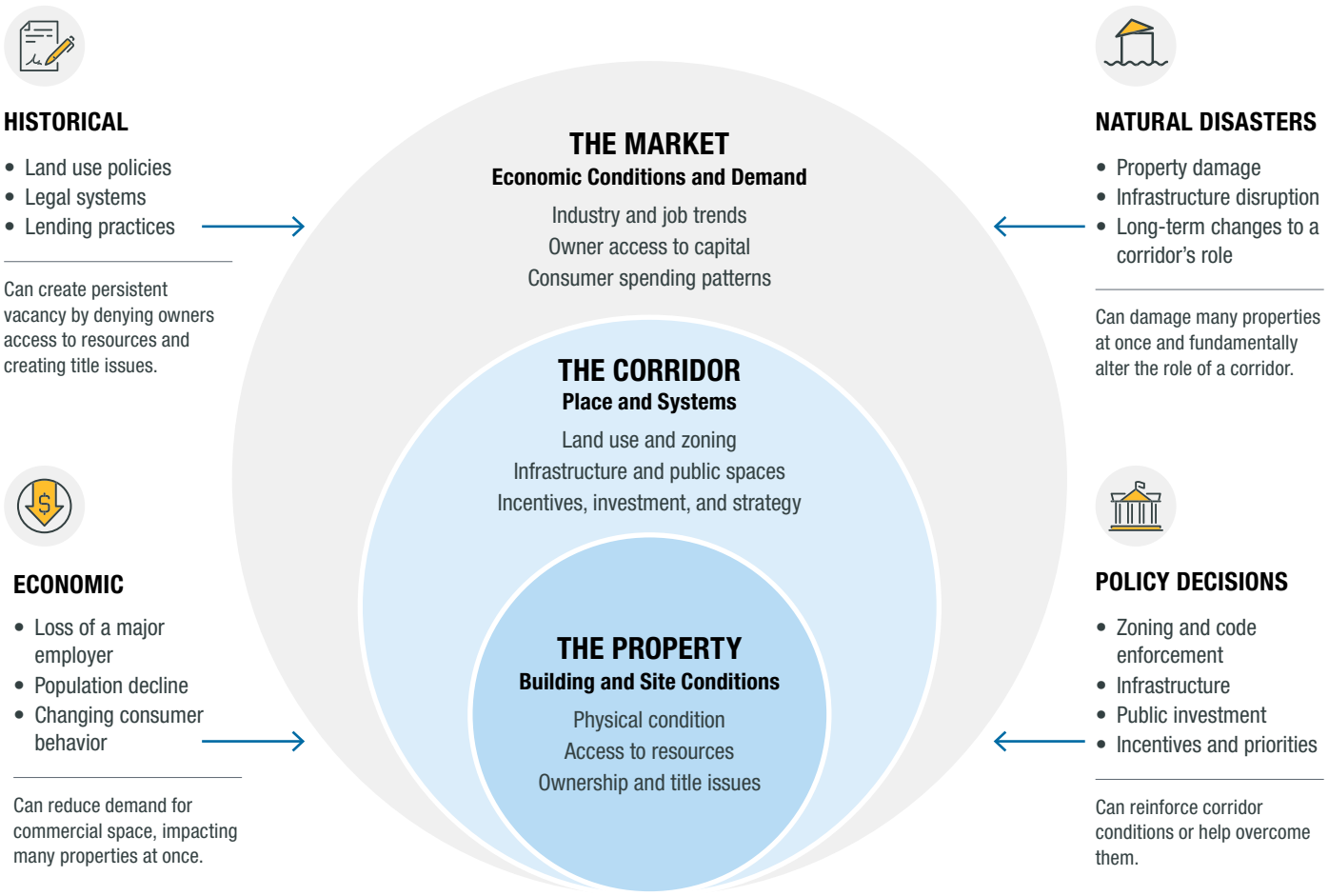
Widespread commercial vacancy is rarely caused by a single property-level problem. More often, it reflects forces that affect many properties along a corridor at once.

Some causes are historical—land use policies, legal systems, and lending practices can create persistent vacancy by denying owners access to resources and creating title issues. Others are economic—the loss of a major employer, population decline, and changing consumer behavior that reduces demand. Natural disasters can damage many properties at once and fundamentally alter the role of a corridor. At the same time, government decisions on zoning, code enforcement, infrastructure, public investment, incentives, and development priorities can either reinforce these conditions or help overcome them.

Understanding the root causes is critical to developing effective solutions. Later in this section, we show how to examine conditions causing vacancy at three interconnected levels: the market, the commercial corridor, and the individual property. Effective revitalization strategies recognize these dynamics and tailor interventions to them.

Commercial Vacancy Doesn't Happen in Isolation

These roots causes of vacancy impact the conditions at the market, corridor, and property level.



Graphic: Center for Community Progress

Why Communities Need a Corridor Strategy

Local governments and their partners have both an opportunity and a responsibility to consider how commercial vacancy affects community stability and to intervene when necessary to achieve outcomes aligned with community goals.

Vacancy and deterioration are often concentrated in a geographic area, the result of policies, processes, and decisions. Property-level interventions, then, have limited impact when the conditions affecting the broader corridor remain unaddressed. For example, a façade improvement program may improve how individual buildings look, but it does not generate new demand if foot traffic is declining or the surrounding neighborhood is losing significant population. Similarly, recruiting new businesses is unlikely to succeed if chronic flooding from inadequate drainage makes properties difficult or costly to reuse. In these cases, the challenge is not the individual vacant properties but a corridor that lacks the conditions to support successful reinvestment and reoccupancy.

A corridor-level strategy is particularly important as the role of commercial corridors changes. Returning every obsolete or deteriorated commercial property back to its historic use may not be feasible, nor what is best for the neighborhood. Communities must assess whether they have more commercial space than residents and workers realistically need. Where they do, they should consider which alternative uses—such as productive or restorative green space or housing—would serve the community best.

Vacant commercial properties may already be the focus of work by local governments, economic development organizations, community development groups, property owners, and private developers. However, these efforts are not always coordinated around a shared vision for the future of a commercial corridor, and existing approaches may not fully address persistent vacancy, deteriorating properties, or market conditions that make reuse difficult. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated strategy that connects property-level interventions with broader economic development and community priorities. Commercial corridors will change with or without a strategy—the question is who will shape that change and to what end.

Local governments have a range of tools at their disposal, but tools are not a strategy. Code enforcement, land banking, zoning, business assistance, incentives, and financing can each address individual barriers, but using them property by property, without a shared vision for the corridor, produces fragmented investments that fail to change underlying conditions. A corridor strategy shifts the fundamental question from “How do we address this vacant building?” to “What future can this corridor realistically support, and what does the surrounding community need?” Once that vision is set, public, private, and community partners can align their tools and investments around it.

The rest of this section describes how to develop and implement a coordinated corridor strategy. It focuses on identifying the right people and expertise to bring to the process; assessing conditions at the market, corridor, and parcel levels; and selecting a strategy that responds to local conditions and priorities.



Commercial corridors will change with or without a strategy—the question is who will shape that change and to what end.

1. Assemble the Team

No single department, organization, or profession can address commercial vacancy and deterioration alone. It requires stronger public intervention, deeper real estate expertise within public institutions, and better coordination across sectors. Communities need people who understand both the challenges and the tools available to address them.

Vacant property experts know how to remove legal, physical, and financial barriers to redevelopment, while economic development professionals know how to attract investment, businesses, and jobs. Working together, they can return vacant properties to productive use while building stronger commercial districts.

Ideally, municipal leadership (such as the mayor, city or town manager, or their designee) would convene a standing commercial corridor strategy team or task —a core group of stakeholders small enough to make and implement decisions

FIGURE 2

Who Should Be on a Commercial Corridor Strategy Team?

This list highlights potential partners that can provide valuable expertise and resources to implement a commercial corridor strategy.

Type of Expertise	Possible Agency or Entity
Data Collection and Management	Information and technology, GIS departments
Enforcement of Property Maintenance Standards	Departments responsible for code enforcement, zoning, and permitting; legal departments; police; fire; public works; other departments responsible for abatement activities
Property Tax Collection and Enforcement	Specific to each community (i.e., tax collector, assessor)
Planning and Economic Development	Planning and economic development departments; regional or state economic development entities
Business Operations	Existing business owners and commercial tenants along the corridor
Neighborhood Priorities	Resident-serving organizations
Commercial Real Estate Sales and Marketing	Local realtors and brokers with expertise in neighborhood commercial corridors
Entrepreneurial or Small Business Development	Local government business affairs or entrepreneurial programs; chambers of commerce; business associations
Business District Management Entities	Main Street programs, business improvement districts
Public or Quasi-Public Landowners	Departments of real estate; land banks; redevelopment authorities
Real Estate Developers	Local developers or community development corporations; local contractors with expertise fitting out commercial spaces
Real Estate Finance	Local financial institutions; community development financial institutions

effectively. Not every partner listed in Figure 2 should participate in every meeting or decision.

Instead, a core team should meet regularly and serve as the hub of a broader network, bringing together municipal staff, community partners, and specialized expertise as needed to understand commercial vacancy dynamics, develop a shared strategy, and coordinate the resources and actions needed to carry it out.

To inform that strategy, the team should examine conditions at three levels: the **market**, the **commercial corridor**, and the **individual property**.

2. Understand Market Conditions

Why It Matters

Long-term economic and demographic shifts have changed demand for neighborhood commercial space. Decades of car-oriented development redirected commercial activity away from traditional neighborhood business districts and toward shopping centers and big-box retail. Neighborhoods that lose residents or face declining incomes and concentrated poverty have less purchasing power to sustain local businesses. Online retail and remote work have further reduced demand for brick-and-mortar space, and these trends will likely continue to reshape commercial real estate.

These changes do not mean neighborhood commercial corridors have no role to play, but communities must reconsider what corridors *can* offer and how they can respond to changing markets. In many places, renewed residential investment, demand for walkable places, and the lasting value of local gathering places (as highlighted following the COVID-19 pandemic) are creating opportunities for commercial corridors to evolve. More communities are also turning to formerly disinvested neighborhoods as sources of housing amid the affordable housing crisis, which could bring reinvestment to a nearby distressed corridor.[13]

KEY QUESTIONS

Is there enough demand to support commercial reuse?

- Who lives, works, and travels through the corridor today, and how are those patterns changing?
- What goods and services do residents leave the neighborhood to access, and what unmet needs could the corridor address?
- What assets bring people to or near the corridor (e.g., employers, schools, hospitals, parks, transit, or cultural and civic institutions)?
- What do commercial property sales, rents, vacancy, and investment activity indicate about the strength and direction of the corridor's real estate market?

13 Nora Daly, "Home Repair is a Critical Housing Supply Strategy," The Rooftop (New America), August 25, 2026, https://www.newamerica.org/insights/home-repair-is-a-critical-housing-supply-strategy/.

Three Levels of the Corridor Strategy



THE MARKET



THE CORRIDOR



THE PROPERTY

All key questions are collected in the **Appendix**.

- What planned investments or anticipated disinvestments—such as an employer or institution expanding or closing, transit changes, or broadband upgrades—could alter demand for the corridor?

Market data shows what a corridor can realistically support.

Market analysis should look beyond the individual property, but the right geographic scale will depend on the corridor. Consider three levels of market: regional, city, and neighborhood. Not every corridor requires analysis at all three levels, and the relevance of each will depend on the corridor's size, location, customer base, and role.

Regional market: What larger economic, demographic, and development trends could affect demand along the corridor? This level matters most for

FIGURE 3

Market Data and Where to Find It

Data Type	Where to Find It
People using the corridor: Population, household income, workers, commuters, traffic, and visitor patterns	American Community Survey; Census LODES/OnTheMap; Esri Business Analyst or Claritas; local transportation and transit agencies; regional planning agency; major employer interviews
Regional employment and industry trends: Industries and employers that are growing, declining, or closing	Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages; regional economic development and workforce agencies
Businesses and unmet needs: Existing business mix; openings and closures; goods and services residents leave the area to get other unmet needs	Claritas or similar platform; business licensing department; building department; local or state finance department; field survey; resident or worker survey
Anchors and future demand drivers: Institutions and destinations that attract people; planned investments, expansions, or closures	Local or regional planning, economic development, or parks entities; schools; building department; asset mapping
Commercial supply and vacancy: Amount and type of commercial space; vacancy rate and duration	Building department; code enforcement; assessor; business licensing department; fire department; US Department of Housing and Urban Development and US Postal Service vacancy data; utility providers; field survey
Real estate market strength and direction: Commercial sales, rents, leasing, permits, investments, and foreclosures; other indicators of growth or distress	LoopNet, Crexi, or a local commercial property listing exchange; CoStar; local brokers and appraisers; deed recorder; assessor and tax foreclosing entity; building department; code enforcement; local courts or other entities that administer or record mortgage foreclosures

Read more about data sources at: "Identifying Vacant and Abandoned Properties," Center for Community Progress (online resource center), accessed October 12, 2026, https://communityprogress.org/resources/library/vacant-properties/vacant-property-strategy/finding-vacant-abandoned-properties.

small-town and rural Main Streets, where the customer base may extend well beyond the immediate neighborhood.

City or subregional market: How does the corridor fit within the local commercial market, and what makes it unique? This level matters for urban and suburban corridors that compete with nearby commercial districts for customers and businesses.

Neighborhood market: What is happening immediately around the corridor and within its primary service area? This level matters most for small or micro-corridors, where a handful of properties may depend on very local conditions.

What the Data Tells Us

Market data shows what a corridor can realistically support.[14] It can answer whether there is demand for commercial space and, importantly, which uses residents need.

Market data can also explain why vacancy and deterioration on a commercial corridor exist in the first place. For example, employment trends can show whether residents are leaving. Low rents may make a corridor *look* affordable, but may not generate enough revenue to justify rehabilitating deteriorated properties, which helps explain limited private investment and low business permit activity.



Community Progress has an online resource center on **How Neighborhood Markets Affect Vacancy** and published "**Neighborhoods by Numbers: An Introduction to Finding and Using Small Area Data**" to help communities quantify their vacancy challenges.

3. Understand Corridor Conditions

Why It Matters

Corridor infrastructure determines whether vacant properties can realistically return to productive use. Street design, transit access, parking and loading, and walking and biking connections affect whether customers, workers, and residents can reach and move through the corridor.

14 "How Neighborhood Markets Affect Vacancy," Center for Community Progress (online resource center), accessed October 12, 2026, https://communityprogress.org/resources/library/vacant-properties/neighborhood-markets-and-vacancy/.

CASE STUDY

INVEST South/West: Using Data and Existing Plans to Target Commercial Investment (Chicago, Illinois)

In 2019, Chicago's Department of Planning and Development (DPD) analyzed hundreds of miles of commercial and business-zoned street frontage across the South and West Sides. The analysis brought together data, such as business licenses, transit service, historic resources, demographics, community plans, and previous capital and programmatic investments, from multiple city departments and partners. DPD narrowed roughly 30 potential corridors to 10 community areas based on two criteria: the presence of at least one established community plan with a commercial component, and at least one active commercial area centered on a specific node or intersection. This let the City focus INVEST South/West on neighborhoods with both a foundation for investment and a clear community vision.

For neighborhood-serving commercial properties, poorly maintained sidewalks, inadequate lighting, and unsafe crossings can reduce customer activity.[15] Perceptions of safety, including crime and traffic safety, also affect where people choose to shop and invest.

Older commercial corridors may also rely on aging or undersized water, sewer, stormwater, electrical, or broadband infrastructure. These systems may constrain both the type and scale of activity the corridor can support due to the high cost of upgrading.[16] The health of the surrounding residential market—the built-in customer base—is also critical to understanding current commercial conditions and what the corridor can realistically support in the future.

KEY QUESTIONS

What is the condition of the corridor, and is its infrastructure an asset, adequate, or a barrier to redevelopment?

- What is the corridor's physical form, and how does that impact its future use (e.g., walkable, auto-oriented, historic, large-format retail, light industrial)?
- What is the condition and capacity of the corridor's utility and transportation infrastructure? Can transportation, water, sewer, stormwater, electricity, and broadband infrastructure support current uses or redevelopment, or will major repairs, extensions, or upgrades be required? What is the condition of sidewalks, lighting, and crossings, and how safe does the corridor feel to people who use it?
- What environmental conditions or risks could affect its future use (e.g., located in a floodplain, subject to stormwater or drainage challenges, vulnerable to extreme heat)?

What is the health and trajectory of the surrounding residential market?

- What is happening to housing values, sales activity, and vacancy near the corridor? Are there signs of investment, stabilization, or disinvestment?
- Who lives near the corridor, and is that customer base growing, declining, or changing (in age, household composition, or other characteristics)?
- What do household income and purchasing power suggest about the types of goods and services the surrounding market can support?
- Is the area positioned to attract or lose households, given housing supply, demand, development activity, and planned investment?

The Power of Talking with Property Owners

A conversation with a commercial property owner can reveal why a property is vacant, what barriers stand in the way of reuse, and what support might help move it forward. Financial challenges, permitting hurdles, code issues, or plans already underway may not be visible from the street. Consider reaching out to the owner directly and approaching the conversation with curiosity and a desire to work together to find an appropriate solution to get properties back to reoccupancy.

15 Eric Cova, Jaibin Mathew, and Heidi Simon, *Dangerous by Design 2026* (Smart Growth America, 2026), https://wordpress.smartgrowthamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Smart-Growth-America-Dangerous-by-Design-2026.pdf.

16 Emma Waters, "Converting Vacant Offices to Housing: Challenges and Opportunities," Bipartisan Policy Center, 2023, https://bipartisanpolicy.org/explainer/vacant-offices-housing-conversion/; Tracy Hadden Loh, "The Promises—and Realities—of Converting Offices into Housing," Brookings Institution, March 26, 2026, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-promises-and-realities-of-converting-offices-into-housing/. While there is little research devoted to utility conversions for neighborhood-level commercial corridors, in our experience, the cost of updating aging infrastructure (addressing decaying sewer lines, updated fire suppression systems, access broadband) is a barrier to development. See also *A Comprehensive Assessment of America's Infrastructure* (American Society of Civil Engineers, 2025), https://infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Full-Report-2025-Natl-IRC-WEB.pdf.

FIGURE 4

Corridor Condition Data and Where to Find It

Field observations, such as simple windshield surveys, can be powerful tools to collect corridor level data. When combined with property condition surveys (see Understand Parcel Conditions) they can provide a comprehensive understanding of corridor and individual parcel conditions.

Data Type	Where to Find It
Physical form and development context: Land use patterns, building form, parcel configuration, historic character, zoning and design requirements, and allowable uses	Planning department; Google Earth and other historic imagery sources; state historic preservation office or local historic commission
Access, mobility, and public realm: Sidewalks, crossings, traffic, transit, bicycle access, parking, lighting, streetscape, and perceptions of safety	Public works; transportation and transit agencies; Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) transition plan; police; plans and studies; field observation; resident and business engagement
Utility infrastructure and environmental conditions: Water, sewer, stormwater, electricity, broadband, flooding, drainage, air quality, climate threats, and other environmental constraints	Utilities; public works; capital improvement plans; Municipal or transportation agency; local or regional planning and resilience agencies; Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); state environmental or natural resources agency; US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); state environmental records; field survey
Surrounding residential market: Housing values, sales, vacancy, property conditions, development activity, foreclosure, and planned development	Population and income data (see prior section), supplemented by assessor, deed recorder, building, and code-enforcement department data

This analysis does not need to be a comprehensive residential market study, but it should provide enough information to understand the broader community stability.



What the Data Tells Us

A corridor's physical conditions indicate the level and type of public investment that may be needed to support redevelopment. Corridors with significant public-realm or infrastructure deficiencies—unsafe or inaccessible sidewalks, inadequate lighting, poor crossings, or insufficient utility capacity—may need substantial public investment before private investment follows. Targeted public investment can also catalyze broader revitalization.

Real or perceived safety concerns can discourage residents from visiting or spending time in the area. Where safety is a barrier, the redevelopment strategy should address both the physical conditions behind those perceptions and community members' experiences. That calls for intentional community engagement to

KEY TERM

Property Condition Surveys

A property condition survey shows the scale of vacant and deteriorated properties in a defined area.[a] For a commercial corridor, it provides a timely picture of property conditions that can guide strategic, effective interventions. It can also capture some of the corridor conditions described in the previous section. Because commercial vacancy has its own nuances, the survey should be designed to reflect them (see Figure 1). Main Street America's Building Opportunities on Main Street (BOOMS) Tracker is a map-based tool that lets local Main Street leaders collect and update information on buildings and lots, including vacancy, property use, ownership, maintenance needs, and other characteristics. The data captures parcel-level conditions and sets the stage for analyzing and selecting a corridor strategy.



a "Conducting a Vacant Property Condition Survey," Center for Community Progress (online resource center), accessed October 12, 2026, https://communityprogress.org/resources/library/vacant-properties/vacant-property-strategy/finding-vacant-abandoned-properties/#condition-survey.

understand concerns, identify solutions, and make sure investments reflect how residents want the corridor to function and feel.

Changing neighborhood dynamics, such as increased housing development or rising residential vacancy, can signal whether market conditions support private investment or whether public investment is needed to change them.

4. Understand Parcel Conditions

Why It Matters

Many vacant commercial properties face barriers that make redevelopment financially or technically challenging.

Years of deferred maintenance leave buildings in poor condition, and older buildings may no longer fit today's business needs due to outdated layouts or inadequate electrical or telecommunications capacity. They also may not meet code requirements such as ADA accessibility and fire suppression systems, or current zoning and parking standards. Some properties may have environmental contamination from past uses, such as gas stations or dry cleaners, adding uncertainty and redevelopment cost.[17] Owners may lack the capital to rehabilitate their buildings, and complex ownership structures or unresolved legal issues can block investment.

17 "What is a Brownfield?" Center for Community Progress (blog), April 21, 2025, https://communityprogress.org/blog/what-is-a-brownfield/.

KEY QUESTIONS

What is the condition of the individual properties on the commercial corridor, and are they suitable for redevelopment or a barrier to it?

- What types of properties comprise the corridor, and how many units are there?
- What condition are they in? Have code enforcement actions (e.g., citations, nuisance abatement) been taken to address unsafe conditions?
- Would the anticipated value of the properties after reuse be sufficient to offset the costs of acquisition, rehabilitation, and ongoing operations?
- Who owns the properties, do they have the resources and willingness to invest, and does reinvestment make economic sense based on the cost of repairs and property value?

FIGURE 5

Parcel-Level Data and Where to Find It

Data Type	Where to Find It
Basic property inventory: Property type; building and lot size; number of commercial units; current and previous uses; occupancy; length of vacancy	Assessor; building department; owner and tenant interviews
Existing building and site conditions: Exterior and structural condition; building systems; code violations; accessibility; utilities	Field survey; code enforcement; building department; fire department; utilities; owner or tenant interviews
Future use and feasibility: Potential for continued commercial use, adaptive reuse, redevelopment, or land-based reuse considering costs, expected income or value, financing gaps, and major regulatory or environmental constraints	Parcel condition and corridor market analyses; planning and building departments; local or state historic preservation office; EPA; FEMA; state environmental agency; brokers; appraisers; contractors; owner or tenant interviews
Ownership and title status: Owner type, willingness and capacity to invest, sales history, taxes, liens, foreclosure, and other title issues	Assessor; deed recorder; land bank or public land holding entity; courts; secretary of state (or other state corporate entity registry); owner or tenant interviews

What the Data Tells Us

Parcel-level data shows the scale of vacancy, where it is concentrated, which properties pose the greatest barriers to reuse, and what types of intervention may be appropriate. Aggregated across the corridor and analyzed alongside market and corridor conditions, this data can reveal patterns in the nature of vacancy and common barriers. For example, understanding ownership structure, behavior, and financial capacity indicates which strategies or tools are most likely to achieve reoccupancy. The data also shows the level and type of resources needed to move properties toward reuse.

CASE STUDY

Project Pop-Up: Building Broker Relationships (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)

The Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership (PDP), a downtown nonprofit, runs two complementary programs as part of a broader strategy for storefront activation and retail recruitment. Project Pop-Up places short-term tenants and art installations in vacant storefronts, helping emerging businesses build a customer base downtown. The Downtown Rent Abatement Program (DRAP) helps businesses ready for permanent space by subsidizing the first year of a multi-year lease. Together, the programs offer a path from temporary activation to long-term occupancy.[a] The big push came ahead of Pittsburgh hosting the April 2026 NFL Draft, when three local foundations and the Urban Redevelopment Authority funded a major expansion as part of a broader vibrancy initiative to reset downtown's image for the region.

Ongoing tracking of vacancy drives the work. PDP uses street surveys and broker listings to identify vacant properties and assess their condition. Getting owners on board with temporary reactivation then required carefully managed relationships with commercial real estate brokers—often the gatekeepers to properties and their owners. PDP's pitch was that activation minimizes financial barriers and risk for owners, brings in income, and keeps the space actively marketed for long-term lease.

Once brokers, owners, and funders were committed, PDP worked with the city's permitting department to review permit histories and match each space to an intervention:

- Raw spaces with no working utilities received exterior art, mostly vinyl or murals. Artists were selected through a call run with local arts organization Shiftworks, which paid the artist fees while PDP covered fabrication and installation.[b]
- Spaces with basic infrastructure got interior art installations, often with light-based movement to engage passersby. Artists were again selected through Shiftworks, and PDP contracted directly with the artists for designs and installation.
- Turnkey spaces went to pop-up tenants or, in a few cases, to long-term tenants supported by DRAP.

For tenants, the two programs work as follows:

Project Pop-Up facilitates short-term activations. Businesses apply through a simple online form, and finalists tour available spaces with owners, brokers, or managers. Businesses receive six- to 12-month license agreements, typically instead of a full lease, at rents well below market. Grants of up to $15,000 help offset rent, modest build-out costs, and other eligible startup expenses.

DRAP supports businesses entering multi-year leases. It pays 50 percent of monthly rent, up to $2,000 per month, directly to the property owner for the first 12 months (capped at $24,000).

PDP reports activating more than 50 storefronts in about three months. Some pop-ups are renewing, and DRAP has become a marketing tool for owners and brokers. Staff stress four lessons:

- **Build relationships with brokers before making asks.** Brokers control access to many vacant spaces and often to the owners, and their income depends on landing long-term tenants. PDP built trust by showing it was not competing for their business but trying to make their jobs easier, and by serving as a reliable source of downtown retail market data.
- **Build the same relationships with owners, funders, and city officials**, so a holdout owner can hear from the mayor or a council member rather than only from PDP.
- **Be clear from the start that art and pop-ups are placeholders** on the way to a long-term tenant, not obstacles to that goal.
- **Engage permitting early**. Occupancy permits can cause significant delays. Working with the permitting department to identify requirements early helps PDP and owners navigate the process more efficiently.

Modest financial assistance toward rent helped secure owner participation in pop-ups. Above all, willing owner participation is the gating factor, and brokers are often the path to it.[c]

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a "Project Pop-Up," Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership (website), accessed October 27, 2026, https://downtownpittsburgh.com/project-pop-up/.

b Shiftworks (website), accessed October 27, 2026, https://shiftworkspgh.org/.

c Interview with Cate Irvin, Senior Director of Economic Development, and Aaron Sukenik, Vice President of District Development, Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership, August 8, 2026.

5. Select a Corridor Strategy and Develop a Plan

With a clear picture of market, corridor, and parcel conditions, communities can move from assessing the corridor to deciding what it needs and which strategies are most likely to lead to reuse that reflects community goals. Some corridors are positioned for commercial **revitalization**, while others need **stabilization**—strengthening viable areas and reducing harm in weaker ones. Still others need to be **repositioned** for uses beyond traditional commercial activity.

Which strategy fits your community's corridor?



Revitalize
For corridors with enough market potential to support renewed or expanded commercial activity. The goal is to build on existing assets, remove barriers to investment, and attract new businesses and development.



Stabilize
For corridors without the market strength for broad redevelopment but with viable businesses, properties, or community-serving functions that can be sustained as conditions improve. The goal is to strengthen what is working, prevent further decline, and concentrate limited resources where they can have the greatest impact.



Reposition
For corridors where market conditions or other factors make a return to their previous commercial role unlikely. The goal is to reposition the corridor intentionally, such as by supporting alternative uses, right-sizing commercial space, or transitioning some properties to other productive uses.



KEY QUESTIONS

What role should this corridor play in the community?

- What competitive advantages or disadvantages does this corridor have compared with other commercial corridors in the community or region?
- Should the corridor primarily serve neighborhood residents, workers, commuters, or visitors?
- How do existing local plans envision the corridor and surrounding neighborhood, and is that vision still realistic given market conditions?
- Does the entire corridor need to remain commercial? If not, what community needs could it better serve (e.g., flood reduction, food or energy production, recreation, improved air quality, housing)?
- Which strategy best fits: **revitalize**, **stabilize**, or **reposition**?

FIGURE 6

From Analysis to Action: Aligning Corridor Strategy and Public Tools

While not a formula or exhaustive list, this table illustrates how market, corridor, and parcel conditions can point toward revitalization, stabilization, or repositioning and how public tools might implement each strategy. Corridors may share characteristics across the three columns, and the appropriate mix and sequence of tools will depend on local conditions, laws, resources, and property-specific barriers.







REVITALIZE	STABILIZE	REPOSITION
For corridors with enough market potential to support renewed or expanded commercial activity	For corridors with viable nodes to sustain, but not the market for broad redevelopment	For corridors where a return to their previous commercial role is unlikely
CONDITIONS		
MARKET		
Demand may be weak and vacancy high, but the corridor has a credible source of expanding demand. This may be a legacy destination business, specialized cluster, institution, unmet demand, growing residential market, or a planned investment likely to bring new residents, workers, or visitors—such as substantial new housing, an expanding employer, or a stadium or other major regional attraction. The opportunity must be specific and realistic—not an aspiration—and strong enough and close enough to attract complementary businesses and uses.	Demand is modest but stable, although lower than in the past. Existing businesses, institutions, or community-serving uses are concentrated in one or two nodes and remain generally viable, but there is no current or expected source of demand strong enough to support broad commercial expansion. The surrounding residential market may be stable or changing slowly, but only supports targeted uses and locations rather than the corridor's full historic commercial footprint.	Demand for the corridor's previous commercial role is persistently weak, vacancy is high and long term, and the supply of commercial space substantially exceeds realistic current or future demand. A small number of businesses may remain viable, and limited demand may exist for other uses, such as light industrial. But no existing asset or planned investment is likely to restore the corridor's former commercial footprint.
CORRIDOR		
The corridor has unique characteristics that position it to capture that future demand. This may include a strong identity, walkable or historic form, easy access, proximity to an anchor, or planned public improvements. Infrastructure, regulatory, and environmental barriers that exist can be realistically addressed.	The corridor has identifiable strengths, like active nodes, legacy businesses, or anchors. But chronic vacancy or infrastructure problems weaken the areas between them. Targeted improvements can reinforce the strongest locations and reduce harm, but corridor-wide investment is unlikely to produce a major market resurgence. Alternative uses are needed for properties without viable commercial use.	The corridor needs a different mix of uses, with green reuse likely to play a major role. Opportunities may exist for energy production, trees, nurseries, rain gardens, meadows, recreation, or other green uses. These uses can provide value individually or as part of a larger network. Other possible reuses may be for housing or light industrial use.

FIGURE 6 *(continued)*

 REVITALIZE	 STABILIZE	 REPOSITION
CONDITIONS *(continued)*		
PROPERTY CONDITIONS		
There is a critical mass of occupied, vacant, or underused properties that can accommodate expanded activity. Reuse of some sites may require significant intervention, but enough are physically, legally, and financially feasible to create momentum with targeted, catalytic public support.	Property conditions and feasibility are mixed. Some occupied, vacant, or underused properties are physically, legally, and financially feasible for continued or new use with targeted support. Enough physical assets remain viable to anchor a more focused corridor, while weaker properties can be maintained or transitioned over time to uses such as small-scale production, housing, or green reuse.	Many properties are vacant, deteriorated, or obsolete, and neither rehabilitating the existing building nor constructing a new one is financially feasible. Many parcels are vacant lots as a result of prior demolition. Where building reuse is not feasible, individual parcels or assembled sites can support green reuse.
VISION		
A lively destination where local businesses and anchors thrive, vacant storefronts are returned to use, and new construction brings additional shops, services, jobs, and homes that build on the corridor's existing strengths.	A dependable neighborhood corridor centered on a strong node of businesses, services, or community anchors that meet residents' daily needs. The corridor remains largely built and active, while select weaker areas transition to green uses that complement the built corridor and support the surrounding community.	A distinctive corridor where vacancy gives way to beauty and purpose—where a small number of viable businesses coexist with urban forests, meadows, rain gardens, solar energy, or other productive uses that strengthen the health and resilience of the surrounding community, lower costs, or create jobs.
STRATEGY		
Build on the corridor's credible source of demand and competitive advantages to create broader development momentum—strengthening anchors, removing barriers to investment, targeting catalytic properties, and attracting complementary commercial businesses and uses.	Concentrate investment and activity around the strongest nodes, retain viable businesses and buildings, address nearby vacancy and deterioration, and transition sites unlikely to support building reuse to site-specific green uses that channel activity toward the nodes.	Convert excess commercial properties where building reuse is infeasible to purposeful land-based uses managed by longer-term stewards, while preserving viable businesses.

FIGURE 6 *(continued)*



REVITALIZE



STABILIZE



REPOSITION

ALIGNING TOOLS

While not a comprehensive list, these illustrate how to augment tools based on strategy.

PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

- Roof, façade, and repair grants
- Proactive code inspections

- Repair grants focused on the strongest nodes
- Vacant property monitoring
- Mothballing
- Bollards to prevent dumping
- Mowing

- Stabilize viable buildings
- Board and maintain properties awaiting transition
- Buffer strip mowing
- Dumping removal

COMPELLING COMPLIANCE OR TRANSFER

- Aggressive nuisance abatement and cost recovery
- Swift, escalating fines
- Receivership for key properties

- Compliance agreements paired with repair assistance
- Targeted nuisance abatement

- Expedited code lien or tax foreclosure
- Negotiated transfers or property swaps with the land bank

PUBLIC OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL

- Proactive acquisition of catalytic properties

- Acquisition of key properties within or near the strongest nodes
- Land bank holding for future reuse

- Large-scale acquisition and site assembly
- Land banking

ENABLING REUSE

Property Preparation

- Targeted brownfield cleanup
- Gray-box or white-box preparation
- Utility upgrades
- Selective demolition for new construction

- Rehabilitation of viable buildings
- Strategic demolition
- Parcel consolidation and site preparation

- Coordinated demolition or deconstruction tied to a reuse plan
- Utility disconnection or downsizing
- Grading, drainage, and stabilization

Site Control, Strategic Disposition, and Development Agreements

- RFPs and development agreements

- Discounted property sales

- Nominal-price disposition for long-term green reuse
- Restrictive covenants

Zoning, Building Code, and Permitting

- Expedited permitting
- Upzoning for greater density

- Temporary-use activation permits
- Zoning for housing, small-scale industrial, and small-scale land-based uses

- Rezoning for land-based uses

Financing, Incentives, and Other Public Investment

- Flexible rehabilitation and tenant-improvement financing

- Property improvement grants

- Stormwater credits
- Solar incentives

Related Corridor and Market-Building Tools

- Targeted business recruitment and storefront matching

- Node-focused business assistance

- Land-based business incubator

Part 2:

Using Public Tools to Implement a Corridor Strategy

When Public Intervention Is Necessary

Putting the commercial corridor strategy into action means matching it with the right tools, resources, and expertise. Public intervention is necessary when properties are causing significant community harm and market forces alone cannot resolve the underlying challenges.

Local government tools can prevent properties from becoming vacant or deteriorated, compel action when owners fail to maintain properties, enable public entities to take control of properties when necessary, and position them for reuse.

This section is organized into four categories:

- **Prevention and Early Intervention**: Tools that keep properties from becoming vacant or deteriorated, or allow communities to track conditions before they become harder and more expensive to address, which includes balancing incentives, monitoring, and enforcement
- **Compelling Compliance or Transfer:** Tools that address harmful property conditions and significant code violations, including mechanisms that can ultimately facilitate a transfer of ownership when properties remain unmaintained or unresolved.
- **Public Ownership and Control**: Tools that let public entities acquire or otherwise gain control of properties when private owners cannot or will not return them to productive use
- **Enabling Reuse**: Tools that support successful reuse, including financing and incentives, remediation, zoning, and other public interventions

Before adopting new tools or programs, communities should take stock of the policies, authorities, and resources they already have and where the gaps are. Some tools can be implemented through existing local authority, while others require changes to local policy or state law. Communities should weigh each tool's likely impact against the investment and effort needed to build new policies, programs, or partnerships. Sometimes a new tool is the right answer. Other times, existing tools may be enough if used more strategically.

> **Public intervention is necessary when properties are causing significant community harm and market forces alone cannot resolve the underlying challenges.**

KEY QUESTIONS

- Based on the condition assessments, what barriers are preventing commercial properties from being reused? Do those barriers vary by corridor or property type?
- Which tools would address those barriers? Can they be implemented under existing local authority, or require changes to local or state law?
- What policies, programs, and enforcement tools and authorities do the public entities already have? Are they being used effectively?
- Is there enough need to justify a new program, policy, or funding mechanism? Would the benefits justify the effort, political capital, resources, and risk?

DEEPER DIVE

Public Tools Are Only One Part of the Strategy

Property owners, developers, financial institutions, community organizations, and other private and nonprofit partners all play important roles in preventing deterioration, investing in properties, and advancing reuse. This section focuses on public tools because communities often face barriers individual property owners cannot resolve alone, such as significant code violations, tax delinquency, environmental contamination, inadequate infrastructure, or financing gaps. Public tools can create the conditions for private and community investment to succeed.

Prevention and Early Intervention

The most effective way to address commercial vacancy and deterioration is to intervene before a property becomes chronically vacant, severely deteriorated, or difficult to return to productive use. Once a property has sat vacant for years, it may have deteriorated to the point where rehabilitation costs are prohibitively high, and the owner may have walked away. This decline harms neighboring businesses, the corridor, and the surrounding residential community. At that point, communities might need to rely on more time- and resource-intensive tools.

> **The earlier a community intervenes, the more options it has.**

Local governments and their partners should work to understand why a property remains vacant, support owners who are willing to act, and address barriers to reinvestment. At the same time, they should monitor property conditions, establish clear maintenance expectations, and hold negligent or unresponsive owners accountable. This balanced approach can help prevent further deterioration and preserve opportunities for reuse before more intensive interventions become necessary.

Incentives

Ideally, local governments can work in partnership with property owners to identify barriers to occupancy, prevent deterioration and vacancy, and connect owners with resources and support to keep properties in productive use without taking a heavy enforcement approach. Many tools described later (see **Enabling Reuse**)—including grants, loans, zoning updates, tenant-improvement assistance, permitting, corridor management, clean-and-safe programs, marketing, and activation—work best before a property becomes vacant or seriously deteriorated. Used early, they can help an owner make a critical repair, keep a business in place, fill a storefront before it sits empty, or address corridor conditions that drive customers and investment away.

Local governments should connect code enforcement with economic development staff and corridor partners, who are often the first to see warning signs. Working together, they can reach an owner or business while someone is still willing to act and the problem is still affordable to fix. The earlier a community intervenes, the more options it has.

Proactive Code Enforcement

Code enforcement is one of the most important public tools for keeping commercial properties safe, secure, and well maintained. By requiring owners to correct unsafe or deteriorating conditions, local governments can slow physical decline and protect neighboring businesses and property values. In weaker real estate markets, code enforcement must be balanced with incentive programs (see **Enabling Reuse**).

Nearly every code enforcement department has limited capacity, which is why a corridor strategy and a commitment to targeted public investment are critical. Rather than responding only to complaints, local governments can focus limited resources on priority commercial districts where coordinated public investments are already planned.

Our experience working with communities across the country suggests property maintenance code enforcement has traditionally focused on residential properties, with commercial buildings receiving less attention and fewer specialized resources. As a result, code enforcement staff are not always integrated into economic development or corridor revitalization efforts, despite their central role in working to improve property conditions.

Communities should evaluate whether their property maintenance, fire, building, and health codes are effective tools for addressing vacant and deteriorated commercial properties; whether code enforcement officers have the training and authority to handle commercial vacancy; and whether code enforcement,

CASE STUDY

Supporting Corridor Revitalization with Public Investment (Allegheny County, Pennsylvania)

Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, used local public investment to support corridor revitalization through coordinated improvements at both the corridor and property levels. Its Main Street grant program funds physical improvements that strengthen the appearance, safety, accessibility, and overall appeal of commercial districts. Eligible activities include:

- **Streetscape improvements**: sidewalks, street lighting, benches, planters, and other public amenities
- **Façade improvements**: painting, signage, window displays, and other visual upgrades
- **Public art**: murals, sculptures, mosaics, and other installations that contribute to a distinctive community identity
- **Traffic calming**: pedestrian crossings, bike lanes, speed bumps, and other safety and accessibility improvements
- **Green spaces and parks**: new or improved parks, plazas, and other gathering spaces

These public investments address the conditions surrounding vacant or underutilized commercial properties, rather than just the buildings themselves—a holistic approach alongside proactive code enforcement that can create the conditions for private investment and make individual properties more attractive for reuse.

economic development, and legal staff coordinate well enough to pursue complex enforcement actions when voluntary compliance fails.

Treating code enforcement as a core part of commercial revitalization protects existing investments and creates the conditions for redevelopment.[18]

> **Treating code enforcement as a core part of commercial revitalization protects existing investments and creates the conditions for redevelopment.**

KEY QUESTIONS

Effectiveness of Tools

- Can code enforcement issue property maintenance warnings and notices with clear correction deadlines?
- Are fines and penalties proportionate to the scale, severity, and impact of violations—and sufficient to encourage compliance?
- Can the municipality recover the cost of inspections, emergency repairs, securing, demolition, or other abatement activities? (See **Nuisance Abatement**)
- Can unpaid fines, fees, and abatement costs be added to the property's tax bill or collected as a lien? (See **Code Lien Foreclosure**)

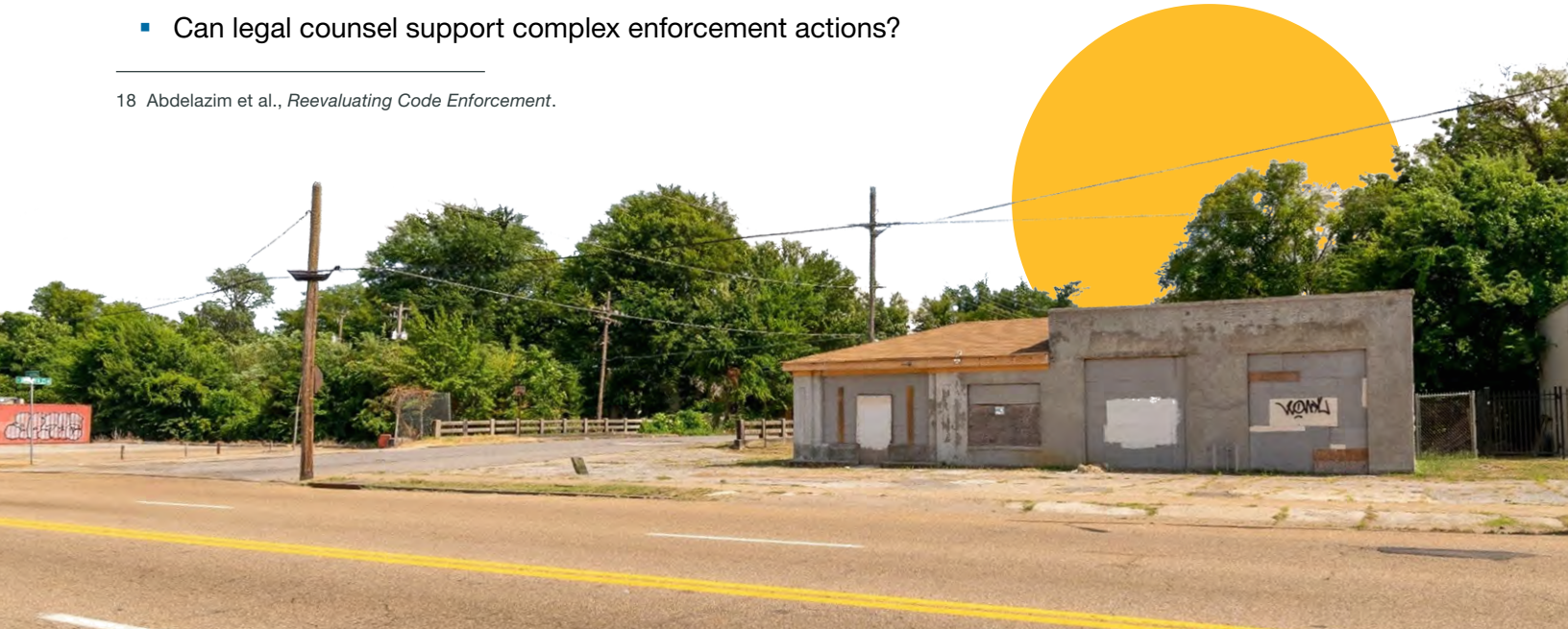
Expertise and Capacity

- Do code enforcement staff understand the unique challenges of commercial properties, such as code requirements, environmental concerns, and complex ownership structures?
- Do they have the training and technical knowledge—including access to building, fire, environmental, and legal expertise—to document violations and build a strong enforcement case?
- Is there enough staff capacity to follow cases from inspection to compliance or enforcement action?

Coordination

- Do code enforcement, economic development, planning, legal, tax, finance, and other relevant departments coordinate on problem commercial properties?
- Is there a clear process for escalation when voluntary compliance fails?
- Can legal counsel support complex enforcement actions?

18 Abdelazim et al., *Reevaluating Code Enforcement*.



Vacant Property Registries

Vacant property registries, or vacant property registration ordinances (VPROs), can help bring vacant properties into compliance with local property maintenance codes. Most states give local governments broad discretion to adopt and craft such ordinances, but authority varies by state law.[19]

VPROs typically require owners of vacant properties to register with the local government by providing specific contact information and paying a fee. Many also require owners to maintain the properties, for example by boarding windows or mowing the grass.[20] VPROs can help focus a local government's efforts on identifying and addressing vacant properties but must be seen as one piece of a larger strategic approach.

VPROs serve three core purposes:[21]

- Ensure that the local government knows who owns vacant properties and can reach them
- Ensure owners understand their obligations under relevant codes and regulations
- Motivate owners to meet minimum maintenance standards

A strong VPRO fee structure reflects the municipality's costs of administering the VPRO program, which can include helping to offset unpaid abatement costs on vacant properties. This fee can also help to motivate owners to restore and reuse their properties.

A well-designed VPRO should include:

- Clear definition of which properties and which parties must register
- Registration requirements, including contact information for the owner or lienholder
- A fee structure
- Owner obligations, such as property maintenance and carrying liability insurance
- Penalties for failing to register

Tying incentives to registration can make a VPRO more useful, for example by waiving registration fees or escalating them based on length of vacancy. Bangor, Maine, lets an owner request a temporary deferral of the registration fee when an active building permit is on file with the code enforcement office.[22]



Registration alone will not solve market challenges or make obsolete properties viable for reuse.

19 "Property Registration Ordinance Tracking," SafeGuard Properties (website), accessed October 12, 2026, https://blog.safeguardproperties.com/all.

20 Alan Mallach, *State Policy and Problem Property Regulation* (Center for Community Progress, 2022), https://communityprogress.org/publications/state-policy-and-problem-property-regulation/.

21 "Tools and Strategies to Address Vacant Properties - Vacant Property Registration Ordinances (VPROs)," Center for Community Progress (online resource center), accessed October 12, 2026, https://communityprogress.org/resources/library/vacant-properties/vacant-property-strategy/addressing-vacant-properties/#vpro.

22 "Legal Department – Vacant Building Registration," City of Bangor, Maine (website), accessed October 14, 2026, https://www.bangormaine.gov/m/faq?cat=51#question-259.

A registry is only as effective as the community's capacity to administer and enforce it. Few owners will register vacant properties voluntarily, particularly when registration carries fees or maintenance requirements. Communities need a proactive process for identifying unregistered properties, keeping the registry accurate, and following up with owners who fail to register or maintain their properties.

Registration alone will not solve market challenges or make obsolete properties viable for reuse, and overly punitive approaches may not lead to reoccupancy. Communities should connect the registry to incentives or other redevelopment tools that help owners address property conditions and prepare them for reuse. This shifts the registry from a tracking list to an early intervention tool and pipeline for targeted assistance.

Business Licensing

Where VPROs aim to compel occupancy of vacant commercial properties, business licensing is a useful tool for occupied ones. Licensing and renewal are recurring opportunities to identify and address property conditions that undermine corridors. Where state and local law allows, municipalities can condition license issuance or renewal on compliance, use provisional licenses tied to corrective-action plans, and escalate consequences for chronic violations.

At the same time, licensing requirements can unintentionally make it harder to reoccupy vacant space. Lengthy processes, duplicative requirements, or requirements that do not reflect a property's condition and intended use add time and cost for businesses trying to open or reactivate space.

Communities should assess whether their licensing and permitting processes fit local market and building conditions.



KEY QUESTIONS

- **Are licensing and permitting requirements proportional to a property's use and condition**, or could they be streamlined to cut unnecessary time and costs while still protecting health and safety?
- **Can business licensing be used as an enforcement tool?** For example, can it condition issuance or renewal on compliance or use provisional licenses tied to corrective-action plans?
- **Are there meaningful consequences for chronic violations?**

Compelling Compliance or Transfer

The goal of prevention and early intervention is to reduce the need for more expensive public intervention down the line. However, when property owners fail to address persistent problems, or when private ownership can no longer achieve community goals, local governments may need to take a more active enforcement role. That can mean using tools that compel owners to address property conditions and seek reoccupancy or, ultimately, tools that facilitate the transfer of properties to new, responsible ownership.

Nuisance Abatement

Unsecured buildings, illegal dumping, overgrown grass, or other persistent nuisances affect more than the individual property where they occur. Concentrated along a corridor, they discourage customers, hurt neighboring businesses, reduce property values, and undermine confidence in the area. Nuisance abatement is an important tool for protecting the health, safety, and vitality of commercial corridors, and it works best as part of proactive code enforcement efforts. Nuisance abatement is the process by which a government steps in and removes or repairs a property condition that is harming neighbors or the surrounding the community, often when the owner cannot or will not act.[23]

State law establishes when and how local governments may enter properties to abate nuisance conditions. Common actions include boarding and securing vacant properties' windows and doors, demolishing unsafe structures, mowing high weeds and grass, and removing trash and debris. State law also prescribes how governments recoup the public dollars spent, most often in the form of a lien. The most effective state statutes for nuisance abatement allow for such a lien to have "priority" over all other liens against the property, similar to the priority lien status usually accorded to unpaid property tax liens. This priority lien status means, in part, that if the local government



23 Abdelazim et al., *Reevaluating Code Enforcement*.

chooses to foreclose on the lien, it gets paid first out of the proceeds of any sale of the property. This gives the owner a powerful incentive to either pay the local government back or risk the loss of the property.

Nuisance abatement addresses a property's immediate harm and keeps them from spreading along a corridor. On its own, however, it does not position a property for reuse or advance the corridor's broader goals. That requires continued engagement with property owners, incentives, and other financing to transition to reuse. In the right circumstances, the cost of abatement can also be recouped through the delinquent tax enforcement process or through code lien foreclosure.

KEY QUESTIONS

- **Do state and local laws give the local government the authority to address common nuisance conditions** (e.g., secure or board buildings, remove debris, mow overgrown lots, make emergency repairs, demolish unsafe structures)?
- **Can the local government recover abatement costs through a priority lien, the tax bill, or another mechanism?** Does the local government have a realistic path to collect those costs?
- **What happens after the nuisance is addressed?** Is there a plan for continued owner engagement, enforcement, acquisition, or other interventions to keep the property from returning to the same condition and move it toward reuse?

> **The fully loaded costs of staff time spent on code enforcement and necessary nuisance abatement activities must be calculated and added to the tax bill.**

Delinquent Property Tax Enforcement

The local government's authority to enforce nonpayment of the property tax lien, or "delinquent property tax enforcement," is a powerful tool for addressing vacancy and deterioration.[24] When designed and implemented effectively, delinquent property tax enforcement can create a pathway to transfer properties from owners who are unwilling or unable to maintain them to new, responsible owners who can return them to productive use.

In weaker markets, owners often abandon their property responsibilities, including the payment of property taxes, because the cost of compliance outweighs the property's value. However, communities report that vacant commercial properties may be less likely than vacant homes to become tax delinquent, in part because commercial properties tend to have higher values. As a result, owners may remain current on property taxes even when a property is vacant. Commercial properties may also carry private liens tied to financing that enabled acquisition, renovations, or the purchase of business equipment. Lenders may pay outstanding taxes to protect their interests or pursue their own lengthy foreclosure processes. For these reasons, tax foreclosure can be a less viable intervention point for commercial properties.

24 To learn more about the delinquent property tax enforcement process in addressing commercial vacancy, see Graziani, *Reimagine Delinquent Property Tax Enforcement*.

In these situations, it becomes even more important that the fully loaded costs of staff time spent on code enforcement and necessary nuisance abatement activities be calculated and added to the tax bill. At the very least, taxpayers will then likely get reimbursed for this critical investment in public safety.

In other cases, local governments may have the authority to pursue tax foreclosure but choose not to because of the financial, legal, or operational liabilities of acquiring and managing commercial properties should the property not sell at a foreclosure auction. Local government decision makers must therefore understand how common commercial tax delinquency is and how their enforcement process works. They should also ask whether a corridor strategy with the right partners at the table changes how they assess risk. These assessments show whether delinquent property tax enforcement is a viable pathway or whether other tools are needed.

Although its utility to compel the transfer of vacant commercial properties to new ownership may be limited, this tool is still worth exploring.

Community Progress advocates for two policy approaches that focus on resolving property-related issues rather than penalizing the owner personally:[25]

1. **Focus on Foreclosure**

   Selling tax liens to private investors, or expending limited public resources going after property owners for personal payment of the debt (which is especially challenging for properties owned by a single-asset LLC), is inefficient and prolongs the time the property sits vacant, deteriorating further.

   Instead, focus on developing a judicially supervised foreclosure process that gives the owner a defined date by which to pay all outstanding amounts. If not paid, it then results in an *in rem* judgment (against the property, not the individual owner) allowing the property to be sold at a court-ordered public sale. If the property does not sell, it is then transferred to the foreclosing governmental unit. This can resolve the tax delinquency while establishing clear ownership and control over future use. For strategic



25 Kim Graziani, *The Road Ahead for Land Banks: Opportunities for Growth and Greater Equity* (Center for Community Progress, 2024), **https://communityprogress.org/publications/2024-road-ahead-land-banks/**.

corridor intervention, public control of a property can be critical to achieving the corridor strategy (see **Public Ownership**).

2. **Reduce Redemption Periods for Vacant Properties**

   Some states have reduced the time in which an owner can redeem (pay back the unpaid taxes to prevent foreclosure) or created an expedited foreclosure processes for properties that meet statutory definitions of vacant or abandoned.[26] These provisions recognize that a vacant, deteriorating property may warrant a different timeline than an occupied one, helping move it toward reuse more quickly. Ideally, tax foreclosure results in clear, marketable title that can be transferred to a new, responsible owner, which could include public ownership.

26 Ohio Rev. Code Ann. § 2308.02 (effective Apr. 6, 2017), **https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-2308.02**; N.J. Stat. Ann. § 2A:50-73 (2025), **https://law.justia.com/codes/new-jersey/title-2a/section-2a-50-73/**.

Property Taxes are Delinquent and Remain Unpaid. What Happens Next?



Below are two scenarios for a vacant, tax-delinquent property. On the left, a local government has privatized the collection and enforcement process by selling tax liens to private buyers. On the right, a local government retains that core function using an optimal enforcement approach to sell the property: judicial *in rem* foreclosure.

1 Tax Lien Put Up for Sale

Taxes owed are offered for sale by the local government as a tax lien to a private bidder.

2 Tax Lien Purchased

Private buyer charges current property owner interest and fees but is unlikely to collect and walks away, given debt exceeds property's market value, or forecloses on property.

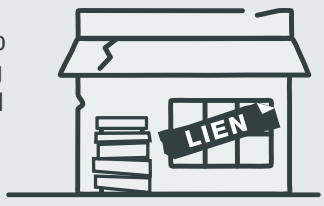
OR

Tax Lien Fails to Sell

Tax lien relisted for auction year after year. Property continues to deteriorate and accumulated debt continues to exceed its market value.

3 Outcome

Property more likely to stay in limbo, harming community health and local economy.



1 Government Retains Tax Lien

Local government retains responsibility to enforce delinquent property taxes and forecloses on tax lien.

2 Property Sells at Auction

Local government sells property with insurable title at auction.

OR

Government Takes Ownership

Local government takes ownership or transfers property to a trusted entity like a land bank to return it to community-aligned use.

3 Outcome

Property more likely to be quickly returned to purposeful use in the hands of a new, responsible owner.



Copyright: Center for Community Progress

KEY QUESTIONS

- **How common is commercial tax delinquency?** Are enough vacant or deteriorated commercial properties becoming delinquent for tax foreclosure to be a useful tool?
- **Does state law provide a clear, effective path to tax foreclosure?** What are the timelines and notice requirements, and can the process move chronically delinquent properties toward new ownership?
- **Does state law allow judicial *in rem* foreclosure**, with a court-ordered public sale and, if no bids are received at the sale, a transfer to a government entity? Does the transfer result in clear, marketable title?
- **Does state law provide a reduced redemption period for vacant properties?** If so, could it help move severely distressed commercial properties through foreclosure more efficiently?
- **Can the local government handle the financial, environmental, legal, and property management risks of acquiring commercial properties?** Could a land bank or another public entity serve that role?
- **Is there a strategy for properties acquired through tax foreclosure?** Is there a clear path to rehabilitation, redevelopment, or transfer to a responsible owner?

Ideally, tax foreclosure results in clear, marketable title that can be transferred to a new, responsible owner, which could include public ownership.

Code Lien Foreclosure

When a particularly harmful vacant or deteriorated commercial property is current on its taxes or is simply caught up in an inefficient system, code lien foreclosure may provide an alternative mechanism for moving the property into responsible ownership.

In states where local governments have limited tools for enforcing delinquent property taxes—or where systems reform is politically difficult—some communities seek to foreclose code enforcement or nuisance abatement liens, noting this tool is far more successful when those liens are given priority lien status in state law.

These laws allow certain code enforcement and abatement costs, along with other eligible expenses, to be secured by liens that receive priority similar to property tax liens, placing them ahead of most other liens. This priority can improve the likelihood that local governments will recover eligible costs when a property is sold. In many states, local governments are also authorized to foreclose on these liens, though the procedures and practical use of foreclosure vary. Some state laws authorize certain jurisdictions specific processes for foreclosing on these liens to address harmful vacant properties.[27] When properly structured and implemented, these processes can help local governments overcome competing claims against a property and facilitate its transfer to responsible ownership, including public ownership when appropriate.

27 See Alabama statues, Code of Ala. §§ 11-40-60 to 69 (Lexis 2026) snd Code of Ala. §§ 11-70B-1 (Lexis 2026).; and Louisiana statute La. R.S. §§ 13:2575(C)(1) and § 13:2576(A)(1) (Lexis 2026).

KEY QUESTIONS

- **Can code liens take priority over other liens?** Without sufficient priority, the local government may be unable to recover its costs or use foreclosure effectively to move the property toward responsible ownership.
- **What costs can the lien secure** (i.e., fines, inspections, legal costs, emergency repairs, demolition, and other costs associated with addressing the property)?
- **Does the process allow the local government to foreclose on the property, force a sale, and extinguish subordinate liens?**
- **Is code lien foreclosure a realistic tool?** Are there enough problem properties to justify the legal, administrative, and financial resources this approach requires?

Receivership can be a powerful tool to rehabilitate vacant property with dangerous health and safety conditions, but it requires a significant commitment of time and resources.

Receivership

Receivership can be a powerful tool to rehabilitate vacant property with dangerous health and safety conditions, but it requires a significant commitment of time and resources and is not appropriate for every property.

The legal process of receivership allows a municipality or, where authorized by state law, an interested party, such as a tenant, a neighbor, or a qualified nonprofit, to petition a court to request the appointment of a receiver when an owner has failed to address serious code violations or dangerous conditions.[28] If the court grants the petition, it appoints a receiver—typically a property management company, developer, nonprofit, attorney, or other qualified entity—to take control of the property and oversee its rehabilitation or sale.

Once appointed, the receiver may be authorized to secure and manage the property, borrow or spend funds to address code violations and rehabilitate the building, and place a lien on the property to recover those costs. The most successful receivership statutes allow the receiver's lien to take priority over all other liens, except municipal taxes. This is crucial to the success of the receivership because it allows receivers to recover costs even when there is a mortgage or other lien on the property. Depending on state law and circumstances, the original owner or interest-holder may regain control by reimbursing the receiver, or the property may be sold or transferred to a responsible owner.

Receivership can preserve and restore vacant buildings at risk of demolition-by-neglect and address dangerous health and safety conditions. In states where nonprofits or other entities can petition for the appointment of a receiver, receivership can also be a tool that allows mission-aligned entities to take on some of the remediation efforts, freeing up municipal capacity to tackle other issues. But success depends on there being a receiver capable of funding the

28 "Tools and Strategies to Address Vacant Properties - Receivership," Center for Community Progress (online resource center), accessed October 12, 2026, https://communityprogress.org/resources/library/vacant-properties/vacant-property-strategy/addressing-vacant-properties/#receivership.

costs of repairs, maintenance, and management and enough value in the property to cover these costs if the owner does not repay them.

As with other code enforcement tools, the goal of receivership is compliance with local and state health and safety laws. In many cases, this result is achieved through a settlement with the owner and a court-supervised process in which the owner remediates the dangerous conditions at the property. This result is as successful as the appointment of a receiver.

State laws vary in their authorization of receivership, with some states explicitly permitting it, others relying on the courts' equitable authority, and some providing no clear pathway. Even where receivership is authorized, statutes may limit its application to residential properties. However, some states allow receivership of commercial and mixed-use properties, either explicitly or through judicial authority.[29] California, for example, permits commercial property receivership, and receivers have successfully rehabilitated commercial spaces, bringing new vibrancy to downtown communities. Regardless of the approach, having explicit statutory authority, as in Tennessee or Pennsylvania,[30] provides a stronger and more reliable legal foundation.

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29 Some states limit receivership, by statute, to residential properties. Examples of states that permit commercial property receivership include California (HSC § 17980), North Carolina (G.S. § 160D-1130); Pennsylvania (68 Pa. C.S.A. § 1101, et seq.); Tennessee (T.C.A. s. 13-6-101 et seq.).

30 In Pennsylvania, this legal process is referred to as conservatorship rather than receivership. See Neighborhood Preservation Act, T.C.A. s. 13-6-101 et seq. Abandoned and Blighted Property Conservatorship Act, Act of Nov. 26, 2008, P.L. 1672, No. 135, **https://www.palegis.us/statutes/unconsolidated/law-information/view-statute?txtType=HTM&SessYr=2008&ActNum=0135.&SessInd=0**.



KEY QUESTIONS

- **Does state law permit receivership for vacant commercial properties?**
- **Is the building a realistic candidate?** Can it be rehabilitated, and is that economically feasible given local market conditions and available resources, including potential grant funding?
- **Does the receiver's lien have priority status?** Can the receiver borrow funds for the rehabilitation against the property? Will the receivership action result in clear title after the sale of the property?
- **Does state law provide a clear exit strategy?** Can the receiver recover its costs or transfer the property to responsible ownership after rehabilitation?

Eminent Domain

Eminent domain is a legal process that lets local governments or their designated agencies, like redevelopment authorities, take a property from a private owner for a specific public purpose, which could include redeveloping disinvested areas. The acquiring agency must compensate the property owner, under the process outlined in state law. While eminent domain is a

CASE STUDY

Roger Williams Park: From Harmful Commercial Property to a Park Gateway (Providence, Rhode Island)

At the southern entrance to Roger Williams Park in Providence, Rhode Island, a vacant commercial property had become a persistent source of harm along the Broad Street Corridor. Damaged by fire, it spent more than a decade as a dumping ground for trash, debris, and abandoned vehicles.

Despite repeated citations and enforcement efforts, the property continued to deteriorate, affecting the surrounding neighborhood and the entrance to one of the city's most significant public spaces.

The Providence Redevelopment Agency (PRA) used its eminent domain authority to acquire the long-standing commercial nuisance and turn it into a gateway to the 427-acre park. Working with the City Parks Department, the PRA ran a public design competition, with residents gathering at a local theater on the corridor to choose their preferred design.

The project was supported by multiple public funding sources, including Rhode Island Housing and the City of Providence's American Rescue Plan Act allocation. The vacant and underutilized parcels were transformed into a modern, energy-efficient, multipurpose center serving park visitors and Washington Park residents. The new gateway provides information about public events, amenities, and year-round programs in the park and along the corridor.

The project demonstrated how public control of a harmful commercial property can resolve longstanding deterioration while advancing the community's vision for the corridor.

powerful tool, it can be a complex legal process that requires a significant amount of public resources to administer.

Communities may be hesitant to use eminent domain because it was historically wielded as a redevelopment tool to intentionally displace Black residents. Between 1950 and 1966, the federal government funneled money to municipalities across the country to clear "blighted" or "slum" neighborhoods,[31] with the intended goal of creating better housing.[32] In reality, this disproportionately displaced families of color,[33] and often physically (and intentionally) perpetuated segregation.[34] It is essential to keep this history in mind if considering using eminent domain in specific circumstances as an intervention of last resort.

KEY QUESTIONS

- **Is eminent domain necessary?** Have other approaches like tax or code lien foreclosure been tried or considered, and is acquisition through eminent domain warranted given the circumstances?
- I**s there a realistic path to reuse after acquisition?** Does the public entity have a clear plan, funding, and potential end user for the property?
- **Are there resources and legal capacity** to acquire the property, provide required compensation, and carry the property through to redevelopment?

Public Ownership and Control

In some cases, successful corridor revitalization requires public or quasi-public ownership of strategically important vacant properties. When the private market cannot or will not reinvest, entities such as land banks and redevelopment authorities can acquire, stabilize, and reposition properties for reuse.

Public ownership gives communities more control over the corridor's future. Public entities can assemble key sites, resolve title or environmental issues, prevent speculative acquisition, and make sure redevelopment reflects community priorities.

> **Public ownership is especially useful when a property is strategically important to a corridor but the private market is unable or unwilling to address it.**

31 The Center for Community Progress avoids using "blight" in our work because of the problematic and ambiguous use of the term to describe entire neighborhoods—including the people who live there. The word however is often used in many state statutes especially as it related to authority of a governmental agency to use eminent domain. See "The Problem with Calling Neighborhoods with Vacant Properties 'Blighted,'" Center for Community Progress (blog), April 11, 2024, https://communityprogress.org/blog/what-is-blight/.

32 "Vacant and 'Blighted' Properties in the American South: Historical Causes and Today's Patterns," (Center for Community Progress, 2026), https://communityprogress.org/data-stories/southern-property-vacancy-maps/.

33 Ed. Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers, "Renewing Inequality," Digital Scholarship Lab, American Panorama, https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/renewal/.

34 Diane Jones Allen, "Confronting the Racist Legacy of Urban Highways," The Dirt (American Society of Landscape Architects), October 2, 2023, https://www.asla.org/news-insights/dirt/confronting-the-racist-legacy-of-urban-highways.

Despite these benefits, public entities are often reluctant to acquire commercial properties because of environmental contamination, high rehabilitation costs, uncertain market demand, and complex ownership and title issues. However, communities can manage these risks and turn vacant properties into assets that support local priorities and long-term revitalization by better understanding the tools, risks, and benefits.

Public Ownership

Local and county governments can often acquire and hold properties directly using public funds, borrowing, grants, and other available resources. Properties can enter public ownership through tax foreclosure, code lien foreclosure, or eminent domain, as described above, or through direct, strategic purchase when public control is necessary to achieve a desired outcome.

In many communities, public or quasi-public entities—like redevelopment authorities, economic development authorities, and land banks—can also acquire and hold properties on behalf of or in coordination with local governments. These entities may offer more beneficial authorities, funding options, and property management or disposition tools than a municipality or county.

Public ownership is especially useful when a property is strategically important to a corridor but the private market is unable or unwilling to address it. Temporary control lets a public entity stabilize the site, address health and safety concerns, assemble properties, resolve title or other barriers, and buy time to find an appropriate reuse or development partner. It also brings ongoing costs, including maintenance, insurance, and other holding expenses.

Requirements for acquiring, managing, and disposing of publicly owned property vary by entity and state law. A municipality or county may be subject to public bidding, appraisal, notice, or other statutory requirements when disposing of property, which can limit its ability to steer a property toward a specific corridor outcome. For these reasons, land banks may have more flexibility to set disposition policies and attach conditions tied to community goals (see **Land Banks**). Understanding these differences helps communities decide which entity should take temporary or longer-term control of a strategic property.



KEY QUESTIONS

- **Can a public entity legally acquire and hold commercial property**, and what types of properties can it hold?
- **What acquisition methods are available?** Can a public entity acquire properties through tax foreclosure, direct purchase, donation, property exchange, negotiated acquisition, or eminent domain? Are there circumstances in which one method is more appropriate than another?
- **Does the public entity have capital available for acquisition?** Is there a dedicated property acquisition or redevelopment fund?
- **Can it afford to hold the property?** What will insurance, maintenance, environmental compliance, and property management cost over time, and is there a sustainable funding source until the property is transferred or redeveloped?
- **Which public entity is best positioned to hold the property**—the municipality or county, a land bank, a redevelopment authority, or an economic development entity?
- **Can properties be acquired strategically rather than reactively?** Can public funds be used to acquire properties before they become severely deteriorated or to assemble multiple properties to support a larger corridor strategy?
- **What requirements govern disposition of publicly owned property?** Does state or local law require an appraisal, public notice, competitive bidding, public hearing, or other process before property can be sold or transferred?

> **Land banks bring experience managing distressed properties.**

CASE STUDY

Hohman's Cleaners: Remediating Environmental Issues to Support a Family Business (Swissvale Borough, Pennsylvania)

Hohman's Cleaners stood on the corner of a prominent intersection in Swissvale Borough's business district. The commercial laundry and dry-cleaning facility closed after 40 years of operation in the 8,600-resident community and proceeded to sit tax delinquent and abandoned for years, filled with unclaimed clothing, dry cleaning equipment, and numerous drums of solvents. Given the potential for chemical contamination, it was considered a brownfield property.

The Tri-COG Land Bank (TCLB), which serves more than 30 communities in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania,[a] partnered with the councils of governments who had an EPA Assessment grant to better understand potential contamination. property. The land bank acquired the property, completed Phase I and II environmental site assessments, and obtained a release of liability from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (a process that took several years because Pennsylvania law does not exempt land banks from cleanup liability as it does for other economic development agencies). In total, TCLB spent about $56,000 to clean out the property and remove the solvents, then sold the property for $90,000 to a family-owned HVAC business.

[a] "Our Members," Tri-COG Land Bank (website), https://tricoglandbank.org/about/our-members/.

CASE STUDY

Sullivan County Land Bank: Revitalizing Historic Properties (Monticello, New York)

In Monticello, New York, the Sullivan County Land Bank is investing in key properties along Broadway, the county seat's main commercial corridor, where 36 of 77 commercial units were vacant in 2023.[a] Rather than waiting for properties to pass through tax foreclosure, the land bank has worked directly with private owners to acquire strategic buildings and create opportunities for their next chapter.

Its first major project was the Broadway Theater, which had been vacant for decades, with several outstanding liens. Seeing no interest from private investors, the land bank purchased the building for $250,000. Although some board members questioned the price, a developer on the board emphasized that the purchase was modest compared with the estimated $10 million needed to rehabilitate the structure. When a state-funded feasibility study found no organization prepared to lead cultural reuse, the land bank sold the theater to a business that transformed it into a bowling alley and arcade while preserving its historic marquee.

Building on that experience, the land bank partnered with nonprofit developer RUPCO to target two historic properties that anchored a block on Broadway: the Strong Building on one end and a KeyBank building on the other.

After purchasing both properties with New York Land Bank Initiative (LBI) funds, the land bank stabilized them while working on the redevelopment vision. The Strong Building, which had been an eyesore and nuisance to the village for many years, will have 60,000 square feet of ground floor commercial space for community organizations, with 16 affordable apartments above.

The second building was sold to the land bank by KeyBank because they saw the community benefit of the redevelopment plan. For nearly two years, the building hosted Monticello's Black Library pop-up, funded through state arts grants, and brought activity into the former bank building. Both projects demonstrated that bringing a building back to life does not always mean returning it to its original purpose. Sometimes, success means finding a new use—even an interim use—that reconnects it to the community.

Progress has not been easy. Rising construction costs and contamination from a former dry cleaner at the Strong Building continue to widen funding gaps. (The land bank recently transferred ownership of the Strong Building to RUPCO to complete a state brownfield tax credit project.) To sustain this work, the land bank relies on a $400,000 community bank line of credit to pay contractors while awaiting grant reimbursements, alongside continued county support for administration. Its experience illustrates that commercial revitalization rarely follows a straight line. It requires patient investment and willingness to pursue different tools and creative partnerships as circumstances change.[b]

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Sometimes, success means finding a new use—even an interim use—that reconnects it to the community.

a “About,” Sullivan County Land Bank (website), accessed October 27, 2026, https://sullivancountylandbank.org/about/.

b Interview with Jill M. Weyer, Chair, Sullivan County Land Bank, and Faith Moore, Senior Vice President of Housing Programs and Solutions, RUPCO, Inc., August 7, 2026.



Land Banks

A land bank is a public entity with unique powers, granted by state law, to return vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties to productive use according to community goals. Its primary purpose is to acquire vacant properties and temporarily hold and take care of them until they can be transferred to new, responsible owners.[35]

Although land banks have existed for decades, their growth accelerated in the 2010s in response to the housing market crash and foreclosure crisis. Many have since expanded their expertise and portfolios beyond residential properties to include commercial ones.[36] This evolution reflects a growing recognition that commercial vacancy can be just as consequential for neighborhood stability and revitalization as residential vacancy.

Land banks bring experience managing distressed properties and many have developed the capacity to acquire, stabilize, maintain, and reposition commercial properties that might otherwise stay vacant.[37]

Land banks have particular advantages when commercial vacancy intersects with environmental contamination including eligibility for protections in certain circumstances from federal environmental liability.[38] In some states, they have access to state liability protections or other legal tools that position them to acquire and manage contaminated properties while a path to remediation and reuse is developed. For example:

- In New York, land banks can enter into agreements with the state environmental agency, which improves cooperation between the land bank and regulatory agencies on liability protections.[39]

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35 "What is a Land Bank?" Center for Community Progress (blog), April 22, 2025, **https://communityprogress.org/blog/what-is-a-land-bank/**.

36 "State of Land Banking Survey Dashboard," Center for Community Progress, accessed October 14, 2026, **https://communityprogress.org/land-bank-survey/**.

37 Graziani, *The Road Ahead for Land Banks*.

38 Christina Carter Grant, Rob Finn, *Land Banks and Brownfields: Case Studies* (Center for Community Progress, 2025), **https://communityprogress.org/publications/land-banks-and-brownfields-case-studies/**; Center for Community Progress, Land Banks & Brownfields, June 2024, **https://communityprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/2024-07-progress-point-land-banks-brownfields.pdf**

39 "DEC Announces New Agreement with State and Local Partners to Redevelop and Revitalize Blighted Properties in Onondaga County," New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (press release), February 3, 2020, **https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/NYSDEC/bulletins/2799c38**.

- In Ohio, land banks are the preferred lead applicants to the state's Brownfield Remediation Program,[40] which makes it easier for land banks to access funding for costly brownfields work.
- Connecticut's state-enabling land bank legislation focuses solely on addressing brownfield properties.[41]

KEY QUESTIONS

- **Is a land bank needed?** Are there enough vacant, tax-delinquent commercial properties, or existing publicly owned properties that current tools do not effectively address? Do properties routinely fail to sell at tax foreclosure or public auction? Could publicly owned properties benefit from more centralized acquisition, maintenance, and disposition?[42]
- **Does the state have legislation that authorizes land bank formation** and gives them the powers to acquire, hold, maintain, and dispose of vacant and distressed properties?
- **Who can serve as the land bank?** Which entities are eligible, do they already exist, and do they have capacity to serve as a land bank?
- **If a land bank already serves the community, can it acquire properties strategically**, with the tools to address priority properties?
- **Can the land bank manage commercial properties effectively?** Does it have the resources and expertise to secure, maintain, stabilize, and, where appropriate, remediate them while a reuse strategy is developed?
- **Are there sufficient resources to cover the costs of holding properties**, particularly those that need significant environmental or structural work?

40 "Brownfield Remediation Program," Ohio Department of Development (website), accessed October 14, 2026, https://development.ohio.gov/community/redevelopment/brownfield-remediation-program.

41 An Act Concerning the Creation of Connecticut Brownfield Land Banks, Revisions to the Brownfield Remediation and Revitalization Program and Authorizing Bonds of the State for Brownfield Remediation and Development Programs, Conn. Pub. Act No. 17-214, Substitute H.B. 7229 (Reg. Sess. 2017), https://www.cga.ct.gov/2017/act/pa/pdf/2017PA-00214-R00HB-07229-PA.pdf.

42 "How to Form a Land Bank," (Center for Community Progress, 2024), https://communityprogress.org/publications/how-to-form-a-land-bank/.



Enabling Reuse

Tools that enable reuse should bridge the gap between the current condition of a corridor or property and the strategy the community is pursuing. This does not mean subsidizing every property or preserving every existing commercial use. Assistance should be directly linked to the future land use vision in the corridor strategy. The tools below apply whether the vision is commercial, housing, industrial, or green space. Communities simply adapt how they use them.

> **Site control and prioritized disposition can be powerful tools to direct what happens to a property.**

KEY QUESTIONS

- **What outcome are we trying to achieve?** What use, community benefit, or broader corridor goal should the intervention advance?
- **What level of intervention is necessary?** Can a modest change or intervention unlock reuse, or does the property require more substantial public investment?
- **Who is best positioned to lead or support the intervention?** What roles should local government, property owners, developers, businesses, nonprofits, or community-based organizations play?
- **What can the market support, and where is public or community intervention needed?** Would the property likely return to productive use without assistance, or is there a demonstrated gap that public action could address?
- **How will we ensure the intervention advances community priorities?** What conditions, agreements, or safeguards are needed to ensure the property serves its intended purpose over time?
- **How will we measure success?** What would meaningful reuse look like for this property and the surrounding corridor, and how will we know whether the intervention is working?

Property Preparation

Local governments can take proactive steps to reduce the physical, environmental, and legal barriers that make vacant properties hard to redevelop. These steps make properties more market-ready, reduce costs and uncertainty for prospective users, and position properties for uses that advance community goals.

- **Environmental assessment and cleanup**: Identify and address contamination so it does not block reuse, and help determine which properties are viable.
- **Mothballing**: Stabilize vacant buildings and protect them from further deterioration when immediate reuse is not feasible, preserving redevelopment potential while the community identifies a reuse.
- **Gray- or white-box preparation:** Complete basic building improvements—such as structural, mechanical, electrical, plumbing, or

interior work—to make vacant commercial space more marketable and reduce upfront costs for prospective businesses and developers.

- **Full rehabilitation:** Bring properties back into use, with the scope of work guided by the desired use, market conditions, and community priorities.
- **Demolition or deconstruction:** Remove structures beyond feasible rehabilitation or that prevent a site from supporting a higher-priority use.
- **Site preparation:** Resolve title issues, parcel configuration, utilities, dumping, drainage, and site conditions or legal issues so the property is ready for its intended use.

Site Control, Strategic Disposition, and Development Agreements

Site control and prioritized disposition can be powerful tools to direct what happens to a property to advance corridor goals. These tools help match properties with appropriate users, retain control when needed, set clear expectations for redevelopment, and preserve long-term community goals while reducing barriers to investment.

- **Short-term leases and licenses:** Temporarily activate vacant properties, test potential reuses, and build toward longer-term uses that respond to community needs and market demand.
- **Requests for proposals (RFPs):** Ask interested purchasers to submit a proposal rather than simply selling the property to the highest bidder. The community can identify prioritized uses, desired community benefits, and selection criteria so the property advances local goals.

DEEPER DIVE

Community Control on Commercial Properties

As real estate becomes increasingly commodified, interest is growing in systems and institutions that give communities greater control over land and property. This movement has traditionally focused on residential real estate, but similar approaches are gaining traction in the commercial space.[a] Commercial community land trusts, community investment trusts, and other shared-ownership models are emerging as tools to preserve community-serving commercial spaces, stabilize local businesses, and keep the benefits of property investment in the community.

Community control extends beyond property ownership. It also includes resourcing local developers to lead the redevelopment of commercial spaces, offering tenant protections to prevent displacement,[b] and providing technical support to legacy residents to position them for successful reuse.

a Julia Duranti-Martínez, *Commercial Community Ownership as a Strategy for Just Development* (LISC, 2022), **https://www.lisc.org/our-resources/resource/commercial-community-ownership-strategy-just-development/**.

b Sophie McManus, Willow Lung, and Katy June-Friesen, *Getting Ahead of Small Business Displacement: Strategies for the Early Stages of Gentrification* (Small Business Anti-Displacement Network, February 2026), **https://antidisplacement.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/SBAN-Report-Getting-Ahead-of-Small-Business-Displacement-2026-1.pdf**.

CASE STUDY

Motor City Match: Accelerating Small Business Growth (Detroit, Michigan)

Motor City Match (MCM) is a small business accelerator launched in 2015 to reduce commercial vacancy and problem properties in Detroit's neighborhood corridors.[a] Administered by the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation (DEGC), the program effectively turns aspiring business owners into small-scale developers.

The plan's four tracks—Plan, Develop, Design, and Cash—build on one another, but are designed so that applicants can enter at the most appropriate point for them:

- **Plan** offers classes, consulting, and $1,500 in technical assistance to 15 Detroit-based awardees each quarter.
- **Develop** requires proof of sales and offers $3,500 in technical assistance, ideally for legal lease review, along with help finding space.
- **Design** requires a lease, letter of intent, or deed as well as zoning verification letters and early site plans. It provides up to $25,000 in architectural and engineering services.
- **Cash** provides gap grants of up to $100,000 (though averaging about $50,000) and recipients must contribute 10 percent equity and show that remaining costs are covered by a loan or other financing.
- A fifth, complemenary, **Buildings** track lets building owners list vacant commercial properties. MCM verifies ownership, taxes, water bills, and blight tickets, and confirms the building can reasonably be renovated.

DEGC supports the prospective business tenants every step of the way, coaching them to negotiate leases and tenant-improvement allowances, and facilitating networking events with community development financial institutions.

Previously supported by federal dollars from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, philanthropy, and a $15 million American Rescue Plan Act contract, funding for Motor City Match is now provided by the City's general fund. The program has run more than 30 quarterly application rounds, and reports awarding about $21 million in grants and opening more than 200 businesses.

The build-out has made properties more attractive and viable for future tenants, even as some of the businesses transition or close. The Detroit City Council also recently funded an alumni pilot to help newly opened businesses stay open.[b]

The program has run more than 30 quarterly application rounds, and reports awarding about $21 million in grants and opening more than 200 businesses.



a "About Our Program," Motor City Match, accessed October 12, 2026, https://www.motorcitymatch.com/about.

b Interview with Madison Schillig, Motor City Match Program Director, Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, August 12, 2026.

- **First-look opportunities:** Prioritize purchasers best positioned to align reuse with community goals, such as existing businesses, local developers, or mission-driven organizations and give them a time-bound window to purchase before others can.
- **Discounted sales:** Set the price to close a demonstrated financial gap, such as substantial rehabilitation costs, and tie the discount to a preferred use or community benefit.
- **Ground leases:** Let public entities retain long-term ownership and control of the property while a private or nonprofit partner develops and operates it in line with community priorities.
- **Development agreements:** Set clear expectations for use, timelines, construction performance, and community benefits, with remedies such as reversion or financial damages if commitments are not met.
- **Restrictive covenants or easements:** Preserve a desired use, affordability requirement, or other priority over the long term, even after the property changes ownership.

Zoning, Building Code, and Permitting

Communities can create clearer paths for redevelopment that make desired uses more feasible, reduce regulatory barriers for developers, and help ensure public investment supports corridor goals.

- **Zoning changes:** Use zoning to align permitted uses and development standards with community goals and market opportunities before properties are disposed of. For example, allow small-scale industrial, mixed-use, productive green space, or other priority uses.
- **Parking requirements:** Reconsider requirements that make commercial redevelopment financially infeasible, and whether on-street or public parking can meet corridor demand.
- **Adaptive reuse and change-of-use flexibility:** Allow reasonable flexibility in building and life-safety requirements so reusing older or vacant buildings is more feasible.



- **Temporary-use permits:** Enable short-term or interim uses that activate vacant properties, test market demand, and build toward longer-term uses.
- **Public right-of-way and outdoor-use permits:** Expand opportunities to activate adjacent public space, such sidewalk cafes, parklets, outdoor sales, or temporary street uses to support commercial activity.
- **Coordinated or expedited approvals:** Reduce time, uncertainty, and carrying costs for projects through coordinated reviews, a single point of contact, or fast-track pathways for priority projects.
- **Fee waivers:** Reduce upfront development costs for projects that deliver community benefits or address financial barriers.

Financing, Incentives, and Other Public Investment

Public financing and investment can help address financial barriers that often make commercial properties hard to reuse, particularly when market conditions, corridor infrastructure, or rehabilitation costs exceed what private investment can support. These tools can reduce risk, close financing gaps, and create conditions for private investment while directing resources toward reuse that aligns with community goals.

- **Grants or flexible loans:** Offer funds that close specific financial gaps, such as predevelopment costs, upgrades required by code, or tenant attraction. The uses of these funds should be structured around priority uses and locally defined goals.
- **Credit enhancements:** Reduce risk for private lenders and improve access to capital for projects that advance community priorities but may not otherwise meet conventional financing requirements.
- **Commercial Property Assessed Clean Energy (C-PACE) financing**: C-PACE financing can provide additional funding for eligible energy-efficiency, renewable energy, or resilience improvements.
- **Favorable lease terms:** Reduce occupancy costs or align rent with a property's ability to generate revenue, making publicly owned space accessible for desired businesses, nonprofits, and community-serving uses.
- **Tax incentives:** Reduce the cost of acquisition, rehabilitation, or operation. Examples include payments in lieu of taxes (PILOTs), property tax exemptions or freezes, tax credits (e.g., historic tax credits, New Markets Tax Credits, Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, energy tax credits).
- **Tax increment financing (TIF):** TIFs capture a portion of future increases in property or other designated tax revenues to help finance improvements or development costs.
- **Infrastructure investments:** Address surrounding infrastructure issues—improving streets, sidewalks, utilities, lighting, broadband, parking, or public spaces—to make priority commercial uses more viable.



Public financing and investment can help address financial barriers that often make commercial properties hard to reuse.

Related Corridor and Market-Building Tools

- **Corridor management:** Establish or strengthen an entity or partnership to coordinate corridor priorities, support property and business owners, and sustain implementation across properties and initiatives.
- **Corridor marketing, branding, signage, and wayfinding:** Strengthen the corridor's identity and visibility and communicate why it is a good place to visit and do business in.
- **Business recruitment:** Proactively recruit businesses that fill identified gaps, complement existing businesses, and fit the vision for the corridor, rather than relying solely on market-driven tenanting.
- **Matching programs:** Connect potential entrepreneurs with property owners who have available commercial space, reducing how long properties remain vacant.
- **Business technical assistance:** In partnership with chambers of commerce, small business development programs, or similarly positioned entities, support businesses with financing, permitting, business planning, leases, and other barriers to occupying and succeeding in commercial space. Technical assistance could also support sustained or growing operations, such as business planning, operations, marketing, and client retention.
- **Clean-and-green and safety upgrades:** Address visible and perceived safety concerns through, for example, graffiti and litter removal, pressure washing, crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED), camera-sharing programs, dedicated patrols, or community-based crisis response.
- **Pop-ups, markets, events, art, and creative placemaking:** Activate vacant spaces and public areas with temporary businesses, markets, events, and art that bring people to the corridor.
- **Designated social or entertainment districts:** Create a framework for concentrating and supporting restaurants, entertainment, and cultural activities that generate foot traffic and strengthen corridor identity (e.g., restaurant districts with special outdoor dining or alcohol permitting, arts and culture districts that allow public-space programming).



CASE STUDY

Business Fit-Up Grant Program: Targeting Public Investment (Bath, Maine)

In Bath, Maine, the closure of several storefronts impacted the vitality of its main commercial corridor. These closures included a longtime boutique at Front and Centre streets and Wilson's Drugstore, a locally owned fixture whose retiring owner sold the business to Walgreens. At the same time, the corridor faced additional pressures as long-held buildings changed hands and historically low rents began rising toward market rates.

Recognizing the need to act, the City considered a range of approaches, from enforcement mechanisms like vacant building registries to incentive programs that could help attract new businesses. The Bath Development Corporation (BDC), a nonprofit whose board is appointed by the city council, pursued a more proactive approach. Drawing on funds from 1990s tax increment financing and the sale of City-owned property, BDC committed $50,000 to pilot the Business Fit-Up Grant, a program supporting new and expanding businesses in Bath.[a]

The program offers grants of up to $12,500 on a reimbursement basis, requiring a one-to-one cash match. Grants are awarded directly to businesses—not property owners—with preference given to those opening or expanding in vacant or underutilized spaces. Eligible expenses include interior renovations, accessibility improvements, code-compliance work, and unexpected costs tenants may discover only after submitting change-of-use plans.

Written guidelines and a scoring rubric, weighing economic impact, a sound business plan, and fit with the comprehensive plan, kept decisions tied to criteria rather than instinct. Board members also interviewed applicants, surfacing context a business plan could not, such as why a children's clothing manufacturer was adding retail space.

To make matches, board members inventoried vacant spaces through owners and brokers, then notified owners, realtors, and architects. The Main Street organization also helped promote the program. A local architect connected Over the Moon, a growing specialty apparel shop, with a long-vacant Centre Street storefront, and its sales have risen since the move. A former Wilson's manager opened a new downtown drugstore, using a grant to help meet state security licensing requirements.

Bath's experience shows that revitalizing a commercial corridor starts with understanding what businesses need to succeed and selecting strategies that address those needs. As this example demonstrates, targeting public investment can help turn vacant storefronts into opportunities for local businesses and provide lasting value for the community.[b]

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a "Fit-Up Grant Program," City of Bath, Maine (website), accessed October 27, 2026, **https://www.cityofbathmaine.gov/Departments/Economic-and-Community-Development/Fit-Up-Grant-Program**.

b Interview with Misty Parker, Director of Economic and Community Development, City of Bath, Maine, August 10, 2026.

DEEPER DIVE

Reimagining Vacant Commercial Spaces as Community Assets through Arts, Culture, and Placemaking

Creative placemaking uses arts, culture, and community-centered development to transform vacant or underutilized properties into places that reflect local identity, respond to community priorities, and create opportunities for connection.[a] These efforts can take many forms, from public art and cultural events to pop-up businesses, exhibitions, performance spaces, and permanent arts and cultural destinations.

Creative placemaking is particularly valuable because it allows communities to take action even when traditional redevelopment is not immediately feasible. A property may remain vacant because rehabilitation costs exceed its market value, ownership is complicated, or demand for conventional commercial uses is limited. In these circumstances, temporary or incremental activations can bring life to underused spaces while longer-term reuse strategies take shape. Beyond activating individual properties, creative placemaking can help build a shared vision to support a thriving commercial corridor. Locally rooted arts and cultural activities can celebrate neighborhood history, strengthen connections among residents and businesses, and give people new reasons to visit and spend time along a corridor. Creative placemaking can also help communities articulate what they want their commercial districts to become, informing future investments.

For creative placemaking to contribute to lasting change, however, communities must connect individual projects to a larger corridor vision and address the barriers that often prevent promising ideas from moving forward. Complicated permitting processes, restrictive zoning, limited access to vacant properties, liability concerns, and inadequate funding can all impede implementation.[b] Local governments, land banks, property owners, arts organizations, businesses, and community groups can work together to



make spaces available, clarify approval processes, establish flexible temporary-use policies, and provide small grants or other financial support.[c]

For example, Miami, Florida, established a temporary-use permit for city-owned vacant land that has supported a range of activities, including food trucks, arts and cultural programming, and a drive-in movie theater. Such approaches create opportunities to test new uses, attract visitors, and demonstrate a property's potential without requiring a full-scale redevelopment project from the outset.

Creative placemaking can be leveraged to bring a comprehensive commercial corridor strategy to life. When coordinated with the strategies to improve commercial corridors outlined in this guide, creative placemaking can help communities move from managing vacant properties to building corridors that people value and use.

Dear Tamaqua: Revitalizing Through the Arts (Tamaqua, Pennsylvania)

The Borough of Tamaqua uses arts, history, and community engagement to drive downtown revitalization.

Since 2015, the Tamaqua Community Arts Center (Tamaqua Arts) has partnered with Tamaqua Borough, nonprofits, and local businesses on creative placemaking projects.

The "Dear Tamaqua…" campaign invited residents to write letters to share their honest feelings, perspectives, and hopes for the town. The stories were transformed into a community walking experience—part theater, part street festival. Tamaqua Arts placed installations and curated performances from community members along a mile-long path through vacant and revitalized buildings and lots, streets, and alleyways to encourage residents to experience both familiar and unfamiliar spaces in new ways. The project helped amplify voices, respect perspectives, rebuild trust among residents, and broaden the collective vision of what Tamaqua could be, inspiring ongoing revitalization.[d]

Tamaqua Arts has since led other arts-focused revitalization efforts, including installing murals throughout downtown, a Love Tamaqua sculpture installation, and the acquisition and operations of the Tamaqua Arts Center, a local music and event venue with an art gallery and pottery studio.

Tamaqua Arts Center. Photo: NEPA Alliance

In strong collaboration with the Borough, Tamaqua Arts has been strategically acquiring target properties downtown to support partners, including:

- Hope and Coffee, a coffee shop that provides employment opportunities for individuals in recovery
- St. Luke's Medical Center, which provides housing for medical students during their rural rotations
- Liberty Park, which involved the demolition of derelict buildings to install a new pocket park to commemorate the nation's 250th anniversary



Open Doors!: Leveraging Public Resources (Kansas City, Missouri)

Open Doors! is a city-led storefront activation program in Kansas City, Missouri, that placed small businesses, artists, and nonprofits in vacant storefronts in the downtown area, near the streetcar, to get them as close as possible to the main activations for the World Cup, including Fan Fest.[e] The program grew out of the Mayor's Small Business Task Force and staff research on Seattle's Restored program. Recognizing that attracting new visitors to the city would not automatically translate into investment in local businesses and commercial corridors, City leadership saw a need for public intervention to help bring vacant spaces back to life. A city council amendment added $1 million to the budget, and a June 2025 ordinance appropriated approximately $1.4 million for the program, administered by the Economic Development Corporation of Kansas City (EDCKC).

The City leveraged a mix of philanthropic, corporate, and federal funding to support the program, including capacity-building support from the Kauffman Foundation, funding from Airbnb to develop a digital map for participants, and $251,000 in Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds for technical assistance and administrative costs. Additional partners provided financial and in-kind support, as well as technical assistance to participating businesses.

The program focused on matching vacant commercial spaces with interested businesses and artists. The City subsidized up to 80 percent of the lease, capped at $22 per square foot, instead of asking owners to donate the space. To encourage lower rental rates, the City also offered tenant-improvement reimbursements of $5,000 for spaces leased at or below the cap, increasing to $10,000 for owners willing to lease at $12 per square foot or less. To extend the City's capacity to coordinate these matches, the program partnered with the University of Missouri–Kansas City's (UMKC) legal clinic to draft letters of intent that committed property owners to their proposed rates and to holding spaces until suitable tenants were identified. UMKC also offered legal consulting services and workshops to participants throughout the program.

City staff developed the program and recruited property owners and prospective tenants simultaneously, supported by an accessible resource manual for interested businesses. The City received interest in approximately 70 properties, highlighting both the scale of commercial vacancy and property owners' interest in support to activate their spaces. To prepare properties for occupancy, staff reviewed each submission for zoning and permitted uses and conducted site visits. Publicly owned properties were also included in the program, however, assessing which City-owned spaces could meet occupancy requirements revealed that some would require additional investment in repairs and improvements before they could be activated.

At the same time, the City solicited applications from prospective tenants. Administrative, financial, and committee reviews narrowed the applicant pool of over 400—more than 80 of which were from minority- and women-owned businesses due to intentional partnership and outreach efforts—to a shortlist of 52 businesses and organizations, after which the matching process began. Property owners could select tenants directly, request recommendations, or host open houses. Matched tenants signed six-month license agreements and received working capital grants, along with legal, marketing, and consulting support.

Grants went to 24 businesses, artists, and organizations in 18 storefronts. More than 80 businesses and artists indirectly participated through storefront collaborations (e.g., product placement or dedicated spaces within the concepts). For example, Jade Market features

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The City received interest in approximately 70 properties, highlighting both the scale of commercial vacancy and property owners' interest in support to activate their spaces.

more than 25 Asian-owned products in its storefront from local makers. For the shortlisted applicants it could not place, EDCKC ran a Union Station marketplace across from FanFest, which featured more than 15 shortlisted Open Doors applicants, and more than 100 additional small business, artists, and performing artists.

The program activated more than 27,000 square feet of commercial space, provided more than $250,000 in lease subsidies and $170,000 in working capital grants, and generated more than $400,000 in reported participant sales, with monthly sales peaking at $105,374 in July 2026. As participant agreements conclude, 10 businesses plan to remain in their current locations or relocate to new spaces, while four will transition to month-to-month leases. These outcomes offer an early look at the program's impact on business stability, commercial occupancy, and the continued use of previously vacant spaces.[f]

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a "What is Creative Placemaking?" Center for Community Progress, May 18, 2023, **https://communityprogress.org/blog/revitalizing-neighborhoods-how-creative-placemaking-transforms-vacant-properties-into-vibrant-community-spaces/**.

b *Creative Placemaking on Vacant Properties: Lessons Learned from Four Cities* (Center for Community Progress and Metris Arts Consulting, July 2018), **https://communityprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2018-07-Creative-Placemaking-on-Vacant-Properties-Publication.pdf**

c Julia Zimmerman, *How Local Governments Can Facilitate Creative Placemaking on Vacant Property: Recommendations for Policy and Practice* (Center for Community Progress, August 2024), **https://communityprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/2024-08-creative-placemaking-barriers.pdf**

d "Dear Tamaqua," Center for Community Progress, **https://communityprogress.org/resources/creative-placemaking/projects/dear-tamaqua/**.

e "About Open Doors!", Open Doors! (website), **https://www.kcopendoors.com/**.

f Interview with Nia Webster, Assistant Director, Neighborhood Services Department, City of Kansas City, Missouri, July 22, 2026.



The historic Plaza district in downtown Kansas City at dusk. Photo: Matt Gush / Adobe Stock

Conclusion

There is no single solution to commercial vacancy and deterioration, especially when the ways we use commercial space keep changing. This guide helps local government leaders and their partners understand the role they can play in ensuring vacant and deteriorating commercial properties do not cause harm, and also in helping corridors meet the needs of residents and businesses today and in the future.

Yes, investing in strategies to address commercial vacancy takes time and resources, but doing nothing is even more expensive. Local governments and their partners can play a significant role in making sure these properties contribute to residents' quality of life, rather than leaving the outcome to the market.

That work must begin with an understanding of market realities, corridor dynamics, and individual property conditions. A strong corridor strategy is informed by data on current conditions and future potential. It should be developed with community members, decision makers, and public, nonprofit, and private partners. This ensures public resources go toward outcomes that strengthen the corridor over time, not simply toward filling vacant spaces.

Local governments have many tools available to address commercial properties, but the key is knowing when and how to use them and coordinating with partners. To be most effective, communities should identify the desired outcome before choosing a tool. Public ownership, financial assistance, zoning changes, and disposition strategies should not drive decisions on their own. Each intervention should help move a property or corridor toward a clearly defined community goal.

Addressing the conditions of commercial corridors is also not a one-time project. Markets, business needs, property conditions, and community priorities will keep changing, so communities should track progress, learn from implementation, and adjust strategies as conditions evolve.

Communities should measure success by whether the corridor meets local needs and contributes to residents' quality of life, not by the number of properties acquired or buildings rehabilitated. This means asking whether the corridor offers the businesses, services, gathering spaces, and opportunities residents value; whether properties are productive and well maintained; and whether investments are producing a corridor that is vibrant and responsive to community priorities.

The central opportunity for local governments is to move from reacting to vacant and deteriorating properties to strategically managing commercial corridor change.

“To be most effective, communities should identify the desired outcome before choosing a tool.

Appendix

Condition Assessment Questions

Addressing vacant and deteriorated commercial properties requires a coordinated corridor strategy. To inform that strategy, communities should examine conditions at three interconnected levels: the **market**, the **commercial corridor**, and the **individual property**.

These questions help local government leaders and their partners better understand the causes of vacancy and deterioration and determine the most appropriate strategy and interventions.

Market Conditions

Market data helps determine what types of commercial uses a corridor can support based on demand and community needs, while revealing what is driving vacancy and disinvestment (e.g., population loss, low rents, insufficient returns to justify property rehabilitation).

KEY QUESTIONS

Is there enough demand to support commercial reuse?

- Who lives, works, and travels through the corridor today, and how are those patterns changing?
- What goods and services do residents leave the neighborhood to access, and what unmet needs could the corridor address?
- What assets bring people to or near the corridor (e.g., employers, schools, hospitals, parks, transit, or cultural and civic institutions)?
- What do commercial property sales, rents, vacancy, and investment activity indicate about the strength and direction of the corridor's real estate market?
- What planned investments or anticipated disinvestments—such as an employer or institution expanding or closing, transit changes, or broadband upgrades—could alter demand for the corridor?

Corridor Conditions

Physical conditions, safety concerns, and changing neighborhood dynamics help determine where targeted public investment and community-informed improvements are needed to support redevelopment and attract private investment.

KEY QUESTIONS

What is the condition of the corridor, and is its infrastructure an asset, adequate, or a barrier to redevelopment?

- What is the corridor's physical form, and how does that impact its future use (e.g., walkable, auto-oriented, historic, large-format retail, light industrial)?

- What is the condition and capacity of the corridor's utility and transportation infrastructure? Can transportation, water, sewer, stormwater, electricity, and broadband infrastructure support current uses or redevelopment, or will major repairs, extensions, or upgrades be required? What is the condition of sidewalks, lighting, and crossings, and how safe does the corridor feel to people who use it?
- What environmental conditions or risks could affect its future use (e.g., located in a floodplain, subject to stormwater or drainage challenges, vulnerable to extreme heat)?

What is the health and trajectory of the surrounding residential market?

- What is happening to housing values, sales activity, and vacancy near the corridor? Are there signs of investment, stabilization, or disinvestment?
- Who lives near the corridor, and is that customer base growing, declining, or changing (in age, household composition, or other characteristics)?
- What do household income and purchasing power suggest about the types of goods and services the surrounding market can support?
- Is the area positioned to attract or lose households, given housing supply, demand, development activity, and planned investment?

Parcel Conditions

Parcel-level data shows the scale of vacancy, where it is concentrated, which properties pose the greatest barriers to reuse, and what types of intervention may be appropriate. Aggregated across the corridor and analyzed alongside market and corridor conditions, this data uncovers patterns and common barriers.

KEY QUESTIONS

What is the condition of the individual properties on the commercial corridor, and are they suitable for redevelopment or a barrier to it?

- What types of properties comprise the corridor, and how many units are there?
- What condition are they in? Have code enforcement actions (e.g., citations, nuisance abatement) been taken to address unsafe conditions?
- Would the anticipated value of the properties after reuse be sufficient to offset the costs of acquisition, rehabilitation, and ongoing operations?
- Who owns the properties, do they have the resources and willingness to invest, and does reinvestment make economic sense based on the cost of repairs and property value?

Center for
COMMUNITY PROGRESS

About the Center for Community Progress

The Center for Community Progress helps people to transform vacant spaces into vibrant places. Since 2010, its team of experts has provided urban, suburban, and rural communities looking to revitalize vacant properties with the tools and resources needed to address those properties at the policy and systems level. As the only national nonprofit dedicated to vacant property revitalization, Community Progress drives change by uncovering and disrupting 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