

Taking Big

Steps to Strengthen

Communities

2020 Update

Letter from the Executive Director

While much of 2020 was unexpected, TCLB achieved some exciting milestones despite the COVID-19 pandemic. After many years of laying groundwork and refining a life cycle for how to sell property with clear, insurable title, TCLB listed its first houses and sold its first properties in 2020. By the end of the year, eight properties were available for sale, with 10 more in the pipeline to be released in early 2021.

To support this increased activity, TCLB was excited to welcome Emily Woodard, Marketing and Community Relations Manager, and Kayla Geahry, Office and Accounts Manager, to our staff this year. We also worked closely with Evaine Sing from EKS Solutions to develop a framework that will guide our budding vacant land strategy. Abandoned, vacant lots reduce nearby property values and create hazards when left unattended, but they also offer opportunities to address neighborhood challenges such as food access, flooding, and pollution. With thoughtful, coordinated partnerships, we can transform the landscape of vacant parcels in our member communities from damaging eyesores to assets that will support local environmental, health, and social justice goals.

Moving into 2021, we hope to increase outreach to potential community partners and to begin to develop pilot projects to operationalize our vacant land strategy. We also expect property dispositions to increase substantially as more properties complete the Quiet Title Action and become eligible for title insurance. TCLB remains committed to providing every property with a clear, insurable title that protects new owners from becoming liable for old debts and disrupts neighborhood cycles of abandonment.

While 2020 has not been an easy year for anyone, we are looking forward to turning a new page in 2021. We are grateful to our members and partners for continuing to support our neighborhoods in the face of challenges no one could have foreseen. Thank you again for all of the work you do to support strong, sustainable, and healthy communities.



An Lewis
Executive Director



Our vision is to achieve sustainable communities free of blight and attractive to residents and businesses.



Our mission is to strategically restore investment in blighted properties to enhance community safety, value, and vibrancy.

OUR PURPOSE

Blight is pervasive, expensive, and has damaging effects on the economic and social fabric of communities. Unattended property vacancies result in blocks wrought with blight, high maintenance costs, nuisance issues such as crime and fire, and uncollected taxes. This creates a cycle of disinvestment with the ultimate cost paid by existing community residents.

TCLB is dedicated to eliminating blight in local communities through responsive, community-centered action that aids in the development of the region. We are driven by a “Plan for the Place” and use data to support strategic decisions. In everything we do, we are responsive to community priorities and development opportunities.

TCLB is committed to providing all of its properties with clear and insurable title, an essential protection that ensures property owners will not be financially responsible for the unpaid debts of previous owners. Clear titles help to support neighborhood stability by preventing unforeseen issues from causing financial hardship that may lead to foreclosure or abandonment in the future.



Neighborhood Restoration
“Greening” vacant lots through side lot sales and neighborhood green spaces



Neighborhood Preservation
Addressing abandoned homes in stable neighborhoods



Site Development
Acquiring and assembling multiple lots for larger redevelopment plans



Economic Redevelopment
Acquiring and repurposing commercial spaces to bring in new businesses and strengthen existing commercial districts

Our Members

TCLB membership is comprised of 22 municipalities, six school districts, and Allegheny County. In order for us to operate in any community, the municipal government, school district, and county government must join together. Member participation is paramount to the functioning of TCLB. All of our members appoint representatives to serve on the Municipal and School District Advisory Committees, which review property decisions and elect the TCLB Board of Directors. Furthermore, TCLB staff work with each community throughout the process – from property selection to acquisition to disposition – to ensure our work is consistent with local community goals.

To financially support operations and property transactions, members contribute to the TCLB annually. As enabled by the PA Land Bank Act, 50% of property tax revenue is also sent to the TCLB for five years after we sell a property. Members also agree to forgive any outstanding liens on TCLB properties.

BENEFITS OF WORKING WITH TCLB TO FIGHT BLIGHT INCLUDE:



Increased tax revenues



Reduction in crime, in particular gun-related violence



Improved health for community members



Clear, insurable title for new property owners



Savings in code enforcement, police, fire, and public works costs



Revitalized communities, attractive for new residents and growth



22 Municipalities

- Blawnox
- Braddock Hills
- Chalfant
- Churchill
- Clairton
- Dravosburg
- East Pittsburgh
- Edgewood
- Etna
- Forest Hills
- Millvale
- McKeesport
- Monroeville
- North Braddock
- Pitcairn
- Rankin
- Sharpsburg
- South Versailles
- Swissvale
- Turtle Creek
- White Oak
- Wilkins

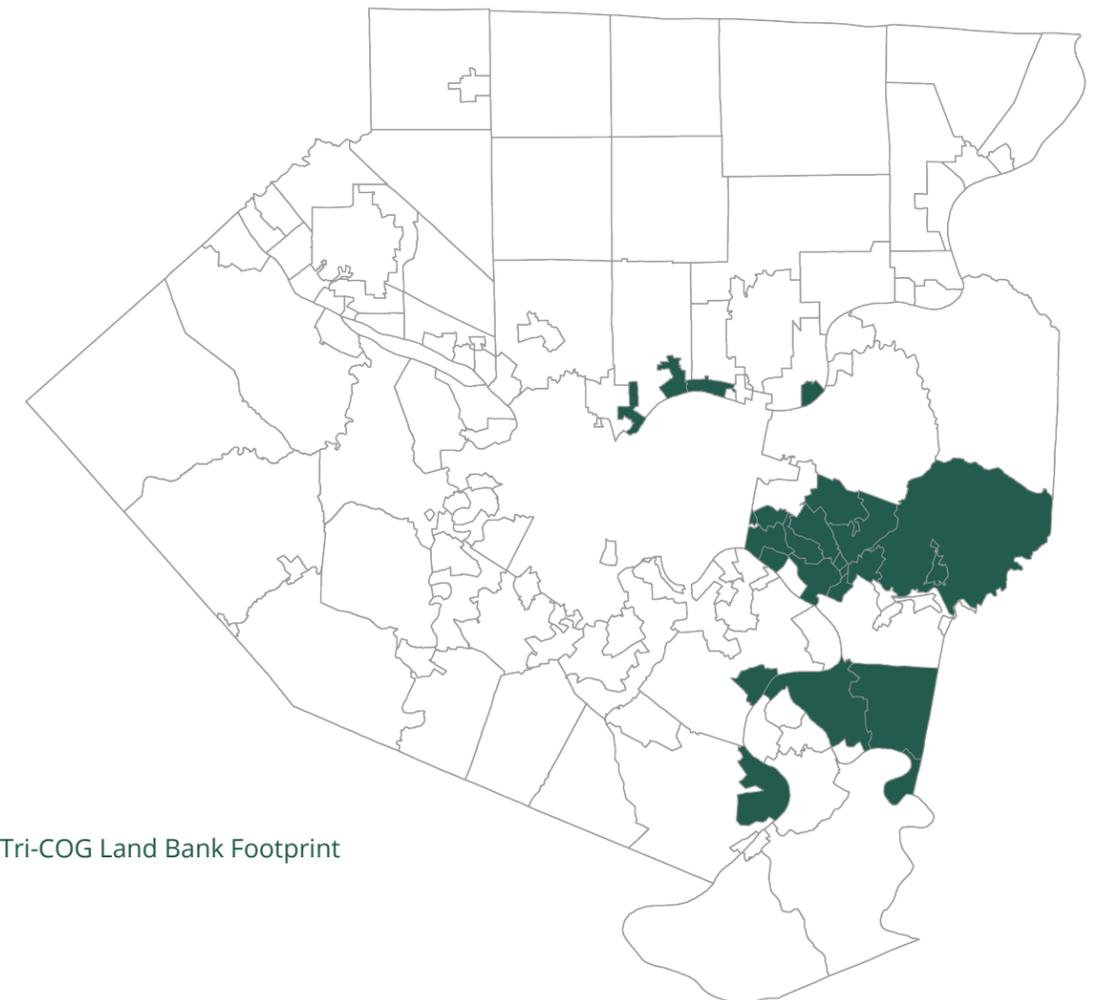


Six School Districts

- Clairton City School District
- Fox Chapel Area School District
- Gateway School District
- McKeesport Area School District
- Shaler Area School District
- Woodland Hills School District



Allegheny County



Local Impact



36 HOUSES



1 COMMERCIAL BUILDING



6 VACANT LOTS

GROWING OUR INVENTORY

By the end of 2020, TCLB owned 43 properties: 36 houses, one commercial building, and six vacant lots. Thirteen of these properties were acquired in 2020, despite a slowdown in the court systems due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

TCLB acquired its first commercial property in 2020, a former dry cleaners. This site sits in the middle of Swissvale Borough's Business District and has been vacant for over a decade. This project took many years to work through because, as a former dry cleaning store, the property is considered a brownfield and land banks are not currently protected from clean-up liability. PA Representative Austin Davis introduced legislation to change this. If passed, HB 610 would provide the same legal protection for land banks that is offered to redevelopment authorities, enabling TCLB to more easily repurpose old industrial sites like this former dry cleaners.

Prior to TCLB's acquisition of the site, Swissvale Borough conducted Phase I and Phase II studies to analyze contamination, utilizing Environmental Protection Agency funding administered by the Turtle Creek Valley Council of Governments. A remediation plan was developed and ultimately approved by the PA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to be implemented by TCLB. Approval by the PA DEP will allow TCLB to transfer this property to a new owner without harm to them or the community, and without unnecessary liability.

Properties Listed for Sale

At the beginning of 2020, TCLB achieved the milestone of listing its first houses for sale. One house was a brick two bedroom in Turtle Creek and the other was a vintage three bedroom in Braddock Hills. This kicked off our first year of active property showings and application reviews, giving the land bank the opportunity to put into practice a system it spent years developing. COVID-19 created delays with state closures and legal system slow downs, but despite these obstacles, TCLB listed six more houses by the end of the year. In 2021, TCLB expects to ramp up sales with 21 more properties in queue to be sold to new owners over the course of the year.

FIRST TWO PROPERTIES SOLD!

In the late summer of 2020, TCLB sold its first two properties, two side lots located in White Oak. These sales marked the first time a property had ever been sold to a new owner by a land bank in Allegheny County. Both lots were successfully transferred through TCLB's Side Lot Development Program, which enables homeowners to extend their yards to include a previously abandoned lot next door.

Prior to TCLB acquiring the properties, both of these side lots had tax lien records dating back to 1949. After acquiring the properties, TCLB cleared the title so the new owners will not be held liable for any old debts. Throughout the legal process, TCLB arranged for regular maintenance services on both properties so that they did not become unsightly or pose a harm to the neighborhood.

Now these lots will be back on the tax rolls and cared for long-term, helping protect property values and increase health and safety throughout each neighborhood!



Dome Avenue



Quay Street

Aerial photos courtesy of Allegheny County Real Estate Portal

Strong Foundations

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

To find the highest and best use for each property and to support positive change across the region, building community partnerships is a critical aspect of TCLB's work. In 2020, TCLB deepened its relationships with existing partners and connected with new organizations to support affordable housing development, vacant land transformation, and other regional initiatives.

TCLB formalized a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with City of Bridges Community Land Trust (CLT) to create new affordable housing opportunities in Etna, Millvale, and Sharpsburg. This MOU details the working relationship between the two organizations, and how the properties will be chosen and priced. Under this agreement, TCLB will acquire abandoned properties for City of Bridges CLT to convert into permanently affordable housing using the community land trust model. City of Bridges CLT's application to pilot three properties was approved by the TCLB Board of Directors in December 2020.

In 2020, TCLB also continued its participation in the Lead Safe Allegheny Coalition. This coalition brings together representatives from government, nonprofits, and community groups to address lead exposure from multiple perspectives, including policy, community education, infrastructure, and data and research. As part of its participation in this coalition, TCLB worked with Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh (formerly Conservation Consultants, Inc.) to design a lead safe demolition specification and to pilot it on a TCLB property in spring 2020. Later in 2020, the Board of Directors approved an application to build a new house on the former demolition site. TCLB is also having conversations with the Millvale Community Development Corporation about developing affordable housing using a vacant property on that same street, which balances growth with affordability.

Lastly, TCLB is continuing to explore new partnership opportunities through its recent strategy initiative to recover abandoned vacant land in its footprint. In 2020, TCLB contracted with consultant Evaine Sing from EKS Solutions to help develop a comprehensive framework for this initiative and to begin outreach to local service providers. In October, TCLB hosted a meeting with 17 organizations to provide an overview of its work on the issue and gather feedback. Follow up conversations with many of these organizations continued after that initial meeting.

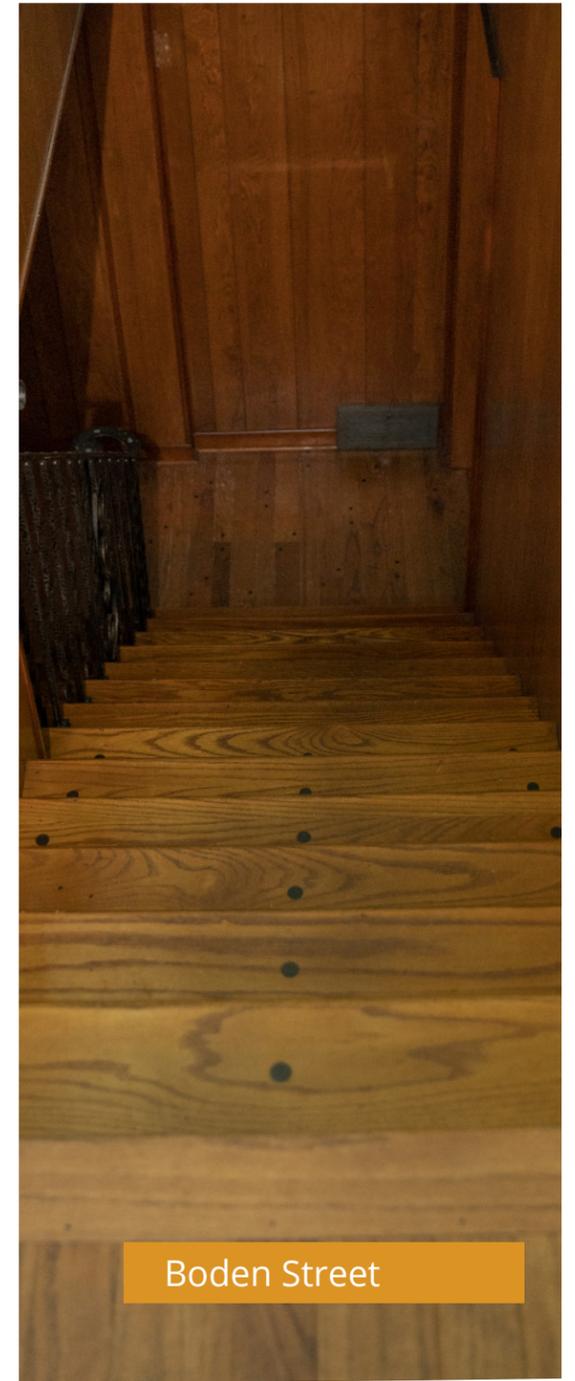
INTERNAL GROWTH

Emily Woodard joined the TCLB Team in January 2020, after graduating from the Heinz College at Carnegie Mellon University with a Master of Science in Public Policy and Management. Prior to joining TCLB as the Marketing and Community Relations Manager, Emily interned at TCLB in the summer of 2019 through the Local Government Academy's Municipal Intern Program. In this position, Emily manages outreach and communications with members, partners, and the public. Emily also researches and identifies potential new funding sources and writes funding proposals for TCLB.

Kayla Geahry joined the TCLB Team in June 2020 as Accounts and Office Manager. Kayla brings almost 10 years of experience as an Office Manager and Director of Operations at a small social media marketing agency located in Pittsburgh, where she honed her skills in human resources, accounting, and other operations-based responsibilities. She is a graduate of Penn State University with a degree in Communications.

TCLB was sad to see Project Coordinator, Anna Meehan leave in July 2020, We are excited for her next chapter - to pursue a graduate degree at The University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy.

In 2020, TCLB continued its participation in elevate412, Pittsburgh's first nonprofit marketing collaborative, in partnership with Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh, Economic Development South, Turtle Creek Valley Council of Governments, and Steel Rivers Council of Governments. This year's marketing accomplishments include developing a new website, capturing photographs of properties, clean-outs, and demolition projects, and launching a new presence on Instagram.



Boden Street



North Avenue

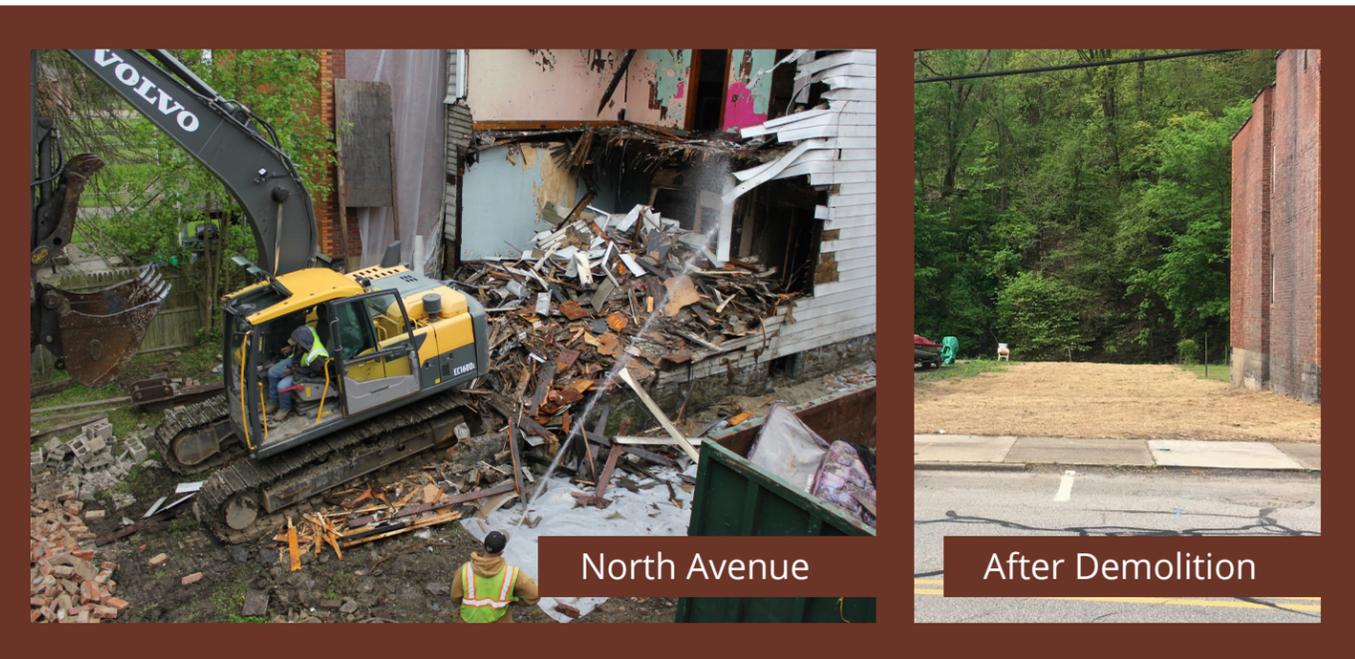
Local Impact

LEAD SAFE DEMOLITION PILOT PROJECT

In late spring of 2020, TCLB demolished an abandoned house in Millvale. This lot was the site of the county's first Lead Safe Demolition using specifications developed by Tri-COG Land Bank and Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh (formerly Conservation Consultants, Inc.). These practice recommendations stem from a report issued by the University of Pittsburgh's Institute of Politics in 2019 which summarized the work of an interdisciplinary group of local experts, including TCLB and Conservation Consultants Inc.

Techniques such as pre-wetting the property, wrapping walls in a plastic sheet, deconstructing portions of the structure by hand, and continuous wetting during demolition were used to limit the spread of lead dust. TCLB measured concentrations of lead in the air and soil before, during and after the demolition.

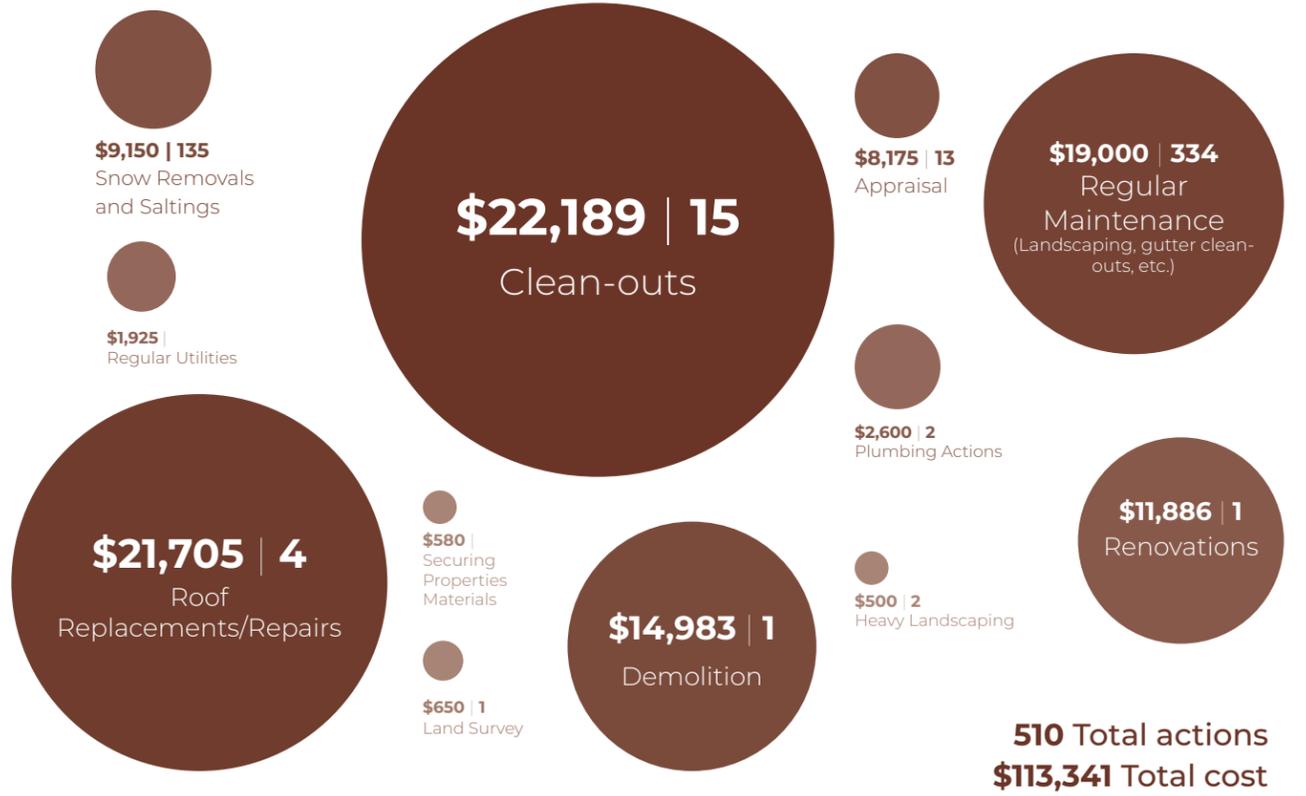
Using this data, TCLB and Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh will continue to refine the specification and share their findings with other municipal leaders. So far, TCLB has presented the results of the pilot demolition to multiple municipalities through a Local Government Academy workshop, to the regional Lead Safe Allegheny coalition, and to staff at the Allegheny County Economic Development Department. TCLB is also working with a second property on North Ave to help strengthen the corridor as a whole.



North Avenue

After Demolition

Maintenance Actions



Avenue D

Next Steps

GETTING PROPERTIES READY FOR SALE

From the moment TCLB acquires a property, we visit it, secure it, and then monitor it on a regular basis. We move quickly to improve its exterior conditions through grass cutting, brush removal, snow removal, and litter clean-up. We clear trash and debris and address any other urgent needs such as roof replacement or tree removal. These maintenance activities make an immediate impact on surrounding property values and neighborhood safety.



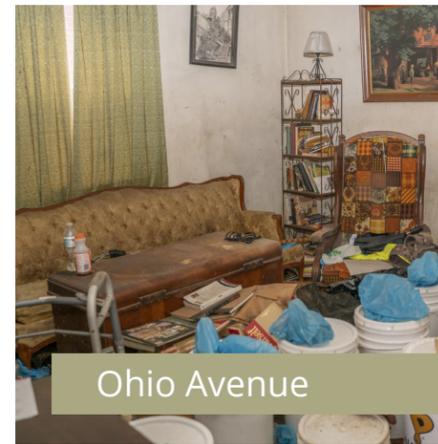
Freeport Street

BEFORE



Freeport Street

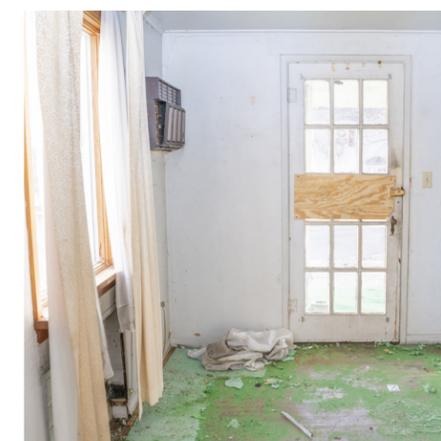
AFTER



Ohio Avenue



Constitution Circle



344
LANDSCAPING
VISITS



15
CLEAN-OUTS

Stepping Into 2021



North 3rd Street

Of the 22,841 tax-delinquent, vacant land parcels in Allegheny County, 23.4% are in TCLB's footprint.

TRANSFORMING ABANDONED, VACANT LAND

Of the 22,841 tax-delinquent, vacant land parcels in Allegheny County, 23.4% are in TCLB's footprint. Additionally, as new funding streams for demolition become available, such as the recently-passed Act 152 program, the local prevalence of abandoned, vacant land is likely to increase further. When not properly cared for, vacant land can quickly become overgrown, collect litter, and attract pests. This disrupts the social fabric of communities by creating health and safety hazards.

To address this problem at scale, TCLB seeks to develop a diversified model that brings together the knowledge and skills from technical experts and community groups to transform abandoned, vacant lands into local assets that reduce environmental hazards and stabilize distressed neighborhoods. To initiate this undertaking, TCLB reached out to the Center for Community Progress to identify land banks and other community groups across the nation working on vacant land reclamation so that the model is rooted in the successful work and techniques of others. TCLB produced maps of the parcels in its footprint to identify which are vacant, tax-delinquent, and potential demolition candidates and to locate concentrations of lots. TCLB also began outreach to potential partner organizations, recognizing that it will take many different groups and approaches to implement the highest and best use for each lot. In 2021, TCLB will deepen this community outreach, identify potential pilot projects, and identify potential funders to invest in the equitable reallocation of vacant land in our region.

INCREASED SALES ACTIVITY

In 2020, COVID-19 resulted in court closings and real estate sales restrictions that created a bottleneck in our property pipeline. By the end of the year, that bottleneck had been cleared, and we expect the pace of sales activity to significantly increase in 2021.

By the end of 2020, TCLB had eight properties listed for sale, with ten more in the queue to be marketed or transferred to a partner in the first few months of 2021. Throughout the remainder of 2021, TCLB expects to offer at least 21 more properties for sale. All of these properties are available with clear, insurable title to ensure that each new owner will not be held liable for any debts from prior owners.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND LAND BANK NETWORKING

TCLB will continue its technical assistance contract with Center for Community Progress, a national leader in the field of abandoned and vacant properties, and its membership in the National Land Bank Network in 2021. In late 2020, TCLB also began participation in the newly formed Pennsylvania Land Bank Network, an engagement that will continue into 2021 and beyond. TCLB is very grateful for these opportunities to engage with other professionals and experts who are doing groundbreaking work in communities across the state and the nation.

BY THE END OF 2020



8
Properties
listed for sale



10
Properties in the queue
to be marketed or
transferred to a partner



1705 Maple Street
Homestead, PA 15120
www.tricoglandbank.org



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