



# Liabilities to Assets:

A Comprehensive Strategy for  
Transforming Vacant Land

2022

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*Across the U.S., cities consist of approximately 15% of vacant land,<sup>1</sup> with higher rates in cities that have experienced industry shifts and population decline. Additionally, cities are reporting that their vacant property portfolios are favoring land over structures. Despite this, local governments across the country report that they do not have enough resources to address the issue of abandoned and vacant land.<sup>2</sup>*

## Foreword

Tri-COG Land Bank (TCLB) seeks to serve as a conductor and facilitator of vacant land repurposing throughout its footprint – to remake blighted land into new opportunities that creatively enliven communities. TCLB is committed to using methods that are cost-effective, sustainable, and community-driven. The concrete impact of vacant land interventions have been proven in numerous community contexts both locally and nationally. Addressing the prevalence of abandoned, vacant land in Allegheny County will lead to significant improvements in public health, crime reduction, and municipal finances while substantially improving local quality of life and well-being.

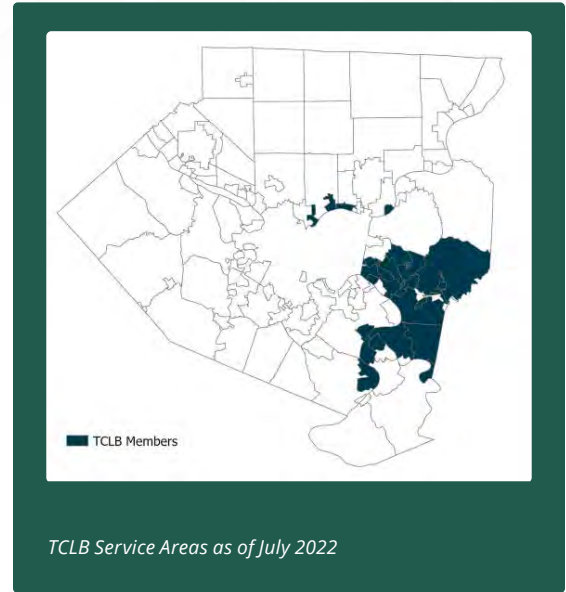
This report surveys the many benefits of vacant land repurposing while outlining the role that TCLB can play in acquiring vacant parcels, navigating legal barriers to ownership, clearing titles, maintaining lots prior to sale, and facilitating dialogue with residents and community stakeholders. This process will ensure that vacant lots are stewarded towards their highest and best use in each community context. Prioritizing transparency and collaboration, TCLB strives to lead a regional effort towards vacant land transformation, empowering and connecting invested community partners to achieve collaborative revitalization.

The aim of this document is to bring focus and thoughtful action recommendations to the Greater Pittsburgh region. It is no secret that our post-industrial history has left behind a legacy of uneven decline, population loss, and property abandonment. These recommendations are informed by extensive research and investigation in proven strategies of others, both local and national. Throughout this report, national trends and case studies are referenced to showcase the range of land reuse solutions available and to highlight proven strategies that are replicable in Allegheny County and Southwestern Pennsylvania. However, both research and many consultations have shown that no comprehensive, regional vacant land program yet exists anywhere in the U.S. TCLB, therefore, has thoughtfully integrated these disparate program techniques to form a more fully encompassing strategy for our region. In this process, TCLB has consulted partners and technical experts to begin what will hopefully prove to be an important venture locally, but which will also inform the work of colleagues across the state and beyond.

When left unattended, abandoned, vacant land harms communities, but these parcels also represent an opportunity for communities to take collective action, innovate, and lastingly improve connectivity, dialogue, and trust. TCLB presents this report as a first step toward launching a new comprehensive program to repurpose vacant land throughout its footprint, inspiring transformative change and community renewal throughout Allegheny County.

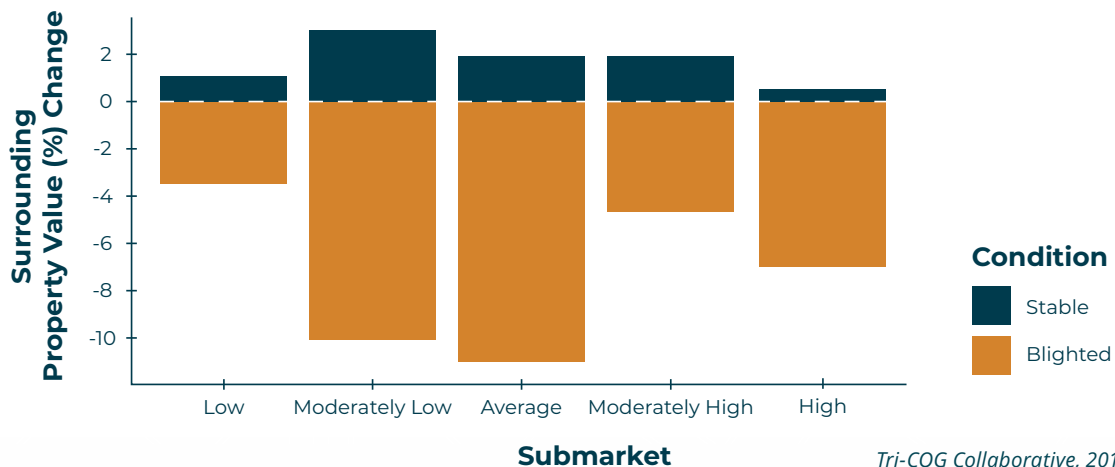
## Defining the Issue

Founded in 2017, TCLB revitalizes neighborhoods by transitioning blighted properties to beneficial reuse. Prior to TCLB's formation, the Steel Rivers Council of Governments<sup>3</sup> and the Turtle Creek Valley Council of Governments spent ten years studying the pervasive effects of property abandonment and blight on their member communities. Many of these communities are former steel industry hubs along the Monongahela River Valley and in the eastern suburbs of Allegheny County, PA. After the collapse of the steel industry in the 1970s and early 1980s, the region experienced a dramatic population loss,<sup>4</sup> with some TCLB communities losing more than 35% of their residents.<sup>5,6</sup> This exodus left behind an oversized housing stock that exceeds current population needs, creating decaying buildings and overgrown lots which invite health and safety hazards into these already under-resourced communities.



In 2013, a blight analysis conducted by the COGs, *Financial Impact of Blight on the Tri-COG Communities*, determined that there were 20,077 vacant lots and 7,158 vacant structures within the communities served by Steel Rivers and Turtle Creek Valley COGs. The analysis also found that blighted structures cost municipalities \$19.3 million per year in service expenditures and lost tax revenue, and blight resulted in property value losses between \$218 million and \$247 million annually.<sup>7</sup> A related assessment of 2012-2014 regional sales data from those same communities found that, **on average, blighted vacant lots decreased surrounding property values by 6%, with other national studies showing devaluation levels as high as 16.5% for properties within 200 feet of a single vacant parcel.**<sup>8</sup> This continuous devaluation of neighborhoods creates a vicious cycle; as blight spreads, neighborhoods lose population and cannot attract new residents and businesses, undermining the ability of municipalities to raise the tax revenue necessary to make progress in addressing the problem.

### Surrounding Property Value Change (%) for Blighted or Stable Lots

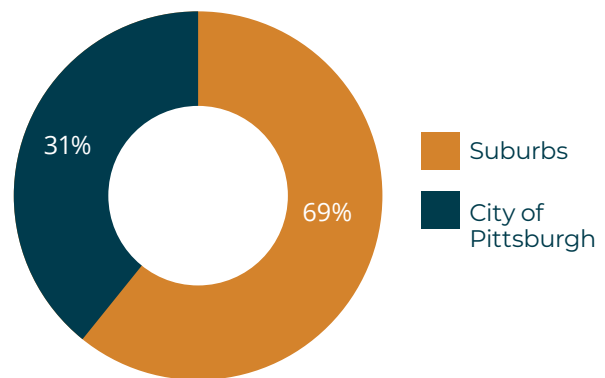


Nationally, private development and population growth have begun to revitalize central city neighborhoods, while communities further from downtown and in the inner-ring suburbs are frequently experiencing the opposite trajectory. Urban planning expert Alan Mallach writes, “While these cities’ downtowns and a few favored close-in neighborhoods may be thriving, thanks largely to the influx of better-off millennials, many if not most of these cities’ traditional middle class and working class single-family neighborhoods are indeed invisible, potentially irreversible decline.”<sup>9</sup> In 2016, University of Pittsburgh’s Institute of Politics found that a similar disparity is unfolding in Pittsburgh, noting that “61 percent of the people living in poverty in Allegheny County and 79 percent of those living in poverty in the entire Pittsburgh metropolitan statistical area reside in suburbs.”<sup>10</sup> These changing demographics warrant a closer examination of how we can shape the landscape in our suburbs to create an environment more conducive to health and social mobility, with a funded action plan to shift the downward trends.

## The Benefits of Repurposing Vacant Land

The long-term benefits of this revitalization process have been demonstrated across the country. However, outside subsidies and other forms of financial support are necessary to sustain the process of clearing titles on vacant lots, maintaining the properties, and transitioning them to new end users. Despite the challenges faced in post-industrial suburbs, Mallach is adamant that “what IS realistic and achievable is significant improvement in the quality of life [these neighborhoods] offer their residents...These neighborhoods CAN be safer, offer better schools and healthier housing.”<sup>11</sup> **Addressing vacancy and abandonment has pivotal impacts on reducing crime, growing the tax base to support schools and public services, and removing health and safety hazards from a community.**<sup>12</sup> Neighborhood benefits are further compounded when the reuse of formerly vacant land aligns with the long-term goals of a community and its residents, representing one complementary part of a broader regional development strategy.

### Percent of Allegheny County Residents Living in Poverty by Area Type



*Vacant lot owned by TCLB in Edgewood*



*Photo provided by Grounded Strategies*

## Crime Reduction and Public Health

A study conducted in Youngstown, Ohio cataloging crime rates surrounding unmaintained vacant lots versus sites treated with green infrastructure found statistically significant reductions in felony assaults, burglaries, and robberies among lots applying to the city's vacant lot greening program.<sup>13</sup> Similar studies from across the country have shown that remediating blighted vacant land reduces crime, particularly gun violence.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, a 2015 study found that by simply walking past or near a greened vacant lot, Philadelphia residents experienced a lowered ambulatory heart rate. In contrast, residents walking past an abandoned site experienced a heightened ambulatory heart rate.<sup>15</sup> The greening treatments performed for this study are low-cost and easily reproducible: cleaning and removing debris, planting grass and trees, and installing low wooden post-and-rail fences. Additional vacant land interventions can also proactively remove environmental hazards like lead and help to mitigate toxins from the nearby soil and air<sup>16</sup> — a critical benefit for a region that suffers disproportionately from chronic illness, Type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and cancer risk from air pollution.<sup>17</sup>

Vacant land interventions also have a dramatic impact on physical and mental health. A 2018 Philadelphia-based study found that those living near greened lots experienced a nearly 63% decrease in self-reported poor mental health compared to those living near lots that did not receive an intervention. Among those specifically struggling with symptoms of depression, reports from people living within a quarter mile radius of greened lots indicated a 41.5% decrease in feelings of depression compared to those who lived near lots that had not been cleaned.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, a literature review conducted by the Urban Institute in 2017 found multiple studies linking higher rates of chronic illness and stunted mental and physical development in children living near abandoned lots and buildings.<sup>19</sup>



### Health and Safety Benefits of Repurposing Vacant Land



Reduction in violent crime, particularly gun violence, assaults, burglaries, and robberies



Removal of lead and other toxins from the soil



Lowered ambulatory heart rate and risk of cardiovascular disease



Mitigation of industrial air pollution



Decreased rates of depression



Carbon sequestration



Healthier physical and mental development for children



Increased community resiliency against flooding and other wet weather events

## Fiscal Sustainability and Building a Strong Tax Base

In addition to improving health, environmental factors, and quality of life for residents, long-standing economic burdens on municipalities are gradually lifted when once-vacant properties are cared for. In Philadelphia, a 2007 study found that blighted vacant lots decrease property values of adjacent properties by up to 20%, but activities like trash removal, proper grading, and landscaping almost entirely remove the negative impact and can increase property values up to 17%.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, a 2014 study in Cleveland estimated that tax-delinquent vacant lots reduced surrounding property values by 2.8-8.6%, depending on the sub-market.<sup>22</sup> Lastly, in Allegheny County, a [study that focused on Mon Valley communities](#) found that stable vacant lots are estimated to increase surrounding home values by an average of 1.6%, while blighted vacant lots decrease property values by 6.0%. This means that, on average, simply stabilizing a blighted lot is estimated to increase surrounding home values by 7.6% in Allegheny County. This breaks out to a **property value increase of \$5,145 per house or \$457,620,095 total** for the County as a whole. Additionally, installing green infrastructure on a blighted vacant lot further increases nearby property values.<sup>23</sup>

### Sunflower+ Project: STL



In addition to rectifying the negative health and crime impacts associated with abandoned land, thoughtful projects on vacant lots can also improve soil health and remove toxins. One example of this is the [Sunflower+ Project: STL](#) in St. Louis. Through this initiative, architects Don Koster and Richard Reilly planted sunflowers on vacant land to remediate lead and other contaminants in the soil. These flowers immediately impacted surrounding property values while also cleaning the soil to make it safer for children to play nearby and enable other uses of the site in the future. The Sunflower+ Project: STL is also exploring innovative ways to monetize their work through selling the flowers and potentially using the seeds for biofuel.<sup>20</sup>

## The Importance of Long-Term Stewardship

Many of these community benefits are also achieved by remediating blighted structures. However, even as the region makes progress in addressing blight in the built environment, it risks perpetuating a vicious cycle by conducting demolitions without long-term plans to address the untended vacant lots that remain once buildings come down. Over a period of five years (2015-2019), Allegheny County spent \$4,590,856 on demolition through the Community Development Block Grant Program.<sup>24</sup> In 2019, legislation enabled by PA Act 152 gave Allegheny County permission to collect an additional \$15 filing fee when deeds are recorded, which will result in an estimated \$2 million of funding annually for demolition activities between 2021-2027.<sup>25</sup> Since the volume of demolitions will increase, we can expect that abandoned blighted vacant land will also increase. Much of this increase will occur within TCLB's footprint; a [GIS analysis](#) conducted in 2020 found that 35.8% of potential demolition sites in Allegheny County are located in the communities currently served by TCLB.

These demolition projects will be critical for removing blighted buildings that are hazardous, unsafe, and no longer structurally sound, but we must also develop a strategy to address the untended vacant lots that will remain. With limited funding, distressed markets, and stable or declining populations in many communities,



we cannot build new houses as quickly as we take down structures, nor is there a large demand for new construction. The private market will not act on its own. In most areas, the cost to acquire vacant land through the tax foreclosure process is higher than the land's market value, making it impossible to address the problem without additional funding support. This is why we need the supportive intervention and strategic focus proposed in this strategy. For example, the chart below illustrates TCLB's cost to acquire, maintain, and clear title for two side yards compared to the price at which those lots were sold. These properties represent two successful sales resulting from TCLB's [Side Lot Development Program](#), which is further explored in [Part 2](#) of this report. The figures below represent the total costs to acquire, maintain, and clear title for two side lots sold in 2020, compared with the sale price.

### Lead-Safe Demolition

When demolition is necessary to begin a repurposing project, it is ideal to approach this work in an environmentally responsible way that prioritizes safety, transparency, and clear communication with the community involved.<sup>26</sup> To learn more about how TCLB facilitated a lead-safe demolition pilot as part of its ongoing work to strengthen Millvale's North Avenue corridor, please visit [tricoglandbank.org/resources](http://tricoglandbank.org/resources).

### TCLB's cost to acquire, maintain, and clear title for two side yards

	Property Costs <sup>27</sup>	Sale Price	Total Profit/Loss
<b>Dome St.</b>	- (\$6,456)	\$750	- (\$5,706)
<b>Quay Ave.</b>	- (\$8,689)	\$882	- (\$7,807)
<b>TOTAL</b>	- (\$15,145)	\$1,632	- (\$13,513)

Transforming abandoned, vacant land has a high price, especially in middle and distressed real estate markets. This is particularly true in the short term, because, as shown above, the value of the lots is low compared to the high costs to acquire and maintain them. These cost constraints may be why addressing vacant land remains one of the largest complaint areas for long-term operational land banks across the country.<sup>28</sup> According to a national survey completed by the University of Michigan, as cities across the US increase their property portfolios, vacant land is increasing at higher levels than blighted structures, but vacant land and greening programs remain one of the smallest budget items for these organizations.<sup>29</sup> This results in a consistently under-resourced system with a disproportionate impact on low-income and minority communities. Survey respondents cited "long-term, sustained funding for maintenance, greening, and capacity building" as their top need and confirmed that "funding is already insufficient to meet existing inventory needs and is not increasing, despite growing vacant lot inventories."<sup>30</sup>

There are many examples across the country of successful projects that have transformed formerly abandoned vacant land into new community assets which increase biodiversity, mitigate stormwater overflow, expand access to nutritious food, and more. Many of these projects are featured throughout the report as models that can be replicated in Southwestern Pennsylvania. However, **the resource constraints outlined above have prevented these projects from reaching the scale needed to adequately solve the problems faced by communities with a legacy of disinvestment and decline.**

# Pathways Forward

Land banks are granted special abilities through state legislation that enable them to steward abandoned properties to new productive uses, making it easier for communities to gain access to previously abandoned land and determine its outcome. TCLB is formed by municipalities, school districts, and Allegheny County, allowing it to have both a neighborhood and regional focus at the same time. With its members, it chooses properties and determines new uses. Through tax sale and other legal processes, TCLB clears property titles, which protects future owners from becoming liable for the unpaid debt of previous owners. TCLB also works with local stakeholders to expand the range of potential buyers and community partners who can help bring the property back to productive use.



TCLB is uniquely empowered to help communities navigate the complex process of accessing and repurposing vacant land in alignment with local development goals. Since its founding in 2017, TCLB has built trusting relationships with its 35 members—26 municipalities, eight school districts, and Allegheny County—to act as a steward of abandoned property recovery in each community it serves. As its inventory grew and it transacted its first sales, TCLB became a regional expert in the intricacies of tax law, Sheriff Sale, title clearing, property maintenance, and real estate transactions. TCLB is the first land bank to own and sell property in Allegheny County and has developed a system to obtain insurable titles for these difficult transactions. TCLB also participates in a number of regional coalitions and sustains partnerships with community-based organizations that seek to address many local issues such as affordable homeownership, lead exposure, stormwater recapture, urban agriculture, and more. In the process of developing this report, TCLB met with over 15 nonprofit organizations that currently offer services related to land stewardship and reclamation.

Building on its successful track record as an operational land bank, TCLB is in a prime position to drive a regional strategy to address abandoned land by:

- 1 Providing access to vacant parcels
- 2 Holding and maintaining land on a short-term basis
- 3 Facilitating working relationships between municipal staff, elected officials, service partners, and community residents
- 4 Identifying long-term disposition strategies

TCLB strives to establish and sustain a dialogue with community stakeholders to form an active coalition of local organizations equipped and committed to repurposing vacant land at a scale that can be practically replicated across TCLB's footprint. Historically, residents in lower income communities, especially people of color, have been excluded from neighborhood development decisions. TCLB is committed to a process that ensures that legacy will not continue. As TCLB continues its regional work, it will prioritize community participation with particular focus on the inclusion of underrepresented groups, especially in neighborhoods primarily composed of people of color. TCLB will continue to work with neighborhood groups and community organizers to host community meetings and events, conduct outreach with elected officials, and engage technical experts to develop an equitable model for vacant land repurposing. Additionally, TCLB plans to identify and partner with organizations that offer workforce development and training programs that empower community residents to maintain abandoned and vacant land, receive compensation for their work, and play a significant role in the revitalization that unfolds in their own neighborhoods.



To transform the high volume of vacant land in Allegheny County into vibrant properties that strengthen communities, the region requires a conductor, convener, and facilitator to drive this work forward. Allegheny County's vast landscape of vacant parcels offers opportunities to create new community assets that support the many local environmental, health, and social goals cataloged in previous sections. This report seeks to define where those parcels are, how they might be used, and how TCLB can use its legal powers as a land bank to support and steward vacant land recovery in our region.

# A 7-Step Process for Transforming Vacant Land

TCLB has developed a framework that outlines key considerations for constructing a regional vacant land strategy. While the framework has multiple parts, it is important to acknowledge that this is not a linear process. TCLB tackles each step of the process simultaneously, recognizing how each element overlaps with and informs the others.

**Partnerships** are at the center of this work; without them, transforming vacant land at scale will not be possible. TCLB specializes in gaining ownership of abandoned land and clearing its title, but that land cannot return to productive use without responsible end users and partners. Community partners are indispensable for helping each lot achieve its highest **potential**. To determine the best use for each parcel, TCLB will work closely with each community in **planning** how available lots can support existing goals such as stormwater recapture, healthy food access, or air pollution mitigation.



Based on community goals and GIS mapping of all available plots, **programs** will be selected for each lot targeting different strategies for reuse, such as disposition, leasing, or licensing. **Participation** from community residents is essential for ensuring the success of these programs, and long-term **preservation** strategies will be baked in from the beginning to support project sustainability. All of these activities will be informed by local, state, and federal **policy**, which TCLB monitors through its participation in the PA Land Bank Network and the National Land Bank Network.

## Part 1: Planning

*Where do we start?*

### Defining Community Goals and Opportunities

Planning for vacant land transformation requires meaningful and sustained dialogue with a wide range of community stakeholders. This dynamic decision-making process is aided by a shared vision, tangible goals, and a strategy for vacant land repurposing that is context-dependent and focused on addressing the most pressing needs of the impacted community. Whether a project initially has a hyper-localized, municipal, or even regional focus, it frequently leads to increased connectivity across geographic and public-private lines which impact advocacy, fundraising, and legislative priorities on a broader scale. In this sense, every successful community project — however small — contributes to a larger regional effort to positively transform vacant land towards uses that enliven and complement communities.

Since 2017, TCLB has chosen several vacant lots within its member communities to test repurposing strategies. Now, leveraging the experience and success of these projects, TCLB seeks to lead a broader regional program that will bring these strategies to scale across its footprint.

## Problem Statements

In order to develop a viable vacant land strategy, a community should first explore and identify its goals and priorities. Then, stemming from its vision, goals, and priorities, we recommend developing **problem statements**.<sup>31</sup>

### Examples

- We have a flooding problem and want to better manage stormwater and overflows.
- We need more safe places for our youth to play.
- We want places that encourage intergenerational gathering.
- We want to highlight our creative talent and local artists.
- We have a significant number of buildings that are public safety hazards and need to be demolished.
- We have a food security issue and want to increase our access to fresh foods for every resident.
- We need affordable housing in our residential areas.

## Inventory Analysis

TCLB will keep broad end-use goals in mind as it defines criteria to sort the inventory, determine the scope of opportunities, and inform decision-making later in the process. In particular, spatial analysis, local stakeholder collaboration, and site visits are all important elements to help facilitate site selection. Spatial analysis will help TCLB identify tax-delinquent vacant land in its footprint, understand the potential extent to which vacant lots could be greened, and suggest suitable end uses.

Spatial analysis using a Geographic Information System (GIS) is a tool that TCLB brings to its communities and the decision making process. When conducted on the community, municipal, county, regional, or watershed scales, spatial analysis identifies the potential to green or repurpose vacant lots. Spatial analysis may also help to identify potential areas where sites could be aggregated.

In addition to follow-up site visits, TCLB will coordinate with local stakeholders to “ground truth,” or confirm their findings from spatial analysis. Site visits provide information about:

- current formal and informal uses of the site
- occupancy status
- the lot’s surface condition
- proximity to utility lines
- vegetation quality and coverage
- sun exposure
- evidence of flooding or erosion
- soil quality via soil tests and observation<sup>32</sup>
- adjacent uses and sightlines

## Innovative Planning Tool

In late 2018, the Allegheny Land Trust (ALT), in partnership with the Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center (WPRDC) launched an interactive online regional mapping tool that guides urban greening priorities. The [Greenprint](#) tool, winner of a 2019 Governor's Award for Environmental Excellence, features a number of land use data sets from public-sector, non-profit and private organizations and makes them available for public use. While the tool is designed to be accessed by residents to encourage participation in greening activities, it is also used to guide ALT, policy makers, and the community on the best uses of parcels to improve comprehensive regional planning and decision-making.<sup>33</sup>

Since TCLB is a membership organization of municipalities, school districts, and Allegheny County, the goals of TCLB's vacant land management strategy will be guided by input from these member communities as well as the region as a whole. Working in 26 municipalities and eight school districts, priorities inevitably vary as much as local market conditions do. To launch a meaningful dialogue, TCLB has undertaken an initial inventory analysis to share with its members.

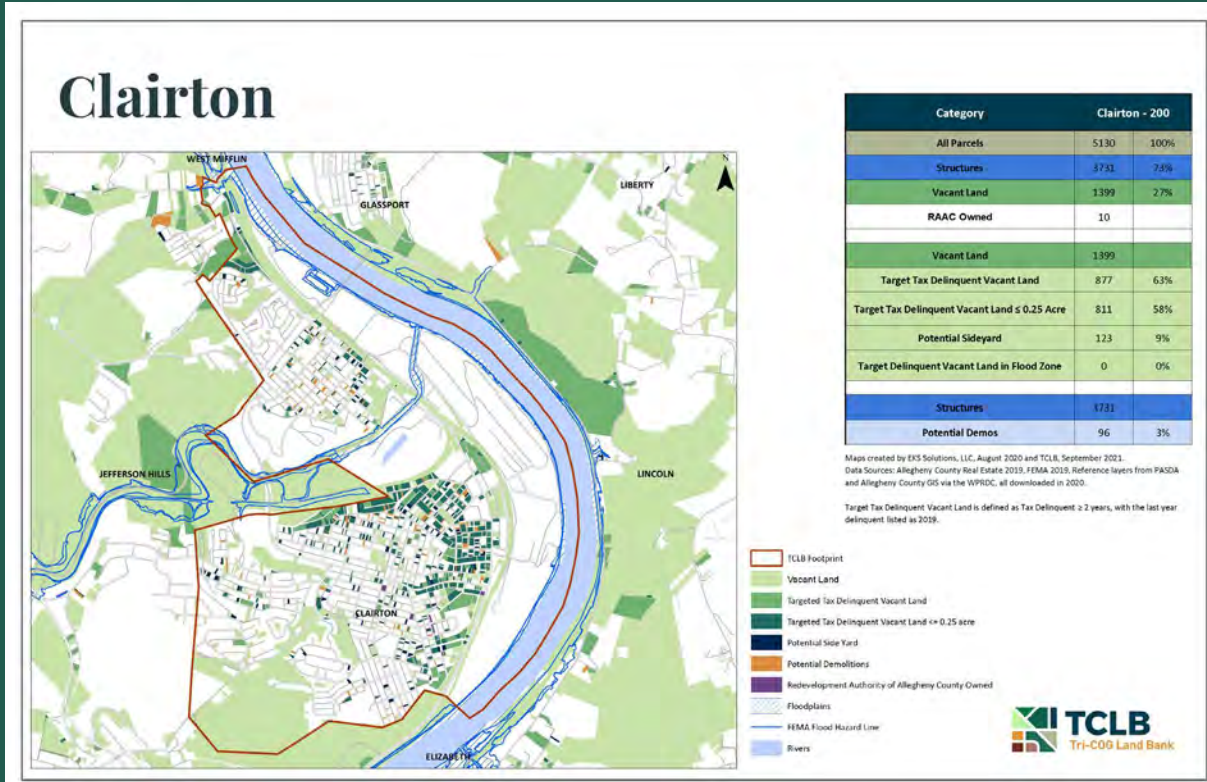
In the initial analysis, TCLB gathered data from public sources that included:

- Allegheny County's open data agreements
- PASDA - PA Spatial Data Access portal
- Western PA Regional Data Center
- Local organizational data collected firsthand
- Regional and national data related to habitat, flooding, demographics, soil, and slope conditions

Vacant land was identified as assessed building value = \$0. Then, vacant land was narrowed down to target tax delinquent vacant land which is defined as parcels that are tax delinquent greater than or equal to two years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019. Tax-delinquent lots less than a quarter acre in size were also identified. Finally, TCLB isolated properties where quality of structures had condition ratings of "poor," "very poor," or "unsound" and which were also tax delinquent (as established by Allegheny County property assessments), as these properties would likely be the site of future demolitions.

From this analysis, TCLB gained the ability to evaluate the scope of the problem in its footprint and in the county as a whole. TCLB located 22,843 vacant land parcels with greater than or equal to two years of tax delinquency since 2019 in Allegheny County, 6,747 of which were in its current footprint (29.5%). TCLB also created customized maps for each of its 26 member municipalities illustrating the locations of vacant land, tax-delinquent vacant land (including those less than .25 acres and those in flood zones), potential side yards, and potential demolitions. An example of these maps is shown on the next page, with the full compilation available in [Appendix A](#).

## Sample GIS Analysis



## Identifying End Users

To ensure project sustainability, TCLB thoughtfully considers property end users during the initial planning phase. If the goal is to increase the disposition of problem properties to private markets, time must be invested to identify potential buyers, including residents, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. When a final public buyer is not immediately available, TCLB provides an important service to a community by committing to stewarding that property into the future. To provide more resources as its work increases, TCLB will build new partnerships with resident groups and other organizations who can help find responsible end users and will help steward the properties. In many cases, these arrangements will be formalized into long-term or permanent agreements with clear expectations.

Across a range of community contexts, TCLB will work with members to execute projects that meet their goals. In addition to sharing data and offering assistance with determining the potential best use for a vacant lot, TCLB will survey its members about their interest in particular land use strategies and hold one-on-one meetings to gather input that strongly informs each repurposing project.

## Part 2: Programs

### *What is possible?*

Although more narrowly focused vacant land programs exist throughout the United States, most are limited to specific projects like community gardens, side lot development, stormwater management, etc. Additionally, these efforts are often geographically siloed and geared towards vacant land in discrete municipalities or neighborhoods. What is urgently needed is a comprehensive regional program that implements the full range of strategies and applies them based on community context and needs. TCLB strives to serve as the coordinator and facilitator of this work, leveraging its experience, resources, and existing partnerships to advance a comprehensive regional strategy. Because TCLB communities bear a disproportionate burden of tax-delinquent vacant properties and environmental justice disparities, the transformation of hazards into assets offers an especially critical opportunity to promote equity while increasing community health, safety, and financial sustainability.

### Potential Role for TCLB

The following program and project framework highlights the wide range of possibilities for addressing abandoned, vacant land. This framework includes several practical land use concepts. Each use will be implemented while taking into account the unique landscape of each community. Outlined below, land use options are sorted into three categories based on the structure for transferring the lot to an end user and the long-term role TCLB will play.

<b>Disposition</b> Lots sold to a defined end user	<b>Activation</b> Enabling others to create more productive uses on land owned by TCLB	<b>Long-Term Maintenance</b> TCLB plays an active role in administering sustainable land stewardship over time
Featured Sales Side Lot Development Mow to Own	Lease and License Programs	Workforce Development Time Banking

Various program examples have been reviewed for strengths and weaknesses to help inform a developing strategy for TCLB. Descriptions of key challenges and considerations for a variety of land use options are detailed in [Appendix B](#). Successful examples of similar projects in other cities can also be found throughout this section and in [Appendix E](#).

### Disposition

The focus of disposition aims to reduce the prevalence of abandoned, vacant land in a community by identifying permanent owners to assume responsibility for ongoing care, thus returning these properties back to the tax rolls. A significant challenge with focused disposition programs is the financing model. Furthermore, most often, the cost to acquire and clear title on vacant land exceeds the amount that can be recouped through a successful sale or disposition, posing the need for external financial support.

With each property TCLB acquires, TCLB will identify local contractors to complete an initial clean up, including addressing any immediate needs like fallen trees or slope slide. Often this cleaning process includes the removal of large debris, rough grading, pruning permanent vegetation, and/or the installation of border planting or fencing to demarcate the site for potential buyers or users. This clean up activity stabilizes a vacant parcel, removes safety concerns, and prepares it for future use, whether temporary or a more permanent development.



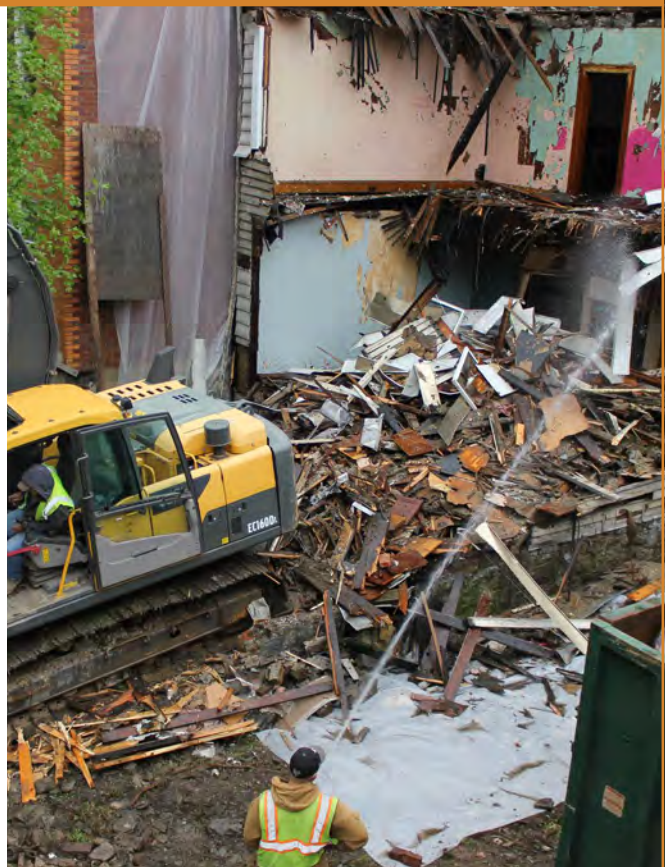
## FEATURED SALES

Featured sales will be a primary disposition strategy for TCLB. This approach is best suited for markets where there is some level of demand for buildable lots and new construction.

Since its founding in 2017, TCLB has established a comprehensive process for acquiring vacant and abandoned property, maintaining it, clearing its title, and transferring it to a new, responsible owner. As of July 15, 2021, TCLB has sold 13 properties (both structures and lots) and has approved buyer applications for six more. As a land bank, TCLB is not obligated to sell properties to the highest bidder, and it considers other factors when evaluating buyer applications, such as community priorities. All TCLB buyers are thoroughly vetted before they are eligible to purchase a TCLB property. TCLB verifies that they do not have any outstanding code violations or unpaid real estate taxes on existing property. Buyers must also provide a detailed plan for how they plan to use and/or redevelop the property they seek to purchase.

### Lead Safe Demolition Creates Buildable Lot

In 2021, TCLB successfully sold its first buildable lot in Millvale as one element of a larger corridor redevelopment strategy. A dilapidated structure was acquired by TCLB at the recommendation of the Borough of Millvale in 2018. After acquisition, TCLB found that the property was structurally unsound with a large hole in the roof and significant water damage. TCLB demolished this property using a pilot lead safe specification developed in partnership with [Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh](#) (formerly Conservation Consultants, Inc.). The remaining lot was sold to a developer that is currently constructing a new house on the property. Further down the street, TCLB is working with the Millvale Community Development Corporation to convert another abandoned structure into affordable housing, and [City of Bridges Community Land Trust](#) is rehabilitating a different house as permanently affordable housing. Together, these properties will help to strengthen the corridor with the availability of balanced, mixed-income housing.



## SIDE LOT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

TCLB currently provides opportunities for qualifying property owners to purchase vacant lots at below-market value. Providing land to current responsible property owners is a reliable way to steward abandoned lots to long-term tended care. [TCLB's Side Lot Development Program](#) allows property owners that share a 50% contiguous boundary with a TCLB-owned lot to apply to purchase the lot as a side yard. To qualify, side lots must be less than .25 acres in size and clear of any primary structures. Participants must be owners or equitable owners of the property directly adjacent to the side lot.<sup>34</sup>

In 2020, the launch of TCLB's Side Lot Development Program led to the sale of two properties in White Oak. Both had burdened the community for decades as tax-delinquent, vacant lots. These two properties have now returned to the tax rolls, stabilizing or increasing surrounding property values while improving public perception and resident experience within the community. Similar side lot programs across the country have gained significant momentum, addressing vacant land issues in cities like [Detroit](#) and [Wilmington](#). Between 2014 and 2018, Detroit's side lot program produced \$500,000 in additional property taxes for the city, developing as a direct result of resident purchases of over 10,000 side lots. This progress represents the successful transfer of approximately 32% of the city's vacant lots.<sup>35</sup>

TCLB has completed comprehensive research to determine where potential lots are located across its member

### Side Lot Development Sales

In the late summer of 2020, TCLB sold its first two properties, two side lots located in the Borough of 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, these side lots both had tax lien records dating back to the year 1949. After acquiring the properties, TCLB cleared the title so the new owners won't be held liable for any old debts. Throughout this process, TCLB also arranged for regular maintenance services on both properties to help stabilize the surrounding area.

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!



communities. This analysis found **1,415 potential side lots in the TCLB footprint**. In order to achieve this scale of impact, TCLB will require funding and support. For example, the upfront costs vs. sales costs of a vacant side lot are consistently disproportional; typical upfront costs approach \$6,500, whereas sales prices may be as low as \$750. These upfront costs include acquisition, legal costs to clear title, and ongoing maintenance. In addition to funding support, the continuation of these efforts will also require steady engagement with TCLB member communities and property owners who are eligible to participate.

## **MOW TO OWN**

Once TCLB acquires abandoned vacant land, one potential strategy for disposition is the establishment of a Mow to Own Program. Mow to Own is a sweat equity program where residents may apply the costs and labor of maintaining a vacant lot towards future ownership. Actions on the lot may range from mowing, debris removal, and snow removal on any adjacent sidewalks. A timeline or dollar amount can be set as the program end point. After that milestone has been reached, if there are no violations and no complaints, the maintenance lien can be removed and the owner will fully own the property. Most programs give first choice to an adjacent landowner, but cities sometimes work with non-profit organizations, community organizations, and/or stormwater management organizations to advance their programs. Each program must define its lot eligibility, applicant eligibility, and maintenance requirements, as well as administration, inspection, and enforcement schedules.

In addition to the financial benefit of returning vacant lots to the tax rolls, these programs can increase access to land ownership for historically underrepresented groups who have frequently faced barriers to land ownership and accessing financial products like mortgages. Mow to Own programs provide an important alternative pathway for residents to gain access to land ownership without requiring upfront capital. [St Louis' Mow to Own Program](#) provides opportunities for residents to gain ownership of lots located next to a property they own by “performing regular mowing and debris removal for 24 months.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, [Akron's Mow to Own Program](#) offers residents the opportunity to gain ownership of a vacant lot after maintaining it for only six months.<sup>37</sup> Similar programs exist across the country to help stabilize communities and provide access to land ownership for historically disenfranchised groups.

## **Activation**

In some cases, the highest and best use of a property may be temporary, before a more permanent end user is identified to take ownership of the parcel. In these instances, lease programs offer promising opportunities for temporary or long-term projects to enliven a community, sometimes evolving into permanent projects when adequately supported. For other properties that have been identified as suitable for development, but for a specified amount of time have no active purpose, parcels can be made available to the public for a set time period and particular use. By establishing a process by which residents and groups can apply to access and use a vacant parcel, TCLB can retain control of viable properties but not be responsible for the ongoing maintenance. In partnership with community organizations, resident groups, urban farmers, and more, TCLB will make its land available for a variety of productive projects such as gardens, green infrastructure, and urban agriculture while still retaining underlying ownership. Through this type of vacant land repurposing, TCLB assists with site access, identifies a capable community partner to manage the project, and works to develop standards for any programs implemented to steward or maintain the property. In some cases where future development is not supported by the market or desired by the community, these properties can ultimately be transferred to a more permanent owner such as a land trust to enable community gardeners or urban farmers to retain control of their project over the long term.

There are many inspiring stories of vacant land transformation that begin with a temporary use agreement. Vacant land activated for temporary use has, for instance, been repurposed for the promotion of special events or experiences. In Buffalo’s Larkinville neighborhood, a vacant lot once occupied by a soap manufacturing plant was activated for “pop-up” use to temporarily host concerts and local merchants. The pop-up evolved to include a “Live at Larkin” summer concert series, as well as vendor stations for local residents to sell their wares to event attendees and employees of the nearby industrial park. Although this particular activation began as a pop-up, consistent pedestrian traffic and growing interest in the events hosted at the site eventually led to the permanent development of [Larkin Square](#), which now hosts a fitness series, ongoing concerts, “food truck Tuesdays,” and an author series resulting from the site’s initial temporary use activation.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, [Grounded Strategies](#), a Pittsburgh-based organization committed to vacant land activation and stewardship, worked in partnership with its ReClaim McKeesport ambassadors to transform a vacant lot on Lemon Street in McKeesport through the installation of fencing, mulch, fall flowers, and spring bulbs. This temporary intervention beautified a vacant lot in 2014, improving community aesthetics, safety, and health while plans for a green construction project are underway, led by an architectural design team who intends to repurpose the lot for permanent use.<sup>39</sup>

## Long Term Maintenance and Stewardship

For projects where TCLB will play an active role in long-term stewardship of vacant parcels, workforce development and timebanking programs offer sustainable methods for ongoing maintenance, often involving community residents in the process. These programs and methods are adaptable based on the specific needs of the property and community.



In order for TCLB to implement these programs, strong partnerships with organizations that specialize in workforce development or timebanking will be required. These programs likely will not be developed during TCLB’s first phase of implementation, but they are promising ideas to explore once the land bank’s disposition and activation programs are more fully developed.

### WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Vacant land repurposing takes many forms — from acquisition and maintenance to green infrastructure installments and the creation of vibrant community gardens. Wherever possible, TCLB will identify workforce development and training opportunities that empower community residents to maintain vacant land, receive compensation for their work, and play a significant role in the revitalization that unfolds in their communities. TCLB will achieve this through collaboration with partner organizations that specialize in workforce development.

Many vacant land transformations are well-suited to incorporate workforce development opportunities, encouraging employment and training in horticulture, landscape maintenance, greenhouse operations, carpentry, masonry, tool maintenance, as well as other personal development classes related to project management, budgeting, health education, and more. One local model for leveraging vacant land maintenance needs to create workforce development opportunities and small business growth is the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh's [LandCare Program](#). This program, developed in partnership with [Grounded Strategies](#), engages locally-based entrepreneurs and contractors to provide monthly maintenance services on URA-owned lots.<sup>40</sup> As TCLB expands its own vacant land portfolio, drawing upon the success of programs like LandCare offers opportunities to local residents and stakeholders to earn money and grow their businesses while playing a central role in transforming their own neighborhoods.

## **TIMEBANKING**

Timebanking programs represent a kind of currency that can be adapted for the ongoing stewardship of vacant land. Residents in a timebanking program can volunteer specific hours of service and receive equivalent time credits, which can be redeemed for social service benefits in recognition of their commitment and labor. Partnerships with local utility companies and other local businesses also help to create rewards systems that incentivize participation and build ground-level commitment to vacant land transformation projects. These types of programs reward community engagement and increase socialization and education among residents, encouraging high levels of participation across project types.

Due to the breadth of workforce development and timebanking programs established within the county and the other supportive services required for a successful program, it does not make sense for TCLB to design one of its own. Instead, TCLB will work to identify partners who are interested in working in its footprint and who are flexible enough to support an ongoing maintenance protocol.

## Part 3: Potential

*How do you decide?*

### Highest and Best Use

TCLB's focus while selecting property end uses differs from that of a speculator, where the highest and best use is often singularly determined by monetary value. Instead, **once TCLB acquires a property, it works closely within the community to outline goals for how the property could be productively reused.** TCLB reviews community priorities before evaluating property applications and incorporating other community partners into the repurposing process. In this sense, TCLB operates as a receptive and embedded partner rather than an outside entity pursuing a predetermined agenda.

TCLB will evaluate potential uses of vacant land based on whether they are:

- 1 Aligned with other local community development goals
- 2 Legal
- 3 Physically and logistically possible
- 4 Financially feasible

Additionally, any determination of the highest and best use includes considering potential purchasers or end users.

### ALIGNING WITH COMMUNITY GOALS

One of the most critical components of determining an end-use strategy is assessing how it meets community needs and addresses resident input. As buy-in and need can be a pathway toward stewardship, the highest and best use of any parcel is one that aligns with neighborhood priorities. These may be identified by reviewing existing comprehensive or strategic plans as a starting point, followed by direct dialogue and collaboration with residents and other local stakeholders. By matching end-use strategies with neighborhood priorities, TCLB brings positive change through projects that the entire community can support.



## EQUITY IN LAND USE DECISIONS

When determining how a project may be maximally productive, it is also beneficial to establish a policy to respond to the historical inequities surrounding land use decisions. All land use decisions have the potential to impact gentrification, affordable housing, access to transportation, green space, and overall quality of life. Historically, land use planning and zoning policies have not always supported community health, wellness, and equitable development, especially for low-income neighborhoods of color. While that mentality may be shifting, policies and legislation may be behind in what is legally enforceable. New programs, including TCLB's vacant land strategy, provide an opportunity to establish more specific guidance in this area.

At minimum, community participation is a necessary step in determining the highest and best use of a parcel. Where possible, final uses should align with existing adopted community plans and larger comprehensive plans- assuming the processes that led to those plans were executed equitably and are still relevant to the current state of the community. Meaningful engagement and participation opportunities for residents within the communities are the best mechanism to ensure a strong planning process. If there are project ideas and end users who are based in the community, they should be given preference for consideration over outside influences, as this not only encourages buy-in from the larger community, but also helps to support long-term sustaining energy around the interventions.

A new focus on the management of vacant land can also help address historic inequities in a community and environmental justice disparities. Owning property is one of the established paths to wealth building that has been specifically made unattainable for populations of color, sometimes encompassing entire neighborhoods. With the prevalence of 'excess' and currently underutilized land, there is an opportunity to help remedy this issue. Wherever possible, preference can be given to residents from historically disadvantaged communities. Some attention may be needed to address financing, financial literacy, and administrative processes necessary to encourage land transactions.

## ENSURING LEGAL, PHYSICAL, AND FINANCIAL FEASIBILITY

Only those uses that are legally permitted are potential highest and best uses. This may exclude uses that are not, and are unlikely to become, permitted by zoning, as well as uses forbidden by government regulations and uses prohibited by deed restrictions or covenants.

Any potential use must also be physically possible given the size, shape, topography, soil quality, access, utilities, and other characteristics of the site. Additionally, the highest and best use of a property is financially viable, meaning the proposed use of a property generates adequate revenue to justify the costs of construction and maintenance. However, the cost to return vacant properties to a productive use may exceed the financial return depending on the end use arrangement. As a result, some preferable end uses may not be feasible without financial subsidy. The public benefits of such uses may outweigh these upfront financial costs, and so efforts to generate other resources to support these projects are critical.

For more information about specific considerations to take into account for potential vacant land end-uses, please see [Appendix C](#).

## Part 4: Partnerships

### *Who can help?*

Once TCLB and community stakeholders have jointly determined what needs to happen and where it will happen, it's time to determine who will do the work. Partners can help to identify necessary timelines, budgetary constraints, and step-by-step actions necessary to complete a particular project. This is particularly true if preparatory work is needed on site, or if community participation is critical for success. They can also perform some of the projects themselves when TCLB has secured control of the property.

In the fall of 2020, TCLB convened several potential partner organizations to discuss the current state of vacant land issues within Allegheny County, with a particular focus on communities in TCLB's footprint. A list of organizations who attended that meeting is outlined in [Appendix D](#). This recent dialogue included background information on land banking and blighted vacant land, an inventory of data for vacant land in TCLB's footprint, and a discussion about potential opportunities to build partnerships to tackle the problem at scale. Partner organizations provided information on their capacity and interest in stewarding land-based projects if access were provided by TCLB. Following this kick-off meeting, TCLB continued one-on-one conversations with many of the participating organizations.

### Transforming High Volumes of Vacant Land

To transform the high volume of vacant land in Allegheny County into vibrant properties that enhance and strengthen communities, the region requires a facilitator to create connections between service providers, municipalities, and potential land owners and stewards. By acquiring, maintaining, and transforming vacant lots, TCLB and its partners will substantially improve public health and safety, environmental sustainability, and community stability.

### Municipalities and School Districts

TCLB works directly with municipalities, school districts, and Allegheny County to ensure that vacant land transformation is pursued in accordance with municipal requirements and in broader alignment with community needs and existing capacity. Municipal staff can help provide historical context and guide planning processes regarding variances, zoning changes, or any other approvals by public figures. Municipal and school district staff also help to recommend properties for TCLB to consider for acquisition and provide historical context on many of those properties.

As of July 2022, TCLB serves 35 members — 26 municipalities, eight school districts, and Allegheny County. TCLB helps to support blight mitigation efforts in its member communities by acquiring properties that would otherwise be difficult to access, vetting potential buyers to ensure they will take care of the property, and evaluating property applications based on community priorities instead of simply accepting the highest bid. TCLB also maintains all of its properties while it owns them, taking this burden off of municipalities and eliminating local complaints.



## Non-Profit Organizations

### COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATIONS

Many places have an organization or group focused on the overall economic development activities for their community. Whether a community development corporation (CDC) or another less formal group, these organizations assist in identifying end users and needs for new projects addressed through vacant land management. CDCs and community groups offer additional expertise and capacity since their focus is often explicitly fixed on singular issues such as crime, health, housing, or education. This hyper-local approach also results in stronger relationships with residents who may be interested in being landowners and stewards.

### LAND CONSERVANCIES AND TRUSTS

A land trust, or land conservancy, is a private, nonprofit organization that works with landowners to conserve land by assisting with direct land transactions — primarily the acceptance of donations, or in somewhat rarer cases, the purchase of land or conservation easements.

Land trusts vary in scope and scale, but all of them share the common mission of working cooperatively with landowners to protect and conserve land for its natural, recreational, scenic, historic, or productive value. In Allegheny County, the Allegheny Land Trust also worked with the Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center to develop an award-winning mapping tool called [Greenprint](#) that empowers residents and organizations like TCLB to track the condition of parks, trails, green infrastructure, and other community green spaces across the region.

TCLB is committed to working with local land trusts and conservancies, such as Allegheny Land Trust, Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, and the Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania, to steward vacant land parcels back to permanent productive uses. Successful examples of partnerships between land banks and land conservancies can be found throughout the country, such as the Pollinator Project established between Michigan’s Saginaw County Land Bank and Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy. This partnership “uses re-naturalization techniques to stabilize vacant urban land,” transforming nearly 260 acres of the Saginaw County Land Bank’s vacant lot inventory using “both low-growing flowering lawns and more rustic wildflower plots.”<sup>41</sup> Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy reports that the project has also led to measurable crime reduction and helped support pollinators like butterflies and honeybees.<sup>42</sup>



### URBAN AGRICULTURE

Urban agriculture, including local farming or urban gardening, is the practice of cultivating, processing, and distributing freshly grown produce in or around urban areas. It may also involve animal husbandry, aquaculture, agroforestry, urban beekeeping, and horticulture. In its

[Food Action Plan](#) released in September 2020, the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council listed “improv[ing] access to land and capital for farmers, particularly new and beginning farmers and farmers of color” as a key priority.<sup>43</sup> As part of the region’s broader strategy to improve food systems, TCLB’s powers as a land bank equip it to assist communities and farmers in gaining ready access to vacant land parcels well-suited for reuse as urban agriculture plots.

Urban agriculture can reflect varying levels of economic and social development. It may be a social movement for sustainable communities, where organic growers form social networks founded on shared values of nature and community integration. For others, food security, nutrition, and income generation are key motivators for participating. In either case, more direct access to fresh vegetables, fruits, and meat products through urban agriculture can improve food security and food safety while adding a productive use to previously unproductive land.

Organizations committed to urban agriculture will generally provide the technical support for new gardens including education, training, and construction oversight, as well as materials and knowledge for sustainability and programming to ensure every aspect of the garden is thriving. This may include food preservation, canning, cooking classes, seed harvesting, and markets. Often, these types of organizations are responding to a community need and filling an identified gap, but they do not generally take on land ownership responsibilities and rely heavily on resident garden groups for long-term stewardship.

## **STORMWATER MANAGEMENT**

Managing the quantity and quality of stormwater is a critical need in many communities with aging infrastructure, particularly in a time where wet weather events are increasing in frequency and severity due to climate change. Stormwater management includes both technical and institutional aspects. While the primary goal is to reduce the impact of flooding and provide time for an overburdened system to catch up to the demand of rainfall events, there are additional benefits gained through the use of green infrastructure, promoting productive landscapes that are functional while improving community aesthetics.



Interventions for the purpose of stormwater management on vacant land can either be the primary function of the site or can happen below the surface without calling attention to the underlying infrastructure. Often these installations require ongoing and specialized care. For this reason, they are best done in partnership with municipalities or a community group with the skills and resources to maintain them.

## **EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING**

Many community organizations exist to provide opportunities for learning, experience, networking, and more. Guided by their individual missions, their common goal is to meaningfully engage with residents in an ongoing way. Through methods as varied as community gardening projects, environmental education, and food insecurity symposiums, these organizations provide programming that is responsive to resident needs and interconnected with regional aspirations for vacant land stewardship and renewal. Though there may be limitations to each organization’s capacity to own or steward land, they may assist in activating space to help keep investments relevant, which is critical to their sustainability.

## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

TCLB will collaborate with community leaders and organizational partners to identify workforce development and training opportunities that empower community residents and others to maintain abandoned and vacant land, receive compensation for their work, and play a significant role in the revitalization that unfolds in their neighborhoods. From youth programs to reentry programs and resident employment, workforce development ensures sustained resident involvement in vacant land transformation, amplifying the impact of each project throughout communities.

To begin the process of identifying partners and developing strategies to integrate workforce development into TCLB's vacant land program, TCLB met with a local nonprofit organization called [Landforce](#) in 2020. To offer crews for environmental stewardship projects, Landforce "recruits, trains, educates, employs and supports adults who have faced structural barriers to stable, family sustaining employment based upon race or personal histories."<sup>44</sup> This is one example of the type of program TCLB seeks to support and partner with to leverage vacant land projects as opportunities to promote equity and personal empowerment in its target communities.

### YOUTH

Programs that focus on youth development can incorporate a vacant land maintenance component to help teach practical skills while fostering an appreciation for community, environment, habitat, food systems, and more. Through hands-on experience and participation in greening and reclamation activities, youth are granted experience in and exposure to professions such as horticulture, greenhouse operations, landscape maintenance, carpentry, masonry, or toll maintenance, alongside other resources that support their positive development and engagement with the community.



### REENTRY PROGRAMS

Reentry programs help returning citizens successfully "reenter" society following their incarceration, thereby reducing recidivism, improving public safety, and empowering motivated individuals to compete for jobs, attain stable housing, support their families, and contribute to the communities they are joining or re-joining.

As with all workforce programs, participants gain hands-on experience - in this case with a focus on land management and environmental processes. As residents return to their community in a productive way, they strengthen their roles as citizens and become connected to local efforts that anchor them in the community. Additionally, unlike youth programs, there are likely fewer restrictions on the type of work that can be completed due to age and experience as it relates to liability and risk.

Workforce programs are often subsidized by other funding due to the dual purpose and outcomes of the effort. This may help achieve economies of scale for regular, ongoing activities.

## RESIDENT EMPLOYMENT & PARTICIPATION

Given that vacant land repurposing projects most directly impact residents of the communities where they occur, workforce development opportunities should equally extend to local residents. In addition to encouraging employment and training in a variety of professions, workforce development programs may also incorporate personal development classes related to project management, budgeting, health education, and more. Bolstering resident involvement in vacant land projects also ensures community-wide endorsement and investment in activities that are enlivening and redefining each neighborhood.

### **Private (developers, businesses)**

In communities where the market is stable and the population is growing, there is an opportunity to look at larger scale projects on vacant land. This may lead to more brick and mortar development under the right site constraints and requires higher levels of commitment and investments from private sources. With future repurposing or development in mind, another important function of TCLB is to responsibly hold and maintain land for temporary use until market conditions change to enable this development when it best suits community and resident needs. Keeping vacant lots well-maintained, viable, and easily accessible for future use ensures that when a committed owner or developer is located, the highest and best use of the property can be realized without any unnecessary constraints, legal barriers, or physical property issues preventing development.

## Part 5: Participation

*When, why, and how should residents be engaged?*

### When

TCLB recognizes that resident participation is critical to the success of a vacant land program. Meaningful dialogue will be initiated early in the planning process to ensure project alignment with resident needs, providing transparency and access among all community stakeholders. During this stage, TCLB remains open and communicative about any process limitations, soliciting help from the community and its residents to address challenges. TCLB will work to structure vacant land meetings and engagements around existing community events to ensure that residents and community stakeholders can conveniently and readily participate. Additionally, TCLB will collaborate with partners and other community groups to fold related topics into engagement activities, leveraging these opportunities to support public health and other local goals.



In its ongoing work, TCLB will undertake multiple outreach strategies and provide a variety of activities for a diverse audience, prioritizing equity and access. For example, some communities may still rely on a print publication for announcements, while others may be more digitally focused. To guarantee community awareness of any repurposing projects, TCLB will thoughtfully consider how people receive their information and remain consistent in reaching as many residents as possible. Similarly, showing consideration regarding the timing of public meetings and events will allow for participation from those who may not work during typical business hours.

Finally, it is important to remember that engagement is an ongoing process. Those who have been engaged early on to share ideas should be updated regarding the progress of any vacant land initiative and then invited to become more hands-on participants as the project moves forward. After all major milestones, TCLB will acknowledge and thank all those who have participated, inform residents of what happens next, and celebrate wins along the way. Additionally, residents will be informed of what happens next, celebrating wins along the way to show appreciation for their contributions and to demonstrate the value of that commitment and volunteerism.

### Why

TCLB's ongoing work in the region will focus on advancing initiatives that clearly benefit the community where a project is taking place. Additionally, community and resident endorsement creates a shared sense of ownership and responsibility for the planning and success of vacant land projects. With projects that require an ongoing commitment to maintenance and/or volunteers, authentic community support is critical. Given the historical disenfranchisement of some residents, particularly people of color, from participating in land use discussions and developments, TCLB remains committed to ensuring that all voices in each member community are granted fair access to contribute to the conversation and planning process.

TCLB will invite community members to provide insights regarding the community's history and current landscape, which informs project choices. This dialogue is an invaluable part of the process. It brings together a diverse group of residents and community stakeholders who, through practical discussion of a project in their neighborhood, are motivated to continue interacting and engaging, strengthening community cohesion and support in the process.

Local planning efforts at the neighborhood scale help to identify and prioritize project sites. Not only may potential conflicts over the use of vacant lots be prevented or resolved, but community members may take a vested interest in the well-being of these sites and commit to long-term stewardship. Community stakeholders frequently have a strong understanding of vacant lots in their neighborhoods and may proactively identify sites for potential projects. Another benefit of cultivating strong participation is that it ensures project sustainability. When more people are aware of, involved in, and excited by the changes in their community, they are more likely to remain involved and offer help as needed.

In addition to directly engaging impacted community members, TCLB has consulted existing neighborhood and comprehensive plans to gain a better understanding of community needs and priorities. In November 2020, TCLB worked with CORO Pittsburgh Fellow Talor Crawford to undergo a thorough review of neighborhood comprehensive plans and identify local priorities that intersect with vacant land reclamation. A chart listing those priorities is provided below:

### Review of Municipal Comprehensive Plans

	Stormwater Management	Affordable Housing	Parks and Open Space	Air Pollution Mitigation	Community Gardens	Art and Murals	Biking and Hiking Trails
Edgewood, Rankin, and Swissvale	✓	✓	✓				
Duquesne and McKeesport	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Etna, Milvale, and Sharpsburg	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Forest Hills	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Churchill, Monroeville, and Wilkins	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Clairton	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Braddock, East Pittsburgh, and North Braddock	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

### How We Might Engage People

**Some ideas to engage residents may include:**

- Door-to-door outreach to residences adjacent to a potential project site
- Attending scheduled community events to stay informed
- Plan a community activity to solicit input and provide updates
- Distribute information to share with the community in a way that makes sense for the local context (newspaper, newsletter, email lists, notice boards, etc.)
- Hosting community volunteer events for build days
- Celebrate the hard work and outcomes on the project by hosting a ribbon cutting event
- Develop ongoing programming to keep the community engaged (work days, harvest events, celebrations, etc.)
- Engaging established community groups to play an active role in designing both community engagement activities and the vacant land projects themselves

## Part 6: Preservation

### *How do we sustain/transition?*

While there are many creative programs and concepts for repurposing vacant lots under various conditions, some programs fail to survive beyond more than one or two seasons of operations. In most cases, this is due to a lack of long-term planning beyond the initial investment. Since its inception, TCLB has worked to develop the resources, capacity, and partnerships necessary to sustain programs beyond initial implementation. Acting as a facilitator, TCLB operates as a committed partner to the communities it serves, embarking on each new vacant land project with a focus on fiscal, programmatic, and logistical sustainability.



To be truly sustainable, a new vacant land program should maintain its operations, services, and benefits over a projected lifetime. New programs should be able to weather changing economic contexts and continue to provide benefits to users beyond initial phases of support. Sustainable projects include the following features:

- **Program Sustainability:** ability to foster partner and stakeholder relationships that ensure community-wide investment and participation in the program over time.
- **Financial Sustainability:** ability to ensure steady flow of funding through diverse revenue streams to maintain and continue its work.
- **Sustained Capacity:** ability to ensure proper working systems in the managing organization that was developed as part of the project.

TCLB evaluates potential projects to determine the likelihood of sustainability, including the degree to which the above features are achievable. With its community partners, TCLB works to ensure that, beyond initial funding, credible plans of support are in place to continue projects over their intended lifespan.

Sustainability is more than finding funding to continue with services developed through grants; it also requires that charitable funds will be put to good use, have long-term impact, and continue to provide benefits to the target community even after the life of the grant has ended. In reality, a combination of strategies maintains the elements of programs necessary for positive outcomes. TCLB discerningly participates in projects and programs that promise to provide benefits to its member communities over long periods of time.

### Program Sustainability

#### **FOSTER PARTNER AND STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS**

TCLB facilitates and sustains vacant land projects by working in close partnership with a variety of community organizations. Strong partnerships synthesize diverse strengths, skills, and experiences to better serve communities and sustain projects. Additionally, partnership increases the number of eyes on a project or program, increasing the chances of early awareness of changes and challenges, and channeling more resources and experiences to help maintain, troubleshoot, and advance ideas. There should be no duplication of services but a variety of available and accessible activities which can benefit many. In this way, more people are engaged, organizations learn from each other, and the community becomes the winner.

## Financial Sustainability

### DIVERSIFYING FUNDING SOURCES

Financial sustainability is an essential goal for most organizations and community projects. It allows them to become stable long enough to accomplish their work. To ensure long-term financial solvency, TCLB uses a sustainable funding model with revenue from a variety of sources, including:

- Annual member dues (calculated at 5% of the delinquent real estate taxes collected in the previous year in each community — principal only)
- 50% tax recapture for the first five years after TCLB sells a property
- Property sales
- Foundation and government grants
- In-kind support from partner organizations

This model enables TCLB to help cover the costs of property acquisition, maintenance, and the legal process of clearing title. However, when it comes to vacant land, these costs are often much higher than the land's market value in communities with weak or middle real estate markets. In order to address vacant land at the scale needed to stabilize neighborhoods, additional funding beyond TCLB's current model is required.

## Sustained Capacity

### CONTINUED STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Capacity building in an organization can lead to project sustainability. A well-trained and highly skilled staff as well as effective leadership are valuable assets in developing and managing programs that meet community needs. Trained staff are also better prepared, more confident, and more effective in implementing and sustaining projects and relationships. The TCLB team will regularly update the broader network with their approach and engage with other organizations regarding lessons they have learned in their own attempts to manage vacant land.

### TRANSFER FOR PERMANENT PRESERVATION

Groups that may take on the investment of vacant lot projects are not always intended to be the permanent owners of the project. In this case, there may be an opportunity to transfer the project to a land trust that will hold the project in perpetuity and has additional resources to assist in long-term preservation.

### TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND BEST PRACTICES

TCLB is continuing its collaboration and technical assistance contract with the Center for Community Progress (CCP), a national leader in land banking and property recycling. As part of this technical assistance, CCP will help TCLB to identify land banks and other community groups across the nation working on vacant land reclamation, so that TCLB's regional model is rooted in the successful work and best practices of similar organizations. By identifying best practices that are transferable and, in some cases, replicable within TCLB's current footprint, this partnership ensures that advances in vacant land transformation will be made using proven, tested strategies.



## Part 7: Policy

After answering the questions necessary to plan for TCLB's role in a vacant land repurposing project, there are two main sets of policy considerations that need to be addressed: organizational and governmental.

### Organizational (TCLB) Policy

TCLB's own organizational policies have been drafted and adopted to reflect its chosen roles at the time of its launch. As TCLB builds out a broader strategy to address vacant land, codifying the standards that TCLB will use in its decision-making process will help ensure program consistency and transparency when working with partners and community residents. At minimum, the details of any program will be reflected in programmatic descriptions, forms, and templates. Many land banks recognize the need for detailed foundational policies while also allowing for adaptability to ensure processes and programmatic policies are context-specific.<sup>45</sup>

### Policy Considerations

#### Some questions to ask as a focused vacant land strategy emerges may include:

- How will municipal and community priorities weigh against those of TCLB?
- What other issue overlays may impact this process? Equity, financing, timing?
- Will strategies evolve as progress is made?
- Are all programs offered by TCLB equal, or is there a hierarchy of preferred approaches such as disposition vs activation and what factors determine that?
- How often are these policies revisited?

### Governmental Policy

Any participating local government's legislative and administrative policies must be reviewed in order to find the best program fit for each community. At the local level, identifying allowable uses under current zoning codes is also necessary for determining which types of projects can be done.

State policies also impact TCLB's ability to acquire properties and clear titles. For example, a legal opinion on inheritance tax collection issued by the PA Department of Revenue in 2018 led title insurance companies to increase restrictions around issuing policies for properties bought at Sheriff Sale. As a result of this, TCLB now must complete an extra legal step, called Quiet Title Action, to ensure that every property can be sold with insurable title. Title insurance is critical because it protects TCLB's property buyers from unforeseen liabilities that may have been missed



in the legal process, which otherwise could lead to foreclosure or continue the cycle of abandonment down the road. However, if those land banks were exempt from liability for unpaid liens such as inheritance tax, clear title could be provided without going through Quiet Title Action. This would shorten the overall process from acquisition to private sale by about one year and reduce the legal, holding, and maintenance costs for the land bank by at least one third.

In addition to policies involving insurable title, the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania manages a Blight Policy Task Force that advocates for a legislative agenda that supports not only land banks but also any other entity seeking to mitigate blight.<sup>46</sup> In 2020, bills supported by the Housing Alliance included:

- **SB439** — a bill to remove the 10 year sunset from Act 152, which enables counties to create a demolition fund using a \$15 Recorder of Deeds fee.<sup>47</sup> Allegheny County passed an ordinance enabled by Act 152 in 2020, which is estimated to provide \$2-3 million annually to fund demolitions.<sup>48</sup> As a result of increased demolition activity, more blighted vacant lots are likely to be left behind, further emphasizing the need for more interventions to stabilize these parcels.
- **HB610 (formerly HB1737)** — a bill to classify land banks as Economic Development Agencies, which would give land banks the same legal protections as redevelopment authorities when working with brownfields.<sup>49</sup> At the end of the 2020 legislative session, this bill was combined with unrelated COVID-19 provisions and ultimately vetoed by the Governor. The bill was reintroduced in its original form as HB610 by Rep. Austin Davis in 2021.
- **SB 810** — a bill that would amend the Municipal Claims Tax Lien Law to reduce the time and steps necessary in the Sheriff Sale process and which may make it easier for land banks to achieve insurable title in the long run.

At the federal level, land banking and blight remediation are receiving increased attention in light of expected increases in foreclosures and abandonment due to COVID-19. On June 4, 2020, U.S. Representatives Daniel Kildee and Drew Ferguson introduced the National Land Bank Network Act to provide \$7 million in new grant funding and support a land bank network that would share technical assistance, best practices, programming, and research.<sup>50</sup>

TCLB has developed important relationships with land bank practitioners across the state and nation. It has participated in the [Pennsylvania Land Bank Network](#) since its inception in 2020 and also the [National Land Bank Network](#), which is managed by the Center for Community Progress.

“The PA Land Bank Network is helping Pennsylvania land banks increase their knowledge, resources, and regulatory abilities to turn blighted properties into bright community spaces at greater scale. The PA Land Bank Network supports the existing land banks in the Commonwealth through peer learning, regular communications, sharing best practices, and addressing common challenges.”

— [Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania](#)

“The National Land Bank Network unites land bank leaders to share knowledge, network, and leverage their strengths to better inform policy change, strengthen land banking as a tool, and build a national community of practice. Since 2010, land banking has served as a core focus area for Community Progress who has published industry-leading publications including *The Empty House Next Door: Understanding and Reducing Vacancy and Hypervacancy in the United States* by Alan Mallach and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and *Take it to the Bank: How Land Banks Are Strengthening America’s Neighborhoods*.”

— [Center for Community Progress](#)

# Conclusion

TCLB has identified vacant land as a priority within its growing portfolio and developed a plan to address it by establishing sustainable practices centered on partnerships with local municipalities and service organizations. While more work is needed to determine next steps for specific projects, this report provides a strong framework for addressing vacant land at scale, explores local data to illustrate the extent of available land, and draws upon other experts and partners to expand the scope of possibilities for repurposing this land to support community goals.

TCLB is a new and highly adaptive tool our region can use to transcend “one off” land transformation efforts, instead favoring a comprehensive regional strategy that honors resident needs, aligns with community aspirations, and recovers vacant land for resident and community use. As outlined in this report’s [Foreword](#), vacant land repurposing yields powerful benefits of improved physical health, mental health, and fiscal sustainability while reducing crime, gun violence, and the prevalence of environmental toxins. Of equal importance, TCLB’s strategy for vacant land transformation brings populations that have been historically disenfranchised directly into the planning process, encouraging community-based dialogue and participation.

To bring this strategy to fruition on a regional level, robust funding and support from partner organizations is imperative. Partnerships offer invaluable technical assistance, leverage local expertise and resources, and create a cohesive network of organizations committed to advancing a regional vacant land strategy. Financial support is necessary to make vital vacant land transformations achievable and sustainable, and it will help further a commitment to the wellbeing of all of our region’s communities and residents. TCLB is eager to serve as the conductor of this comprehensive strategy, to work with a committed network of regional partners to address inequity, enliven communities, and transform an apparent burden into an opportunity for regional renewal. Together, we can transform neglected parcels into powerful sources of wealth, health, and shared prosperity, returning these new assets back to their communities.

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<sup>28</sup> Results from a national survey completed by the University of Michigan Department of Public Health in 2018-2019 in partnership with the Center for Community Progress, full findings have not yet been published.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Every group should have a guiding set of principles to inform strategic decisions when faced with choices

<sup>32</sup> Bare patches in existing groundcover can hint at soil deficiencies

<sup>33</sup> <https://tools.wprdc.org/greenprint/>

<sup>34</sup> An equitable owner is a person who is not the owner of record but who can demonstrate an ownership interest in the property as provided by law. An equitable owner includes, but is not limited to, a person who has inherited an interest in the property. [TCLB General Eligibility Criteria](#) applies to the Side Lot Development Program.

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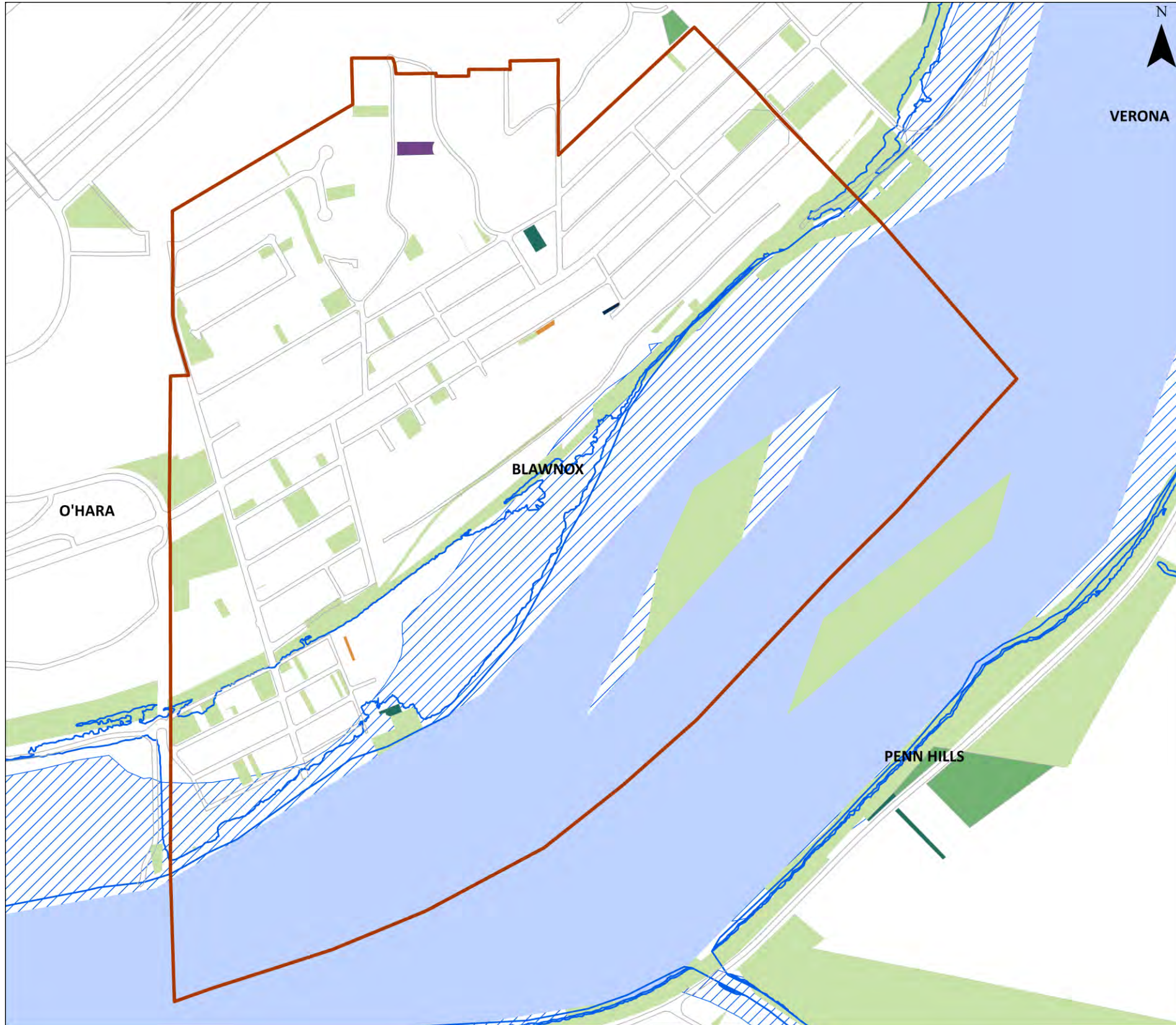


# Appendices

# Appendix A

Total Allegheny County Parcels	582,387
Owner Occupied Parcels (property add = mailing add, no NULL)	338,963
Owner Occupied + Tax Current Parcels	325,018
Vacant Land (\$0 Bldg Value)	95,330
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land (Tax Delinquent $\geq$ 2 years, last year delinquent listed as 2019)	22,843
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land $\leq$ 0.25 Acre	18,579
Potential Sideyards	5,551
Priority Outreach for Potential Sideyards (Owner Occupant, Tax Current, Shares property line with Potential Sideyards)	7,143
Potential Demolitions (Tax Delinquent/Poor Quality)	3,552

# Blawnox



- TCLB Footprint
- Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
- Potential Side Yard
- Potential Demolitions
- Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
- Floodplains
- FEMA Flood Hazard Line
- Rivers

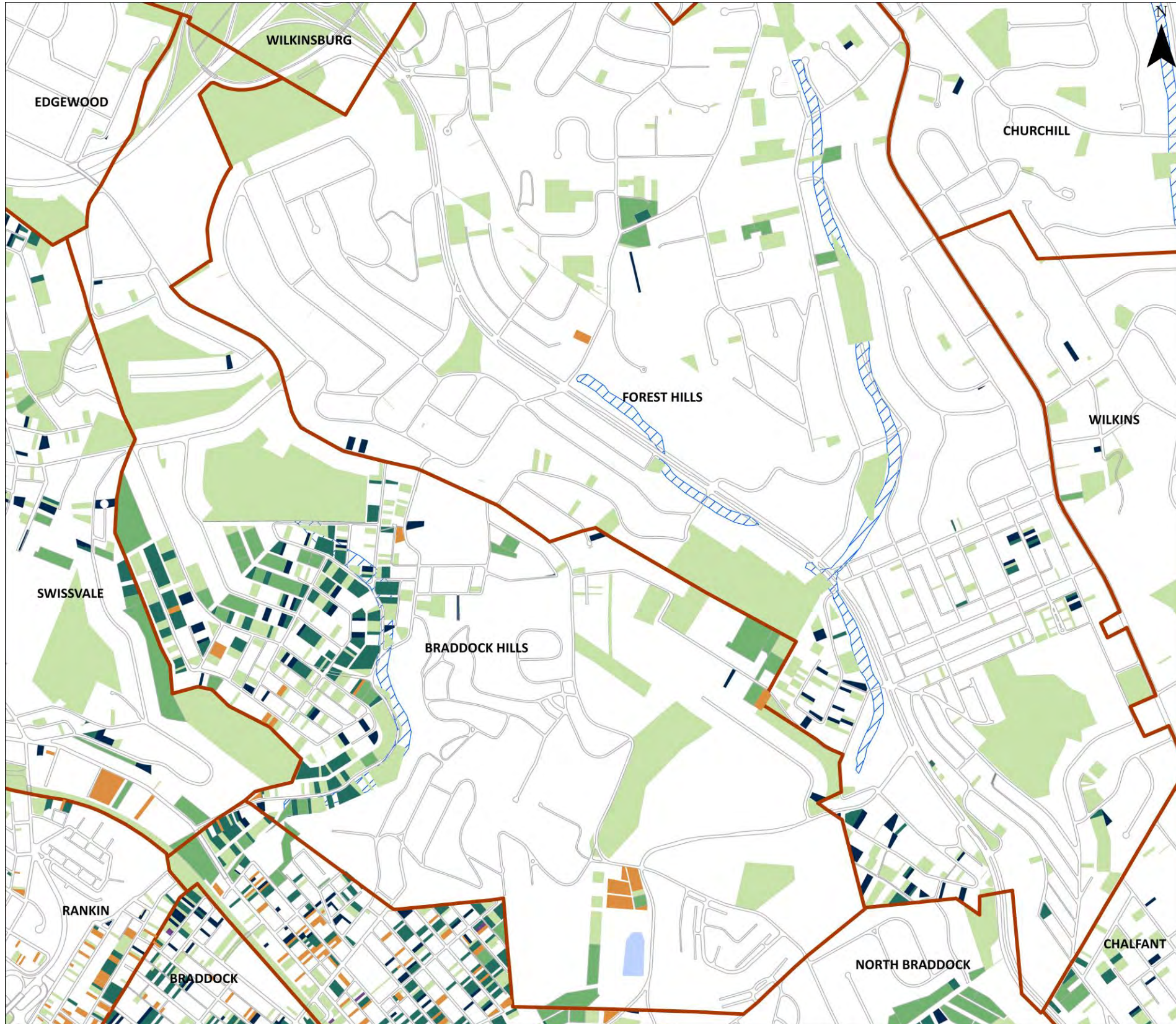
Category	Blawnox - 806	
All Parcels	729	100%
Structures	669	92%
Vacant Land	60	8%
RAAC Owned	1	
Vacant Land	60	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	4	7%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	4	7%
Potential Sideyard	1	2%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	2	3%
Structures	669	
Potential Demos	2	0%

Maps created by EKS Solutions, LLC, August 2020 and TCLB, September 2021.  
 Data Sources: Allegheny County Real Estate 2019, FEMA 2019, Reference layers from PASDA and Allegheny County GIS via the WPRDC, all downloaded in 2020.

Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.













# Braddock Hills



Category	Braddock Hills - 872	
All Parcels	1192	100%
Structures	792	66%
Vacant Land	400	34%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	400	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	205	51%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	177	44%
Potential Sideyard	37	9%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	27	7%
Structures	792	
Potential Demos	11	1%

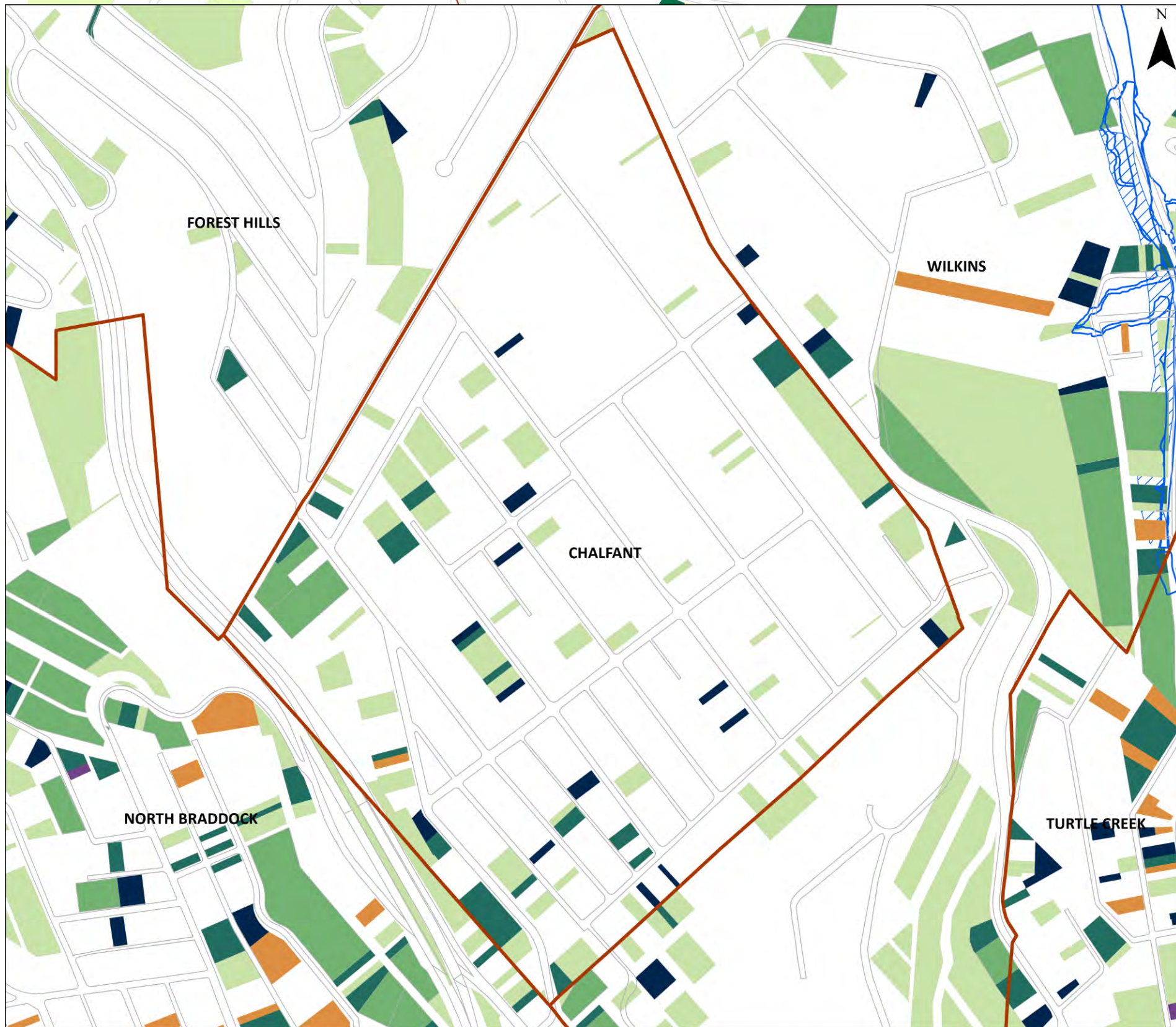
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 Data Sources: Allegheny County Real Estate 2019, FEMA 2019, Reference layers from PASDA and Allegheny County GIS via the WPRDC, all downloaded in 2020.

Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.

-  TCLB Footprint
-  Vacant Land
-  Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
-  Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
-  Potential Side Yard
-  Potential Demolitions
-  Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
-  FEMA Flood Hazard Line
-  Floodplains
-  Rivers



# Chalfant



Category	Chalfant - 814	
All Parcels	530	100%
Structures	425	80%
Vacant Land	105	20%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	105	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	43	41%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	41	39%
Potential Sideyard	15	14%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	0	0%
Structures	425	
Potential Demos	1	0%

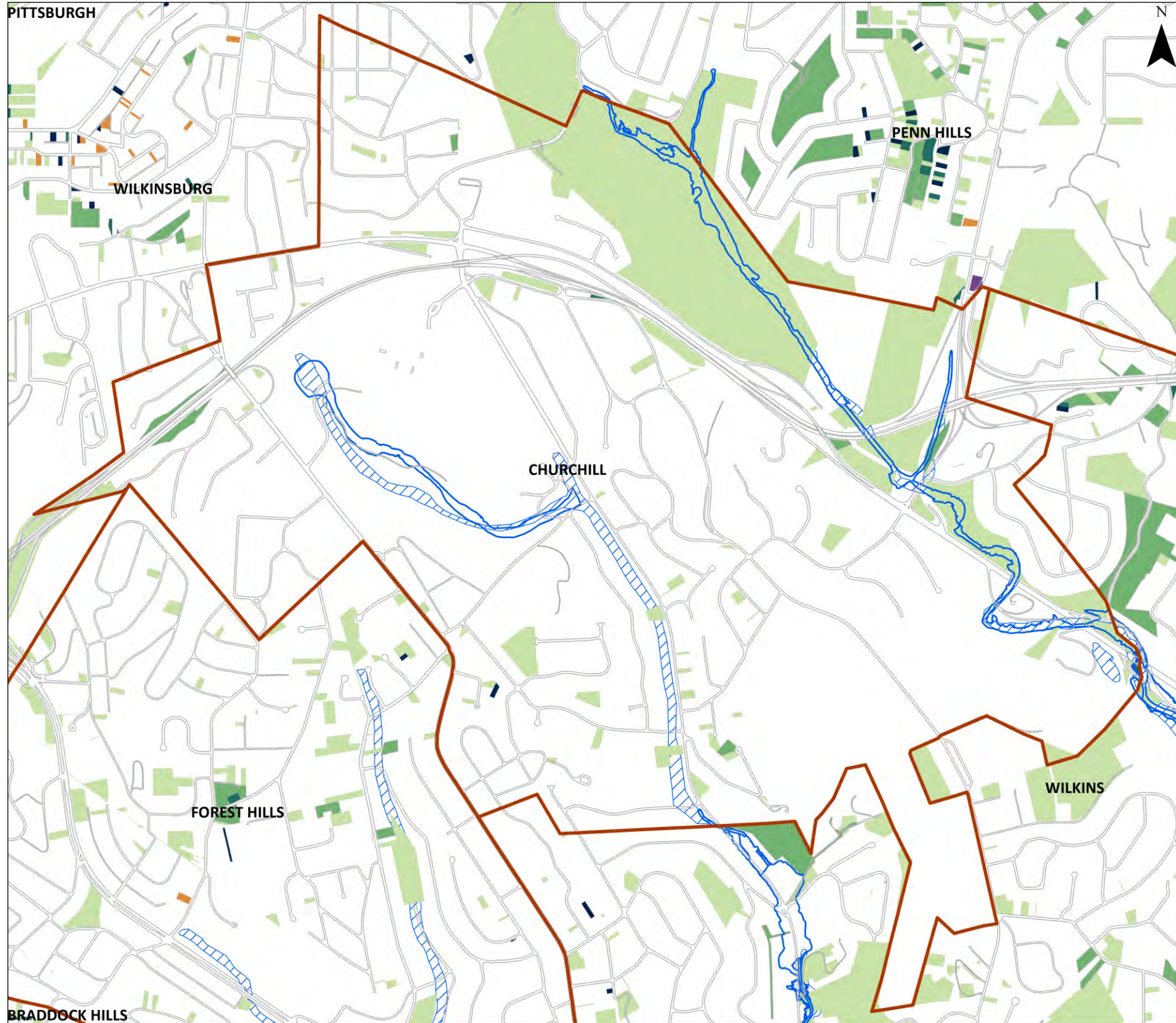
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Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.

- TCLB Footprint
- Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
- Potential Side Yard
- Potential Demolitions
- Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
- Floodplains
- FEMA Flood Hazard Line
- Rivers



# Churchill



Category	Churchill - 816	
All Parcels	1773	100%
Structures	1685	95%
Vacant Land	88	5%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	88	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	9	10%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	4	5%
Potential Sideyard	2	2%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	1	1%
Structures	1685	
Potential Demos	0	0%

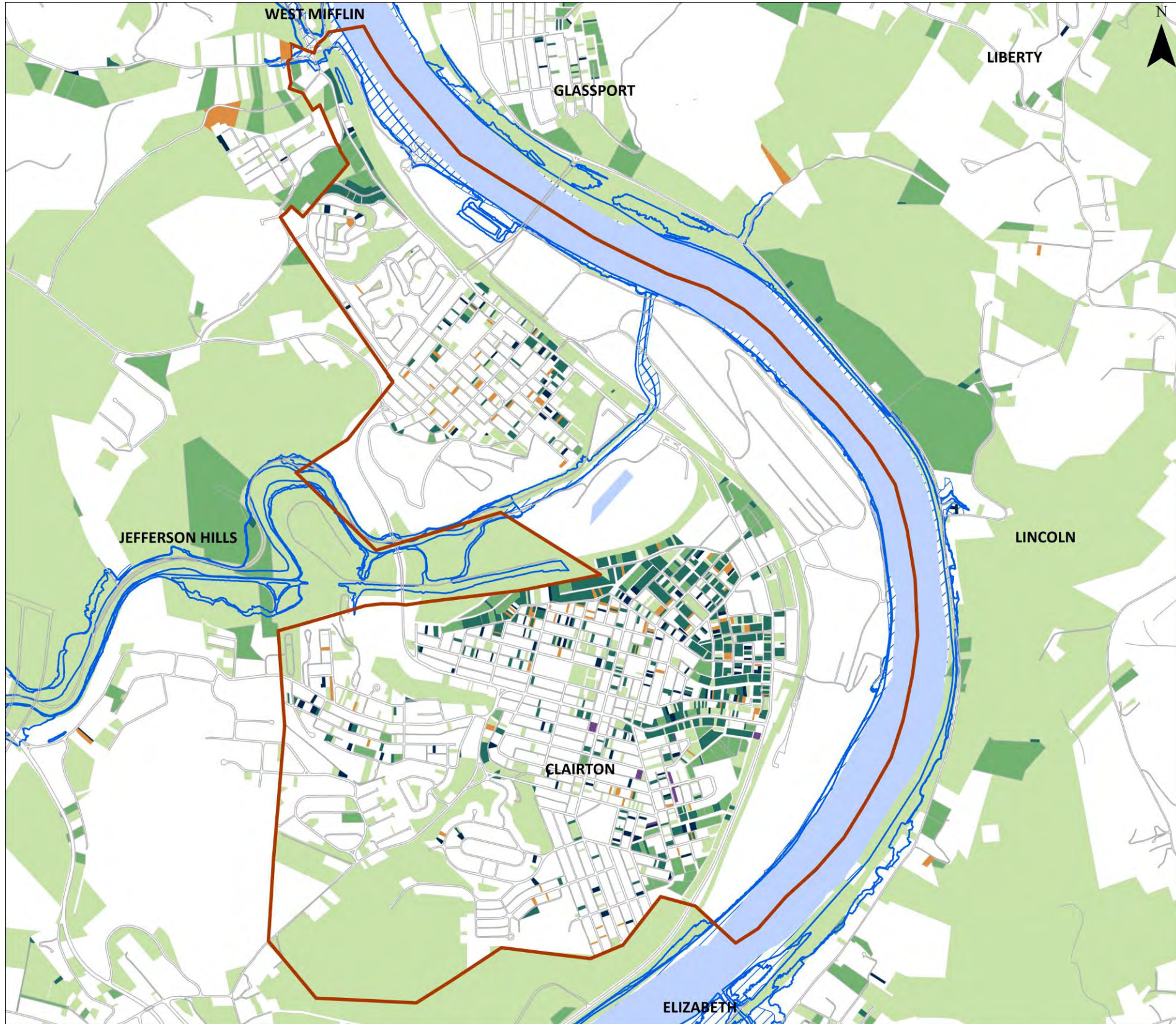
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 Data Sources: Allegheny County Real Estate 2019, FEMA 2019, Reference layers from PASDA and Allegheny County GIS via the WPRDC, all downloaded in 2020.

Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.

- TCLB Footprint
- Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
- Potential Side Yard
- Potential Demolitions
- Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
- Floodplains
- FEMA Flood Hazard Line
- Rivers













# Clairton



Category	Clairton - 200	
All Parcels	5130	100%
Structures	3731	73%
Vacant Land	1399	27%
RAAC Owned	10	
Vacant Land	1399	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	877	63%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	811	58%
Potential Sideyard	123	9%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	0	0%
Structures	3731	
Potential Demos	96	3%

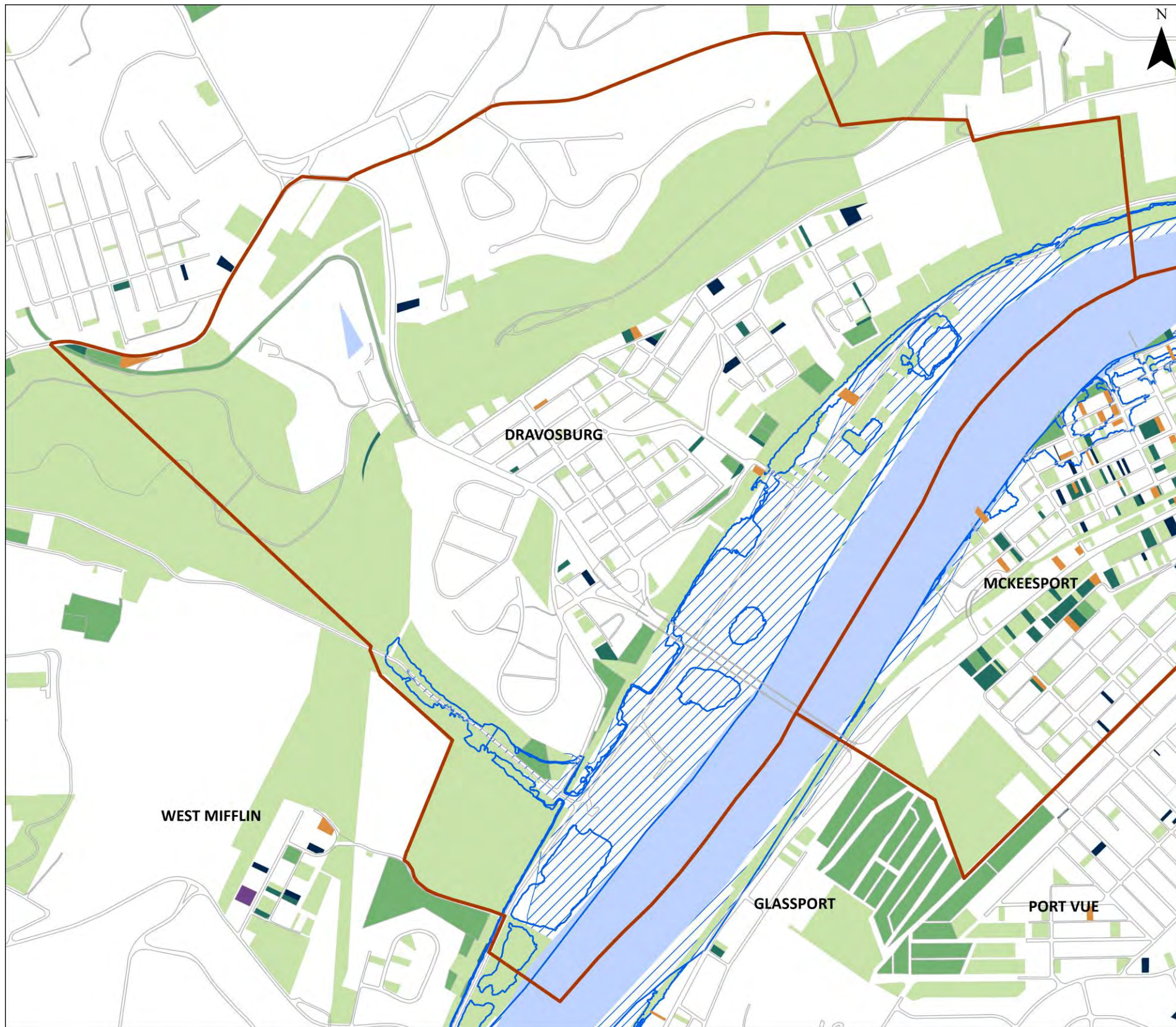
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 Data Sources: Allegheny County Real Estate 2019, FEMA 2019, Reference layers from PASDA and Allegheny County GIS via the WPRDC, all downloaded in 2020.











Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.

-  TCLB Footprint
-  Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
-  Potential Side Yard
-  Potential Demolitions
-  Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
-  Floodplains
-  FEMA Flood Hazard Line
-  Rivers



# Dravosburg



-  TCLB Footprint
-  Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
-  Potential Side Yard
-  Potential Demolitions
-  Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
-  Floodplains
-  FEMA Flood Hazard Line
-  Rivers

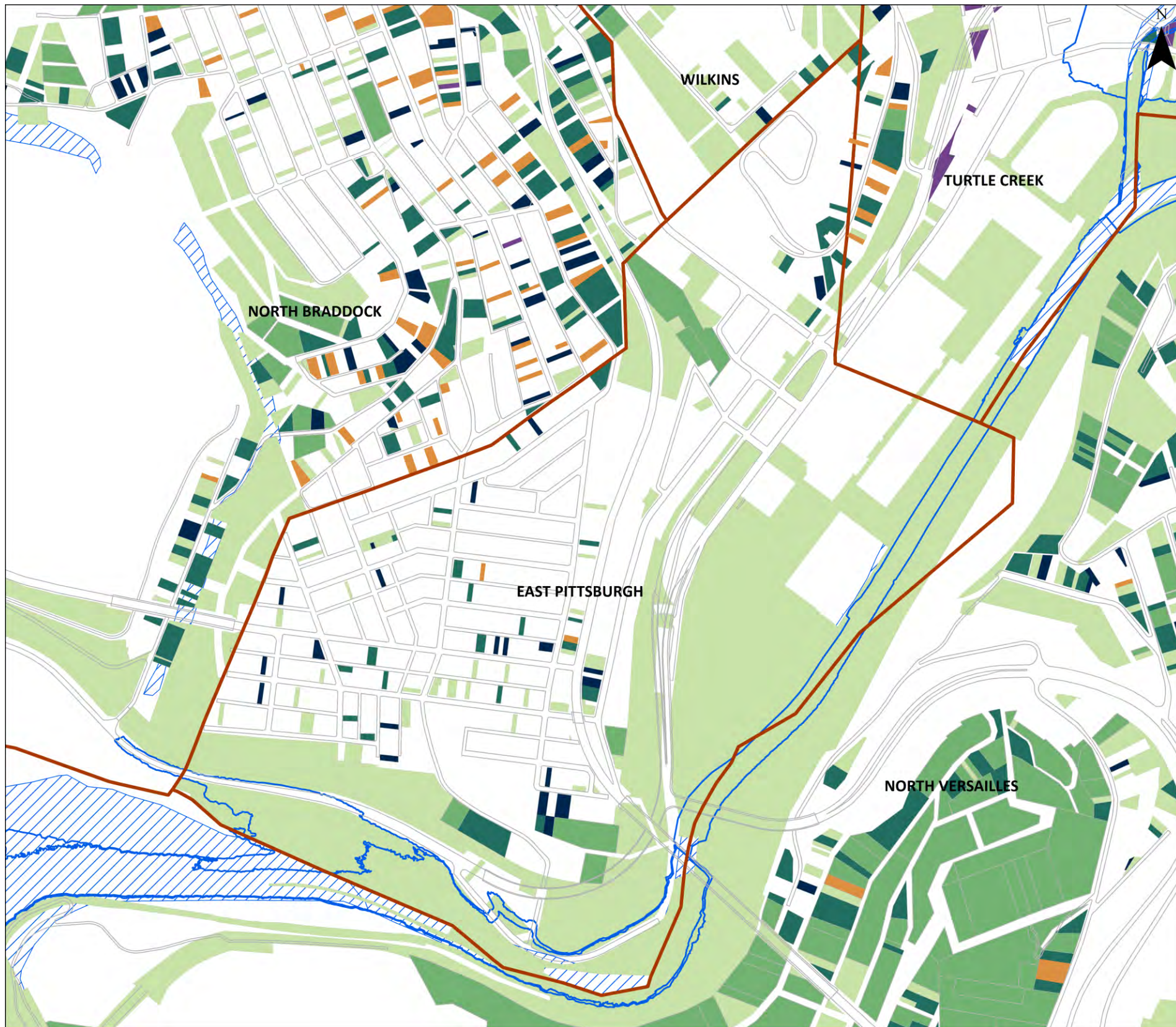
Category	Dravosburg - 820	
All Parcels	911	100%
Structures	731	80%
Vacant Land	180	20%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	180	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	40	22%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	29	16%
Potential Sideyard	9	5%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	1	1%
Structures	731	
Potential Demos	5	1%

Maps created by EKS Solutions, LLC, August 2020 and TCLB, September 2021.  
 Data Sources: Allegheny County Real Estate 2019, FEMA 2019, Reference layers from PASDA and Allegheny County GIS via the WPRDC, all downloaded in 2020.

Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.













# East Pittsburgh



Category	East Pittsburgh - 822	
All Parcels	876	100%
Structures	706	81%
Vacant Land	170	19%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	170	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	71	42%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	65	38%
Potential Sideyard	22	13%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	0	0%
Structures	706	
Potential Demos	3	0%

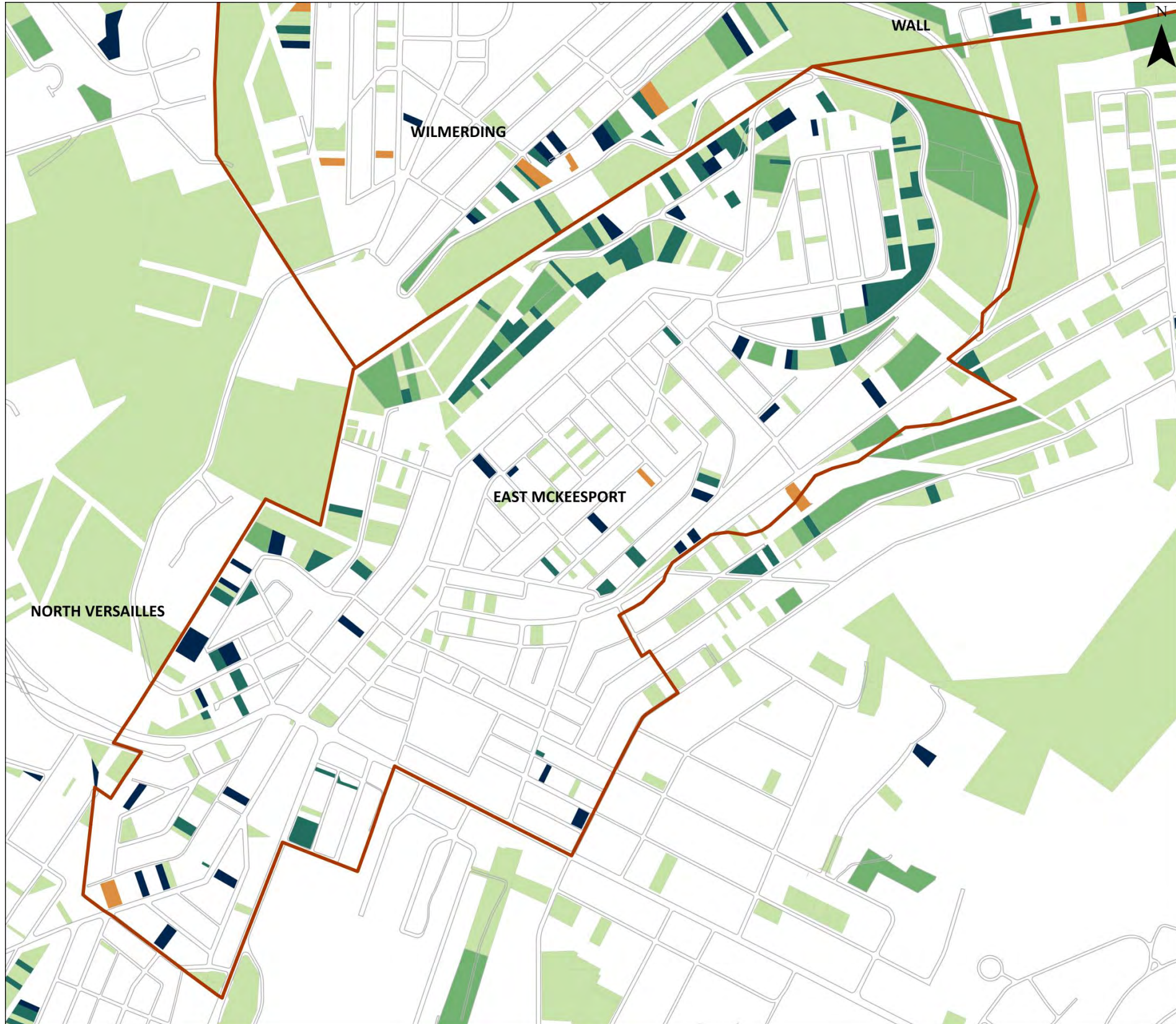
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Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.

-  TCLB Footprint
-  Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
-  Potential Side Yard
-  Potential Demolitions
-  Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
-  Floodplains
-  FEMA Flood Hazard Line
-  Rivers



# East McKeesport



Category	East McKeesport - 821	
All Parcels	1267	100%
Structures	975	77%
Vacant Land	292	23%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	292	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	161	55%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	142	49%
Potential Sideyard	35	12%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	0	0%
Structures	975	
Potential Demos	3	0%

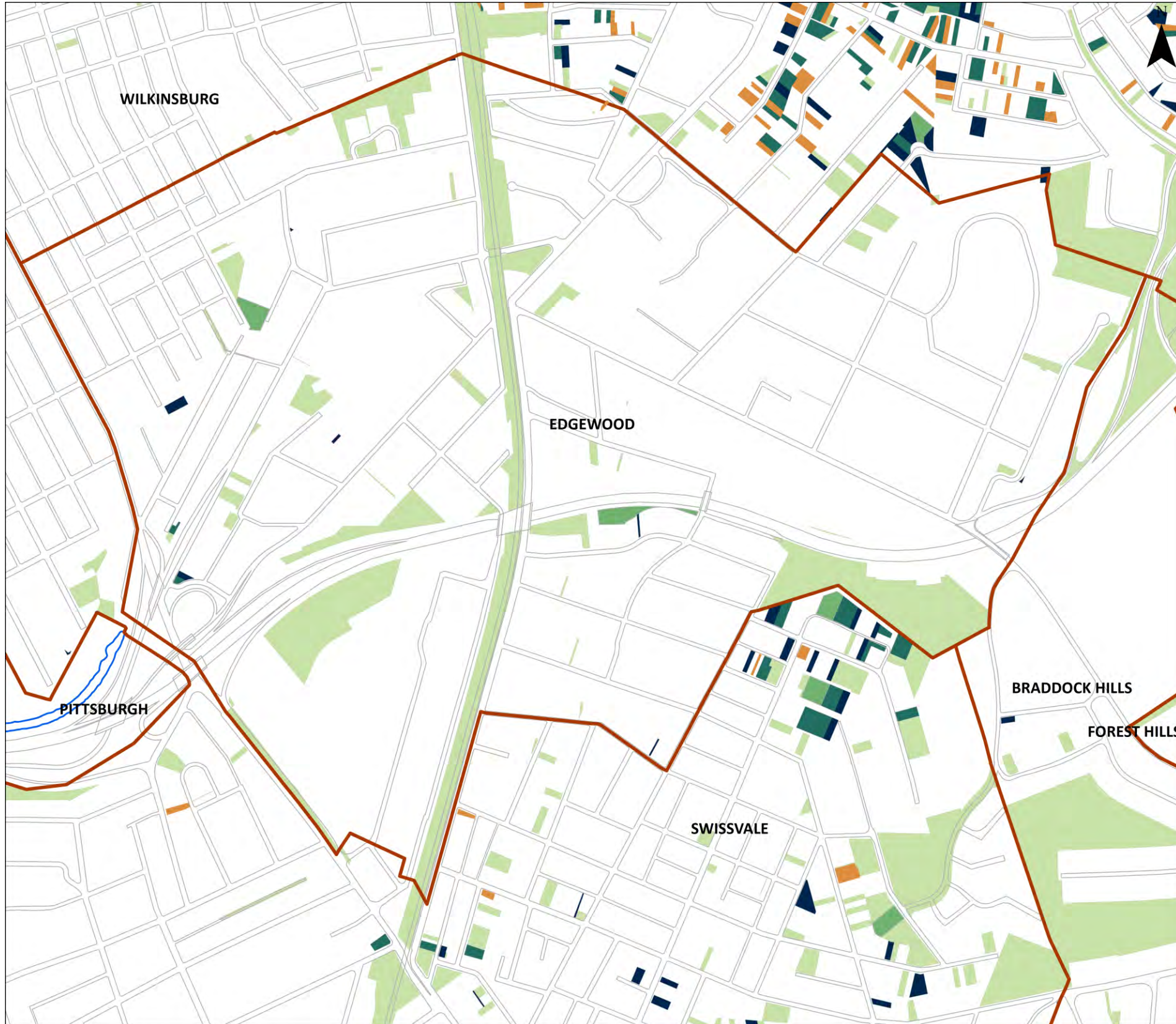
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Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.

- TCLB Footprint
- Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
- Potential Side Yard
- Potential Demolitions
- Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
- Floodplains
- FEMA Flood Hazard Line
- Rivers



# Edgewood



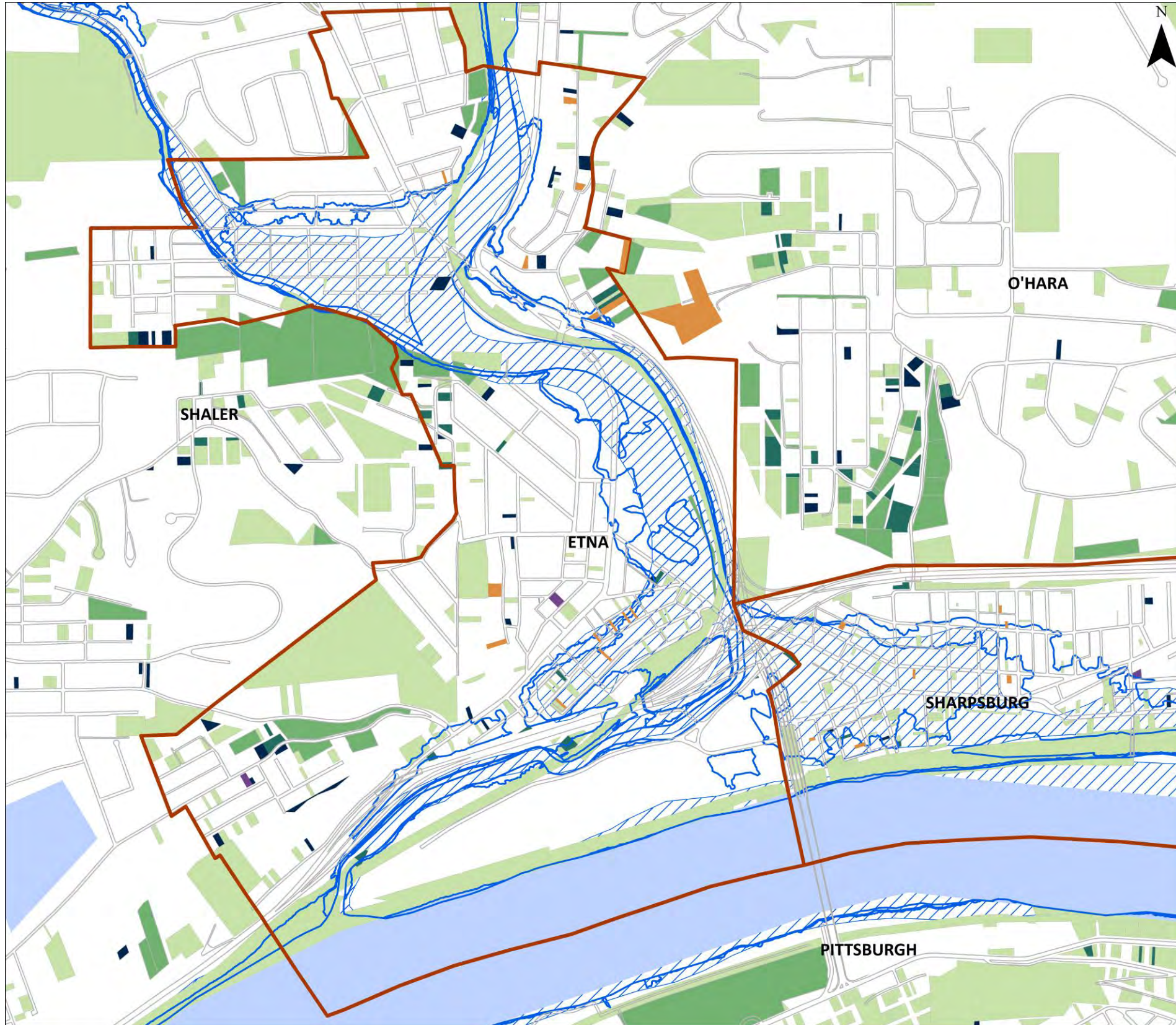
Category	Edgewood - 823	
All Parcels	1442	100%
Structures	1362	94%
Vacant Land	80	6%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	80	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	13	16%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	11	14%
Potential Sideyard	8	10%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	0	0%
Structures	1362	
Potential Demos	1	0%

Maps created by EKS Solutions, LLC, August 2020 and TCLB, September 2021.  
 Data Sources: Allegheny County Real Estate 2019, FEMA 2019, Reference layers from PASDA and Allegheny County GIS via the WPRDC, all downloaded in 2020.

Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.

- TCLB Footprint
- Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
- Potential Side Yard
- Potential Demolitions
- Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
- Floodplains
- FEMA Flood Hazard Line
- Rivers

# Etna



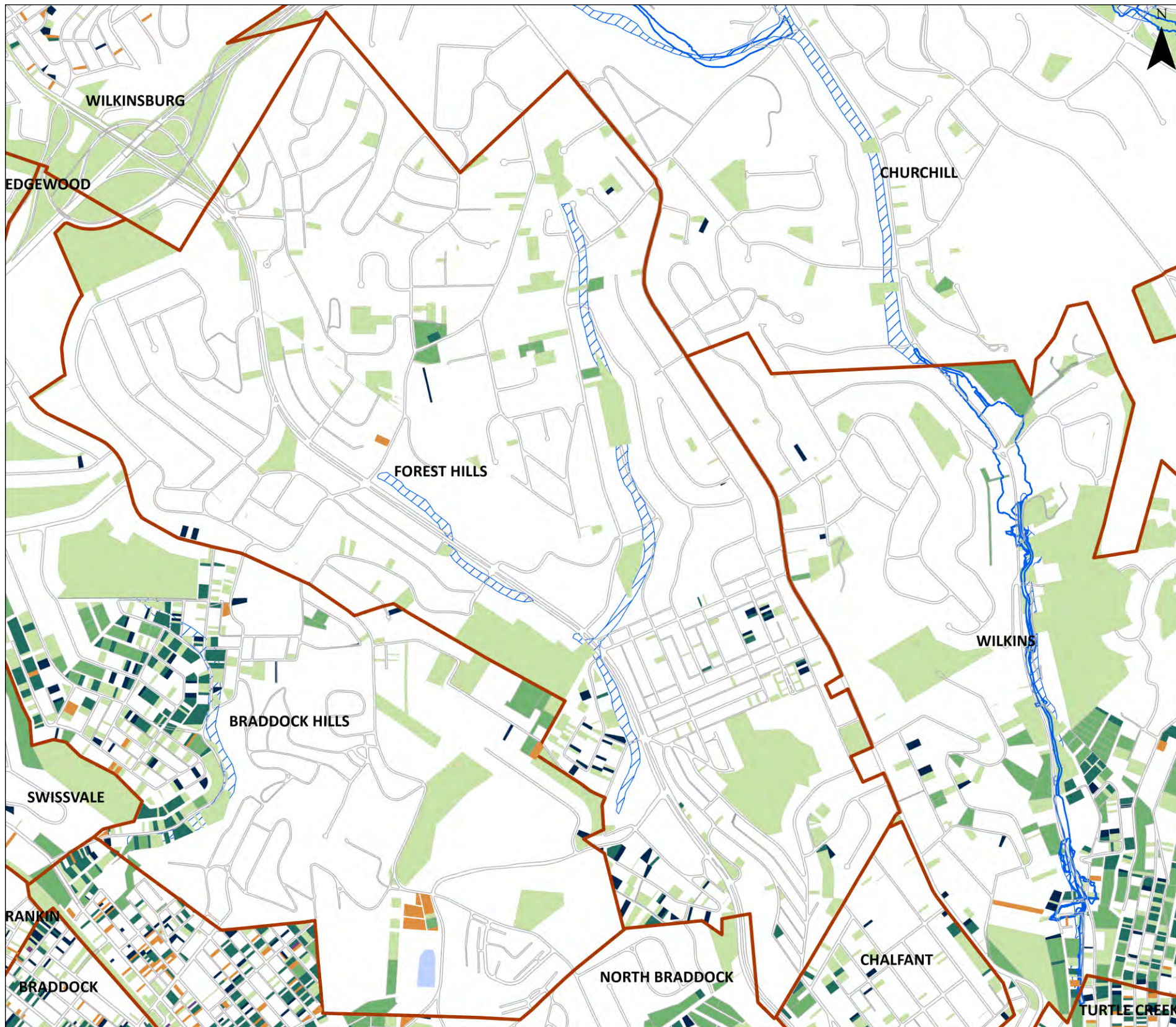
Category	Etna - 827	
All Parcels	1760	100%
Structures	1540	88%
Vacant Land	220	13%
RAAC Owned	3	
Vacant Land	220	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	72	33%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	56	25%
Potential Sideyard	29	13%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	14	6%
Structures	1540	
Potential Demos	17	1%

Maps created by EKS Solutions, LLC, August 2020 and TCLB, September 2021.  
 Data Sources: Allegheny County Real Estate 2019, FEMA 2019, Reference layers from PASDA and Allegheny County GIS via the WPRDC, all downloaded in 2020.

Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.

- TCLB Footprint
- Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
- Potential Side Yard
- Potential Demolitions
- Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
- Floodplains
- FEMA Flood Hazard Line
- Rivers

# Forest Hills



Category	Forest Hills - 828	
All Parcels	3378	100%
Structures	3083	91%
Vacant Land	295	9%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	295	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	66	22%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	60	20%
Potential Sideyard	40	14%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	0	0%
Structures	3083	
Potential Demos	1	0%

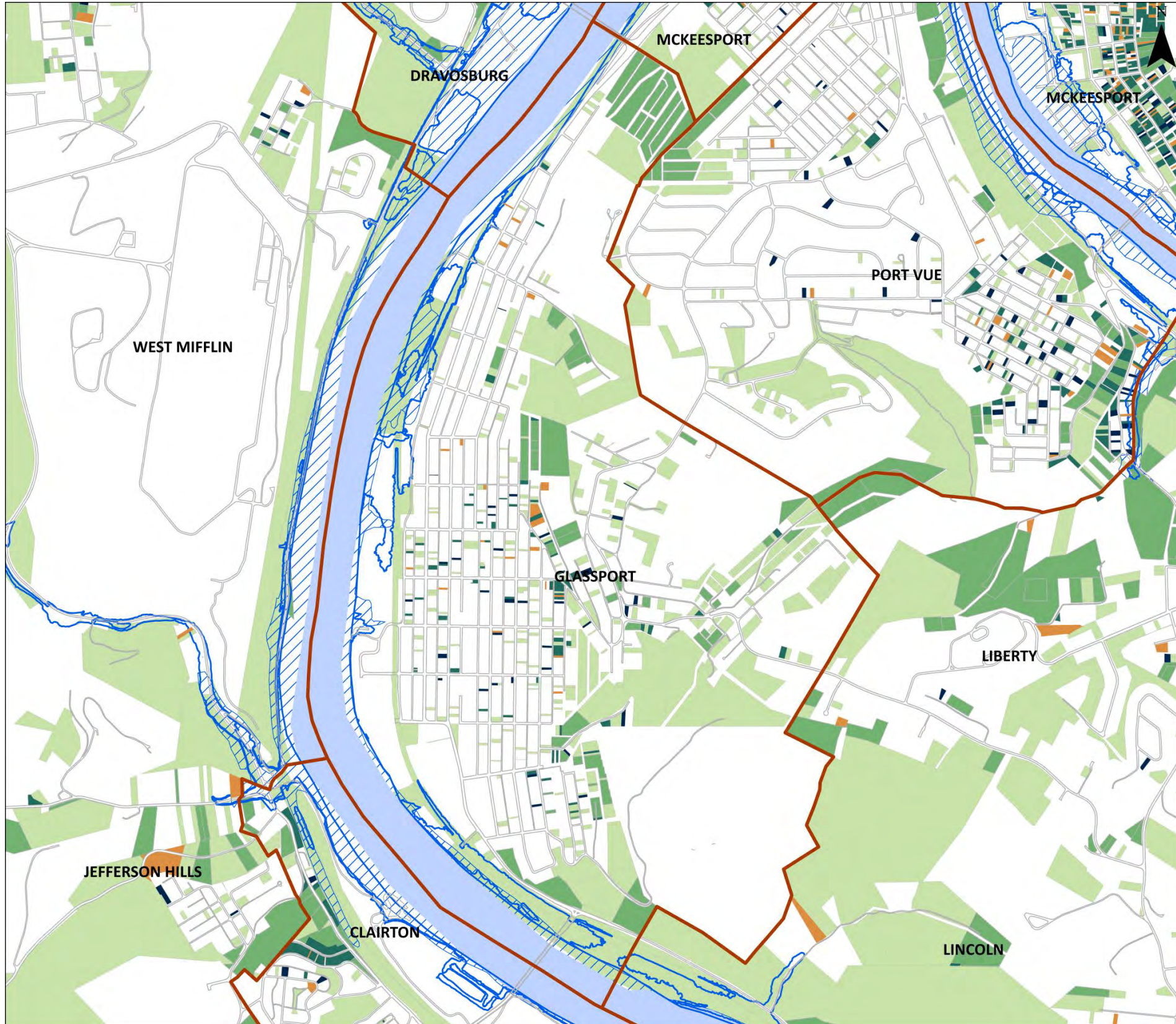
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Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.

- TCLB Footprint
- Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
- Potential Side Yard
- Potential Demolitions
- Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
- Floodplains
- FEMA Flood Hazard Line
- Rivers



# Glassport



- TCLB Footprint
- Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
- Potential Side Yard
- Potential Demolitions
- Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
- Floodplains
- FEMA Flood Hazard Line
- Rivers

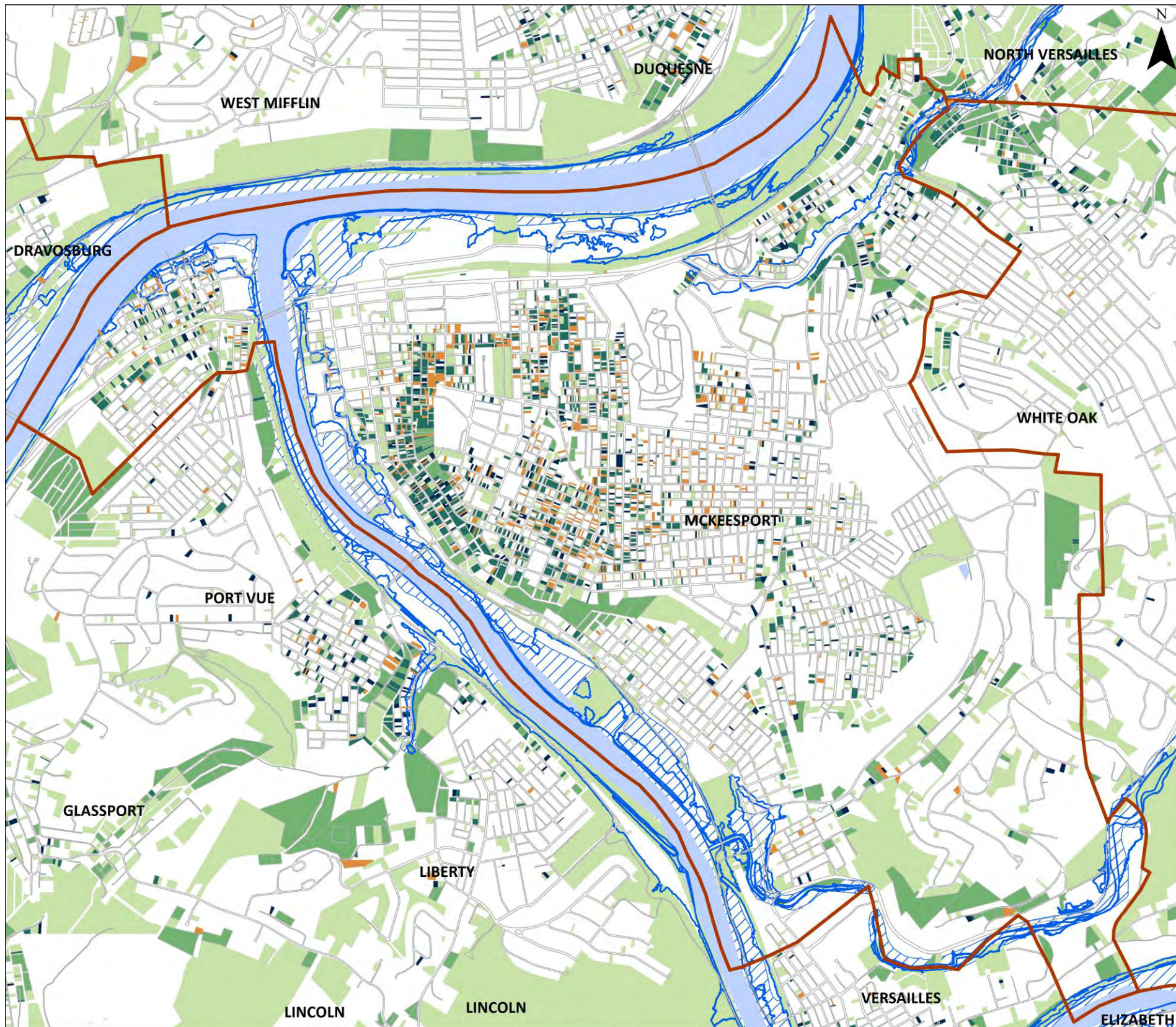
Category	Glassport - 829	
All Parcels	2565	100%
Structures	2065	81%
Vacant Land	500	19%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	500	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	131	26%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	101	20%
Potential Sideyard	33	7%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	0	0%
Structures	2065	
Potential Demos	22	1%

Maps created by EKS Solutions, LLC, August 2020 and TCLB, September 2021 and April 2022. Data Sources: Allegheny County Real Estate 2019, FEMA 2019, Reference layers from PASDA and Allegheny County GIS via the WPRDC, all downloaded in 2020.

Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.













# McKeesport



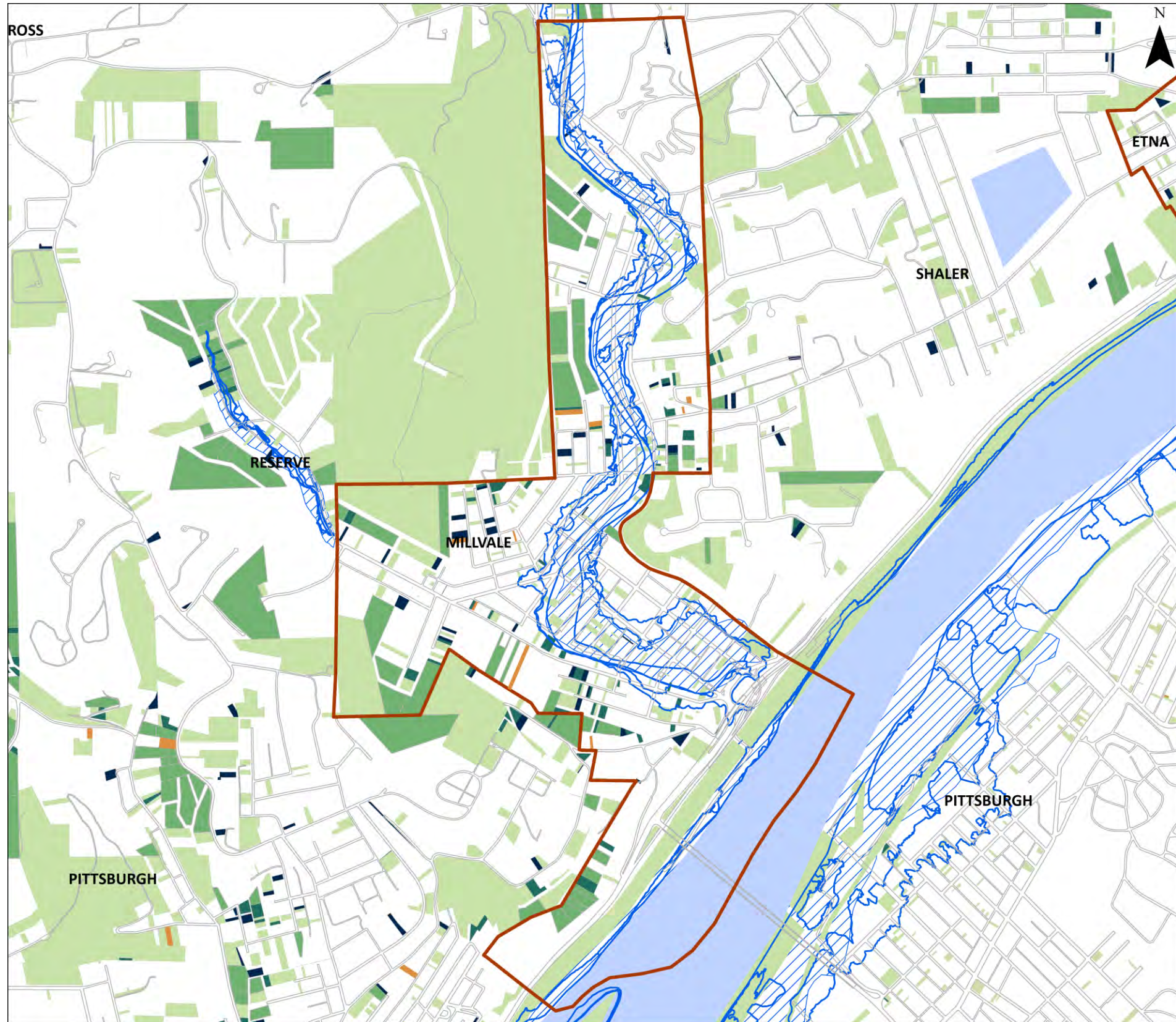
Category	McKeesport - 400	
All Parcels	11596	100%
Structures	8503	73%
Vacant Land	3093	27%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	3093	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	1641	53%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	1533	50%
Potential Sideyard	320	10%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	7	0%
Structures	8503	
Potential Demos	637	7%

Maps created by EKS Solutions, LLC, August 2020 and TCLB, September 2021.  
 Data Sources: Allegheny County Real Estate 2019, FEMA 2019, Reference layers from PASDA and Allegheny County GIS via the WPRDC, all downloaded in 2020.

Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.

-  TCLB Footprint
-  Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
-  Potential Side Yard
-  Potential Demolitions
-  Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
-  Floodplains
-  FEMA Flood Hazard Line
-  Rivers











# Millvale



Category	Millvale - 838	
All Parcels	1987	100%
Structures	1665	84%
Vacant Land	322	16%
RAAC Owned		
Vacant Land	322	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	122	38%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	92	29%
Potential Sideyard	34	11%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	6	2%
Structures	1665	
Potential Demos	10	1%

Maps created by EKS Solutions, LLC, August 2020 and TCLB, September 2021.  
 Data Sources: Allegheny County Real Estate 2019, FEMA 2019, Reference layers from PASDA and Allegheny County GIS via the WPRDC, all downloaded in 2020.

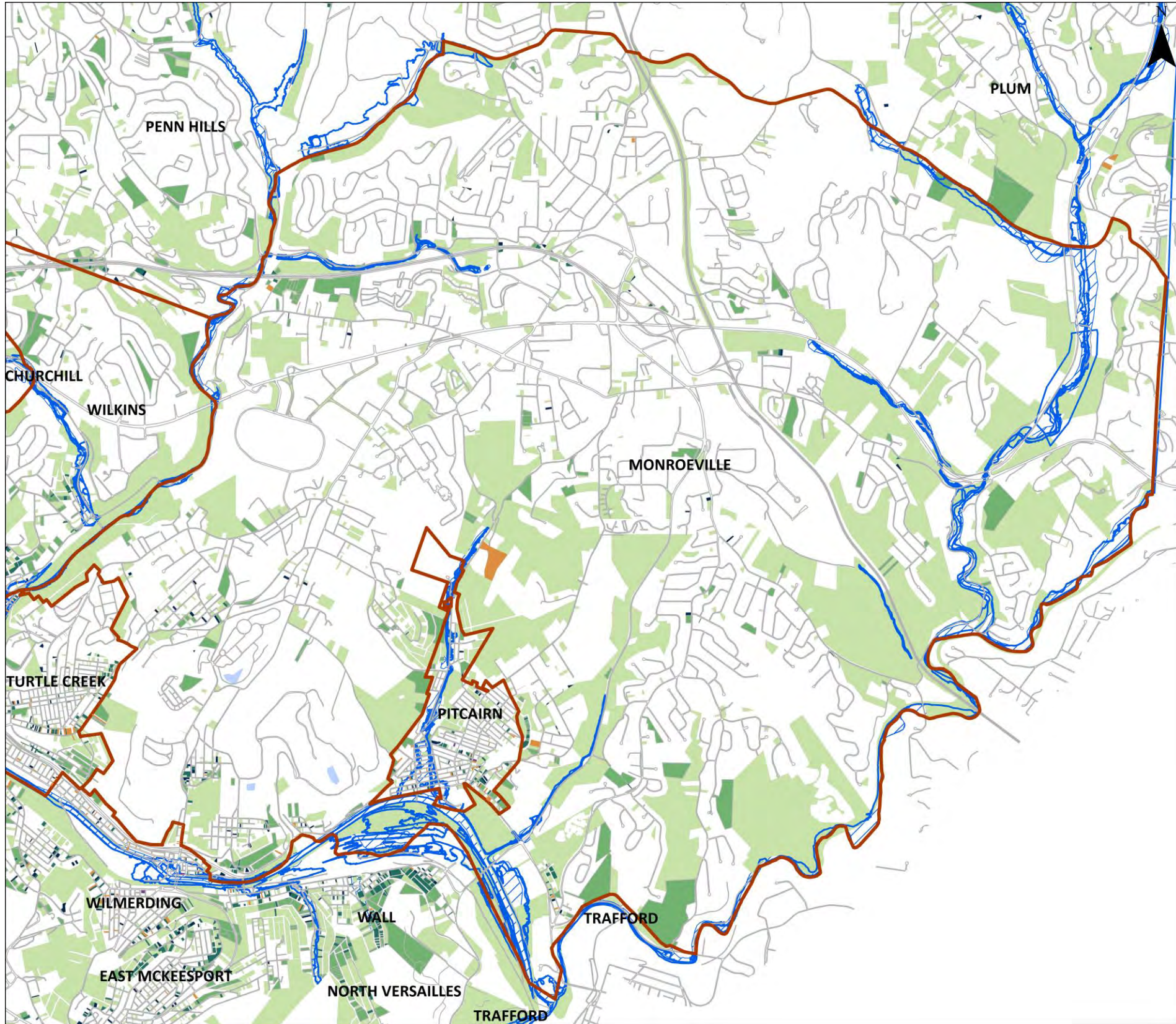
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.

-  TCLB Footprint
-  Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
-  Potential Side Yard
-  Potential Demolitions
-  Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
-  Floodplains
-  FEMA Flood Hazard Line
-  Rivers





# Monroeville



Category	Monroeville - 879	
All Parcels	11763	100%
Structures	10575	90%
Vacant Land	1188	10%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	1188	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	252	21%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	119	10%
Potential Sideyard	56	5%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	4	0%
Structures	10575	
Potential Demos	12	0%

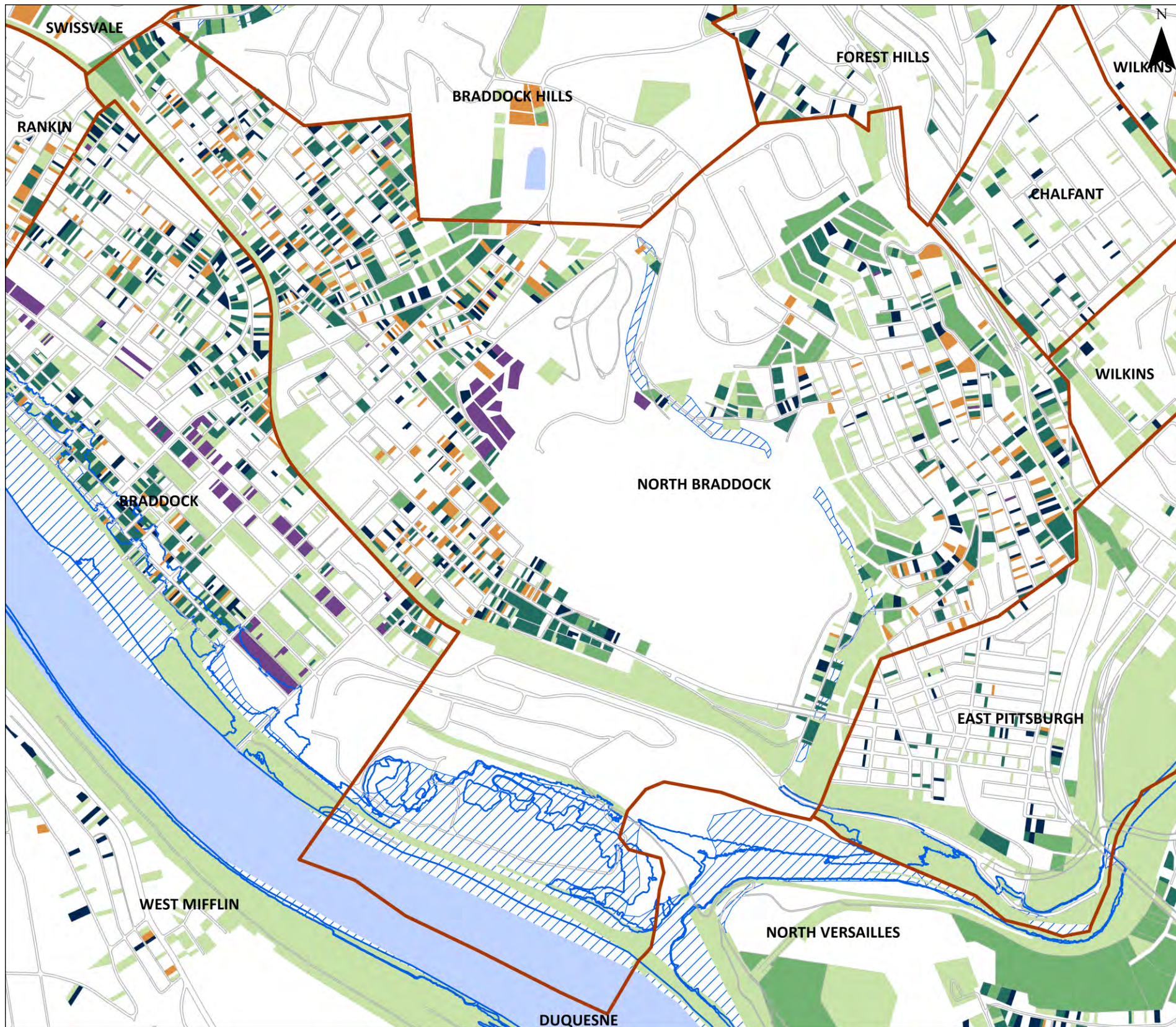
Maps created by EKS Solutions, LLC, August 2020 and TCLB, September 2021.  
 Data Sources: Allegheny County Real Estate 2019, FEMA 2019, Reference layers from PASDA and Allegheny County GIS via the WPRDC, all downloaded in 2020.

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- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
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- Rivers



# North Braddock



Category	North Braddock - 843	
All Parcels	3537	100%
Structures	2368	67%
Vacant Land	1169	33%
RAAC Owned	19	
Vacant Land	1169	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	781	67%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	713	61%
Potential Sideyard	166	14%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	15	1%
Structures	2368	
Potential Demos	253	11%

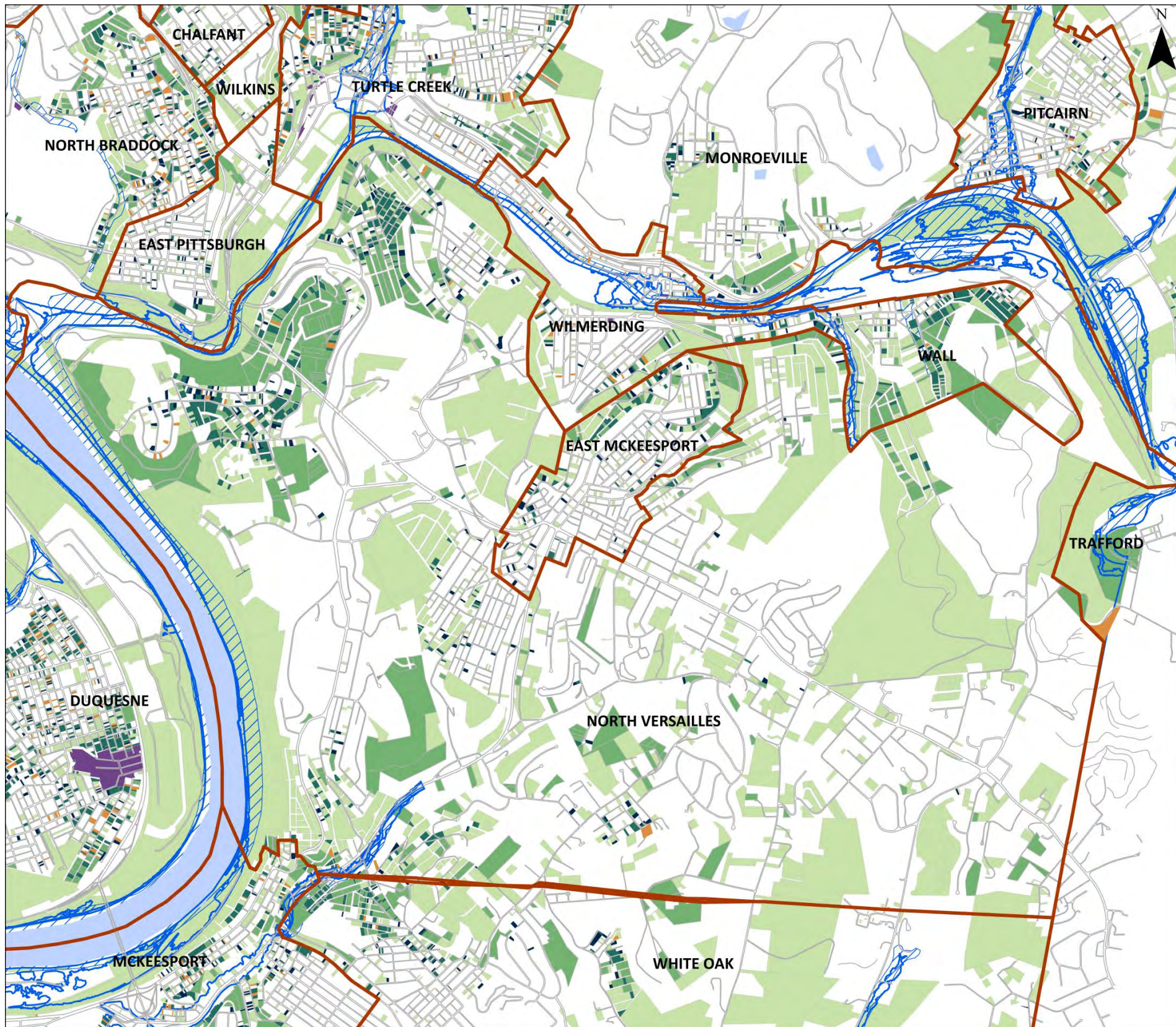
Maps created by EKS Solutions, LLC, August 2020 and TCLB, September 2021.  
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- TCLB Footprint
- Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
- Potential Side Yard
- Potential Demolitions
- Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
- Floodplains
- FEMA Flood Hazard Line
- Rivers



# North Versailles



Category	North Versailles - 930	
All Parcels	6305	100%
Structures	4578	73%
Vacant Land	1727	27%
RAAC Owned	2	
Vacant Land	1727	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	828	48%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	630	36%
Potential Sideyard	136	8%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	2	0%
Structures	4578	
Potential Demos	22	0%

Maps created by EKS Solutions, LLC, August 2020 and TCLB, September 2021 and April 2022. Data Sources: Allegheny County Real Estate 2019, FEMA 2019, Reference layers from PASDA and Allegheny County GIS via the WPRDC, all downloaded in 2020.

Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.

- TCLB Footprint
- Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
- Potential Side Yard
- Potential Demolitions
- Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
- Floodplains
- FEMA Flood Hazard Line
- Rivers

# Pitcairn



- TCLB Footprint
- Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
- Potential Side Yard
- Potential Demolitions
- Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
- Floodplains
- FEMA Flood Hazard Line
- Rivers

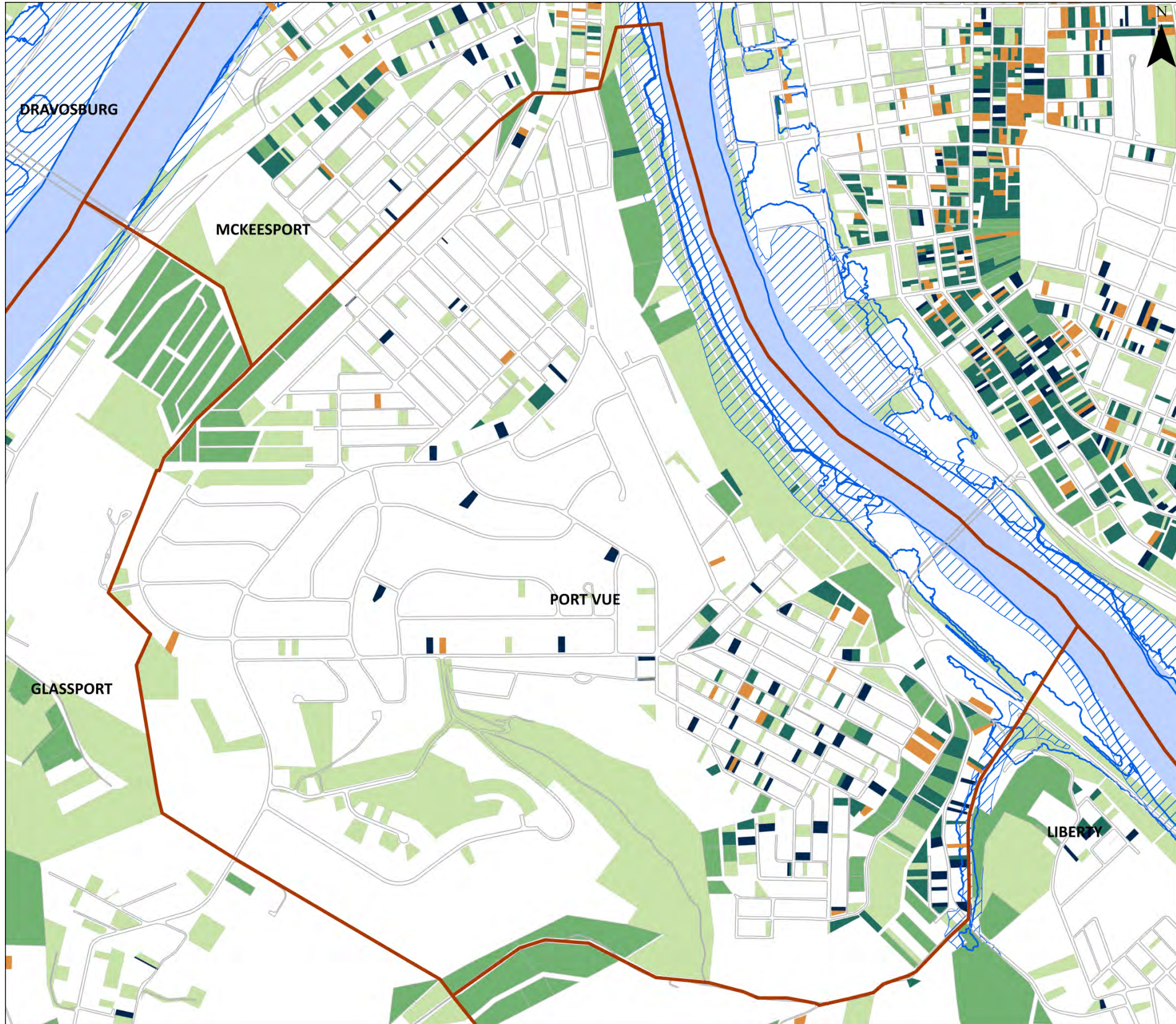
Category	Pitcairn - 847	
All Parcels	1547	100%
Structures	1279	83%
Vacant Land	268	17%
RAAC Owned	4	
Vacant Land	268	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	87	32%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	70	26%
Potential Sideyard	16	6%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	9	3%
Structures	1279	
Potential Demos	21	2%

Maps created by EKS Solutions, LLC, August 2020 and TCLB, September 2021.  
 Data Sources: Allegheny County Real Estate 2019, FEMA 2019, Reference layers from PASDA and Allegheny County GIS via the WPRDC, all downloaded in 2020.

Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.













# Port Vue



Category	Port Vue - 848	
All Parcels	2087	100%
Structures	1772	85%
Vacant Land	315	15%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	315	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	156	50%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	121	38%
Potential Sideyard	52	17%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	2	0%
Structures	1772	
Potential Demos	22	1%

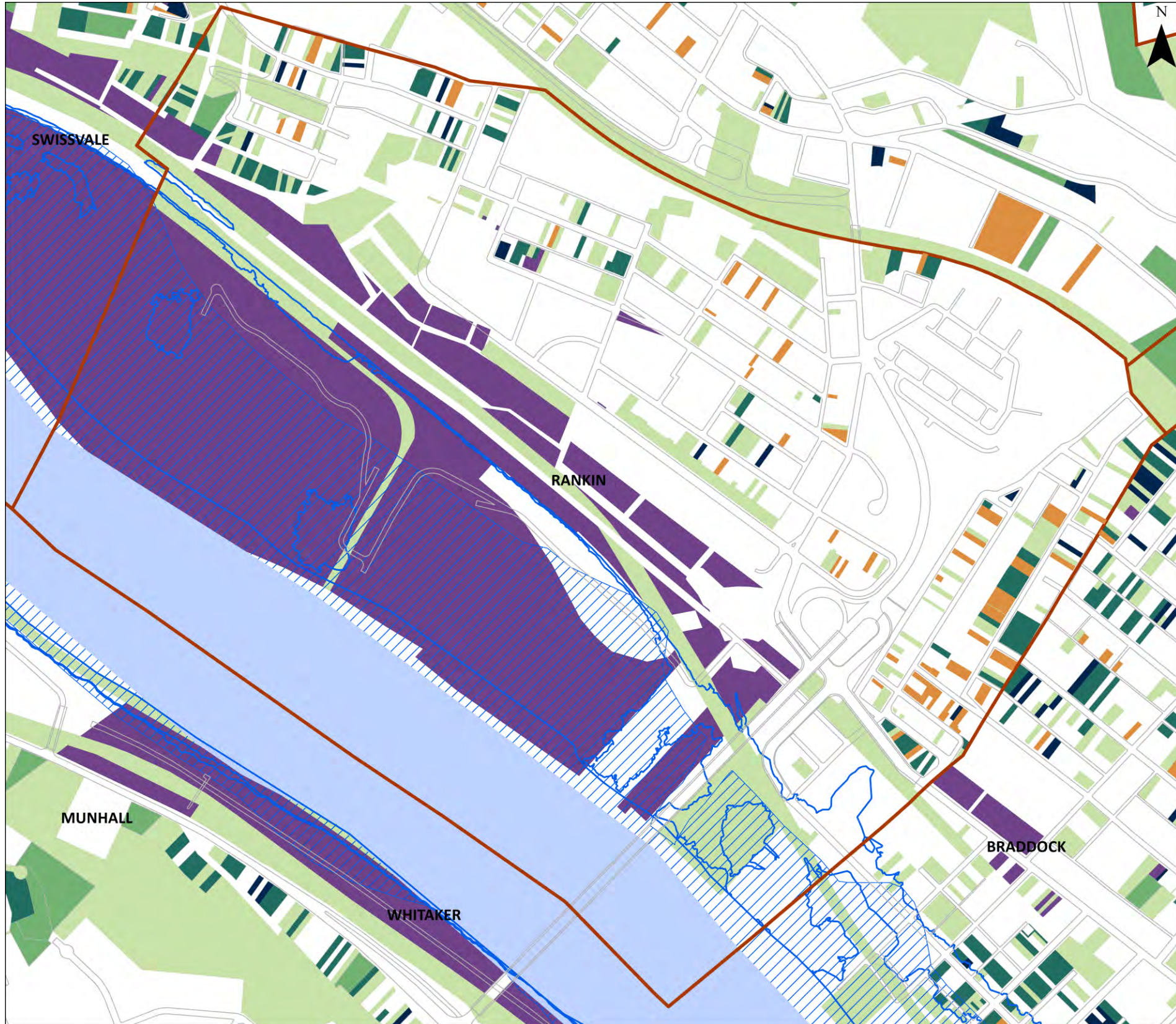
Maps created by EKS Solutions, LLC, August 2020 and TCLB, September 2021 and April 2022. Data Sources: Allegheny County Real Estate 2019, FEMA 2019, Reference layers from PASDA and Allegheny County GIS via the WPRDC, all downloaded in 2020.

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-  TCLB Footprint
-  Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
-  Potential Side Yard
-  Potential Demolitions
-  Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
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-  Rivers













# Rankin



Category	Rankin - 849	
All Parcels	939	100%
Structures	661	70%
Vacant Land	278	30%
RAAC Owned	31	
Vacant Land	278	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	80	29%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	79	28%
Potential Sideyard	13	5%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	0	0%
Structures	661	
Potential Demos	51	8%

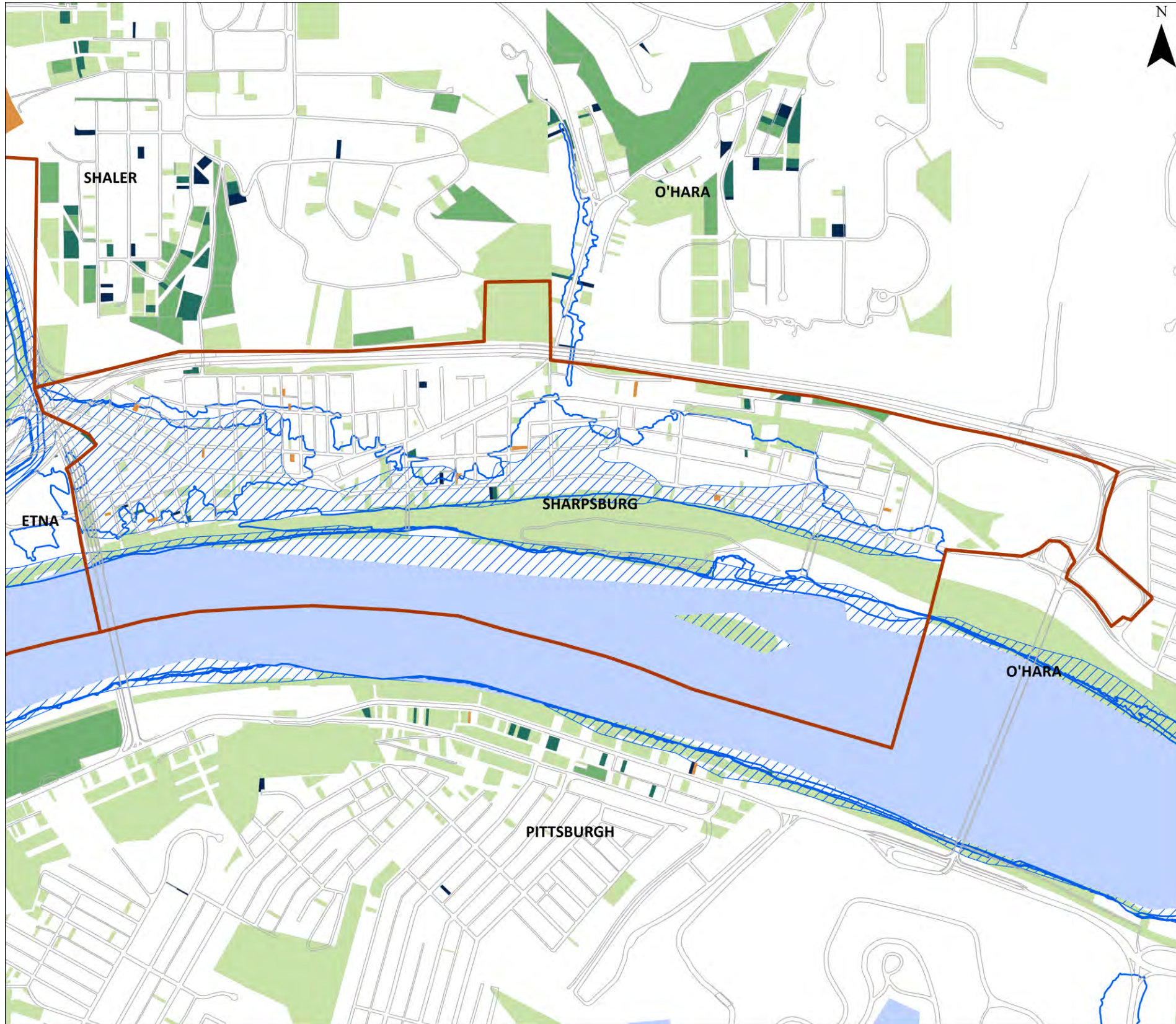
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-  TCLB Footprint
-  Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
-  Potential Side Yard
-  Potential Demolitions
-  Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County Owned
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-  Rivers













# Sharpsburg



Category	Sharpsburg - 852	
All Parcels	1567	100%
Structures	1383	88%
Vacant Land	184	12%
RAAC Owned	1	
Vacant Land	184	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	15	8%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	14	8%
Potential Sideyard	5	3%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	7	4%
Structures	1383	
Potential Demos	12	1%

Maps created by EKS Solutions, LLC, August 2020 and TCLB, September 2021.  
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Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.

-  TCLB Footprint
-  Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
-  Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
-  Potential Side Yard
-  Potential Demolitions
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# South Versailles



Category	South Versailles - 947	
All Parcels	296	100%
Structures	188	64%
Vacant Land	108	36%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	108	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	37	34%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	7	6%
Potential Sideyard	0	0%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	32	30%
Structures	188	
Potential Demos	3	2%

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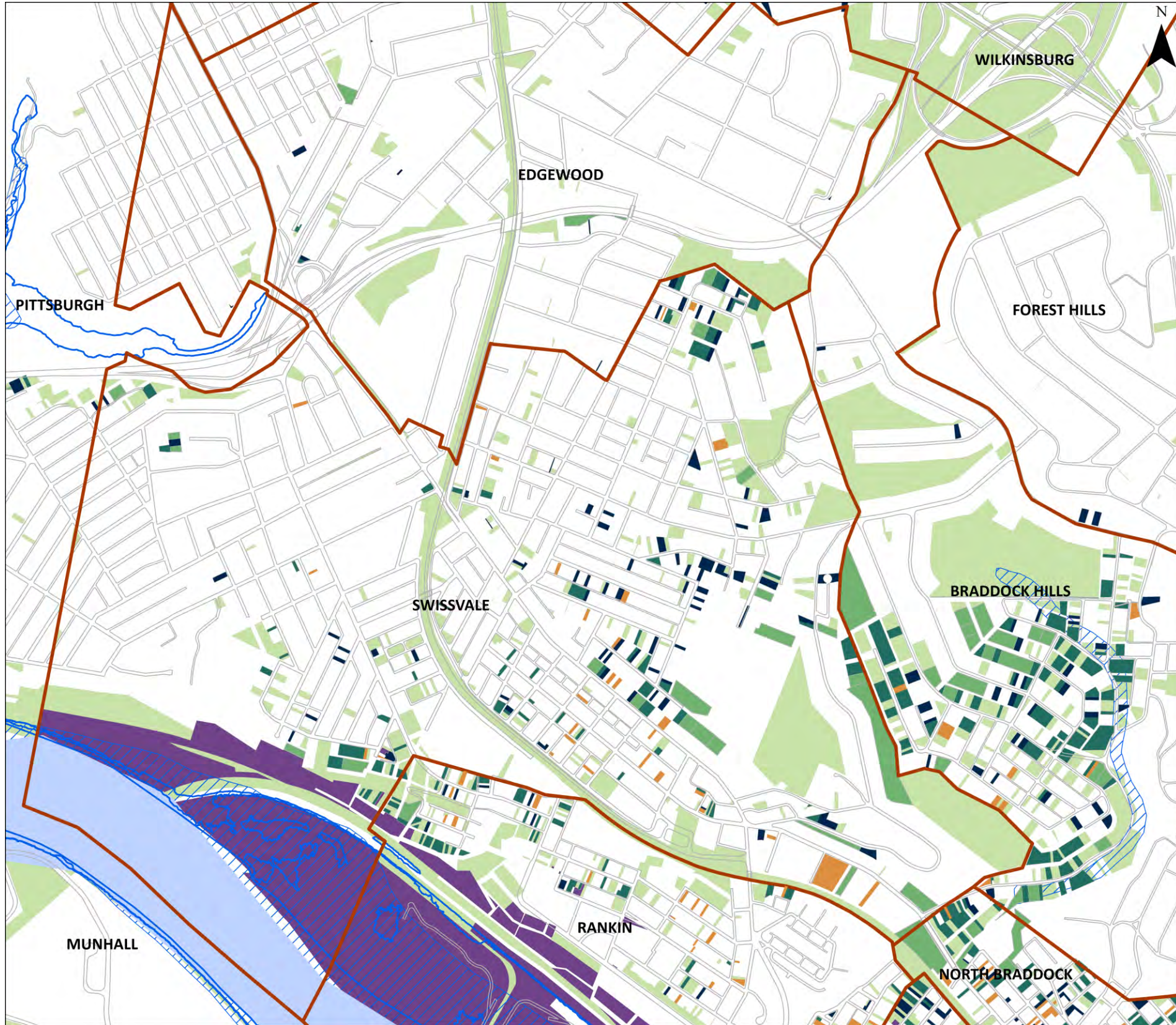
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land is defined as Tax Delinquent ≥ 2 years, with the last year delinquent listed as 2019.

- TCLB Footprint
- Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
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- Potential Demolitions
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# Swissvale



Category	Swissvale - 854	
All Parcels	4176	100%
Structures	3681	88%
Vacant Land	495	12%
RAAC Owned	9	
Vacant Land	495	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	206	42%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	186	38%
Potential Sideyard	83	17%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	0	0%
Structures	3681	
Potential Demos	31	1%

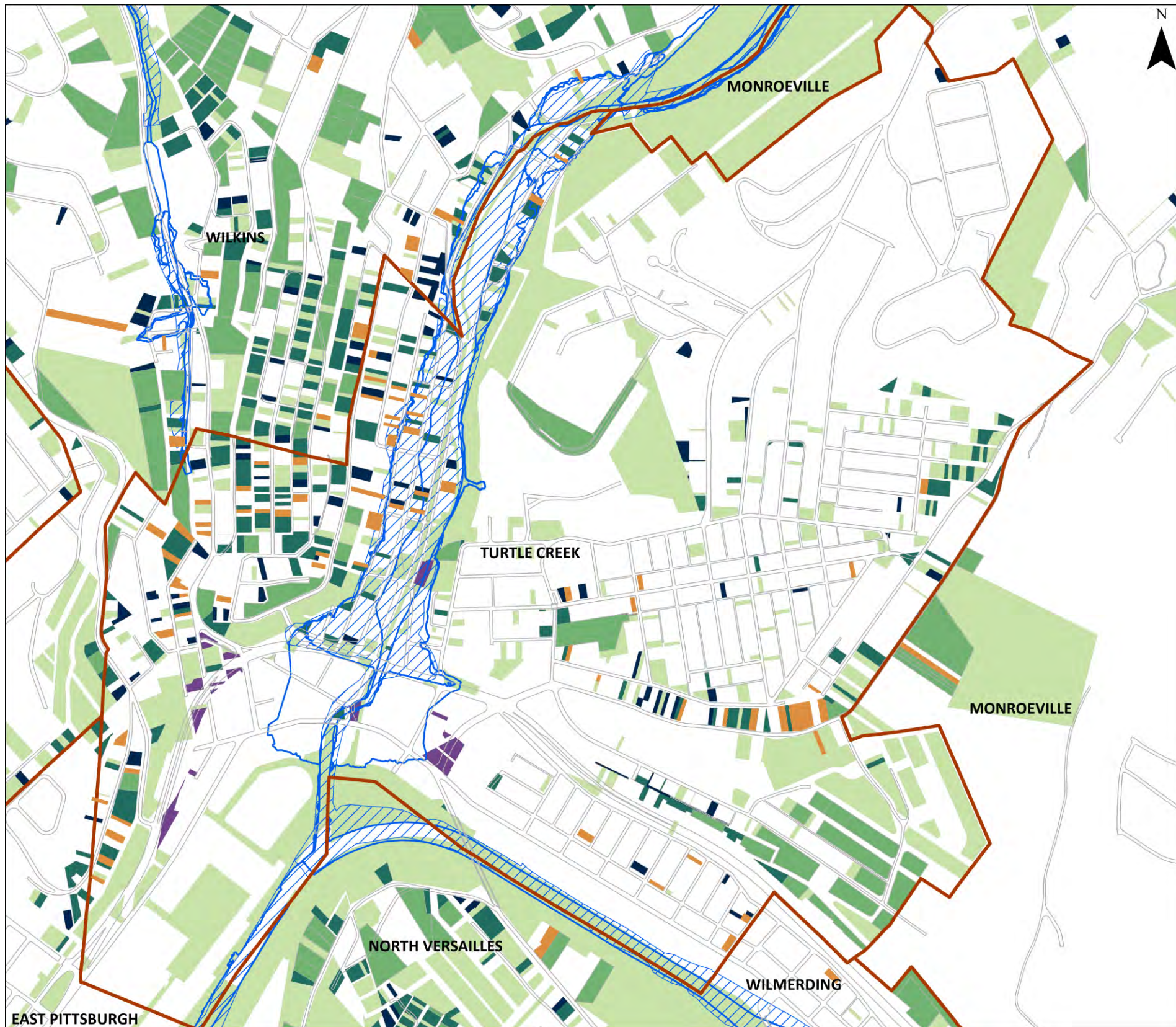
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- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land <= 0.25 acre
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# Turtle Creek



Category	Turtle Creek - 858	
All Parcels	2380	100%
Structures	1801	76%
Vacant Land	579	24%
RAAC Owned	32	
Vacant Land	579	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	275	47%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	250	43%
Potential Sideyard	66	11%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	26	4%
Structures	1801	
Potential Demos	76	4%

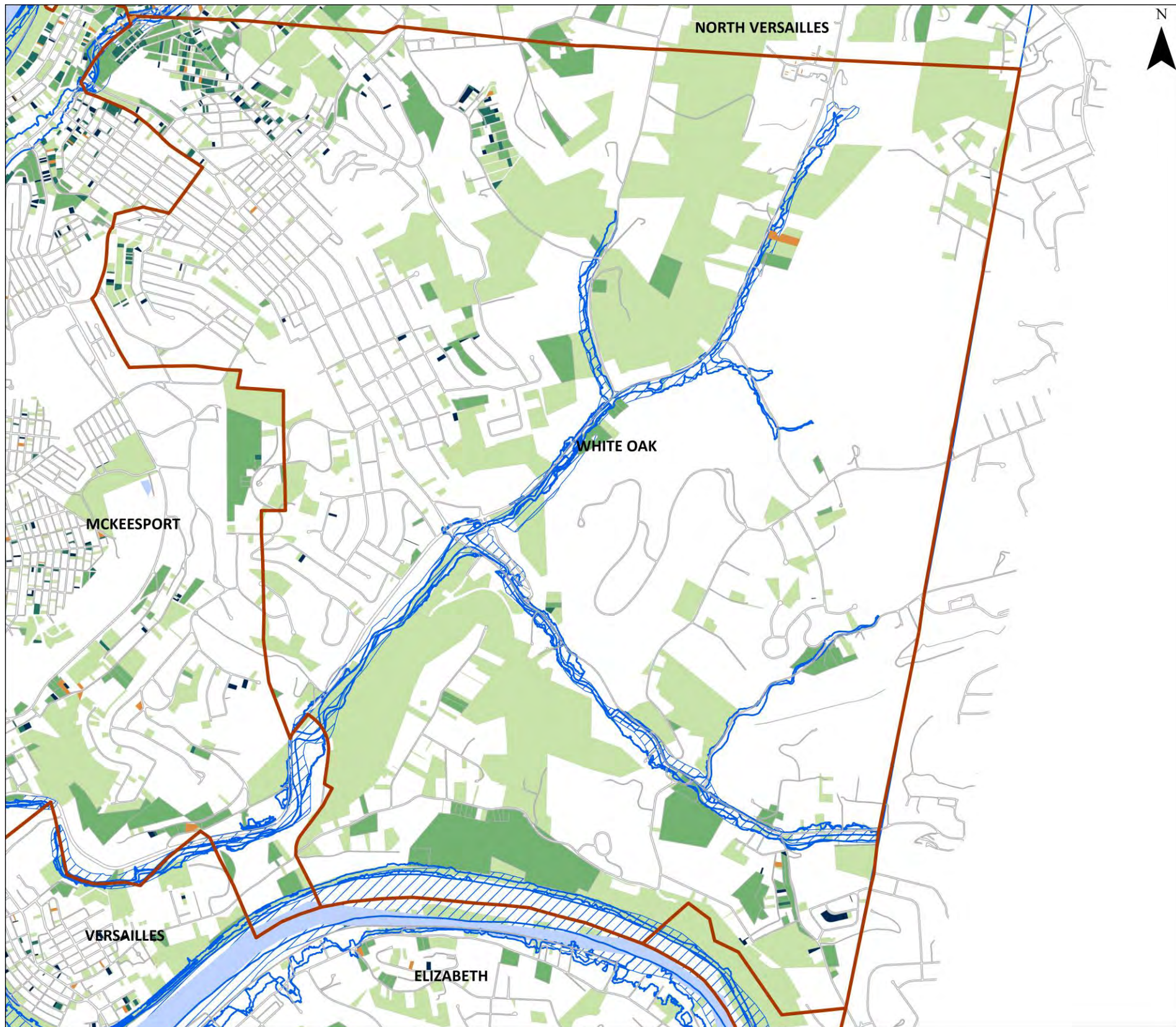
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- Vacant Land
- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
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- Rivers



# White Oak



Category	White Oak - 875	
All Parcels	4155	100%
Structures	3476	84%
Vacant Land	679	16%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	679	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	281	41%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	190	28%
Potential Sideyard	63	9%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	10	1%
Structures	3476	
Potential Demos	16	0%

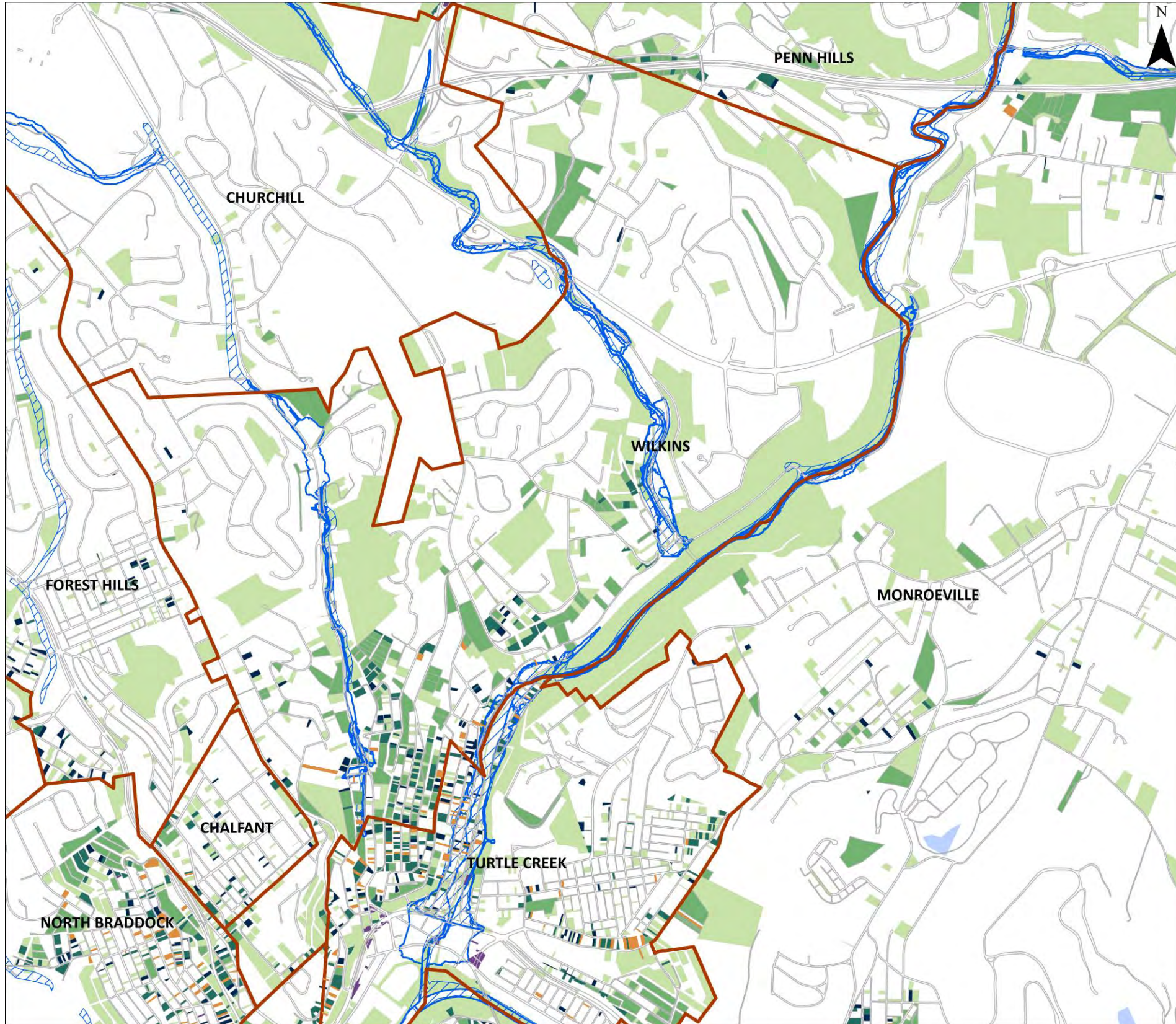
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# Wilkins



Category	Wilkins - 953	
All Parcels	3630	100%
Structures	2902	80%
Vacant Land	728	20%
RAAC Owned	0	
Vacant Land	728	
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land	294	40%
Target Tax Delinquent Vacant Land ≤ 0.25 Acre	191	26%
Potential Sideyard	51	7%
Target Delinquent Vacant Land in Flood Zone	6	1%
Structures	2902	
Potential Demos	14	0%

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- Targeted Tax Delinquent Vacant Land
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# Appendix B

## Disposition

### Featured Sales

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#### Overview

As a Land Bank's portfolio grows, the need to minimize the amount of vacant land without a designated use. As a result, featured sales can be designed and marketed to the public.

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#### Considerations

This is simply an extension of TCLB's existing efforts, but formalizes and expands the efforts to identify marketable properties to the public. Some time should be dedicated to building partnerships with relevant developers, local business owners, and eager residents looking for something to make their own so that there is a potential buyers list and specific data to cater a marketing plan to.

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#### Challenges

Identifying potential buyers will require a significant amount of time to gain some momentum as well as developing a system for identifying parcels that may appeal to the public without interfering with any future TCLB plans.



## Disposition

### Side Lot Programs

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#### Overview

Adjacent property owners and in some cases, (5+ yr) renters or an owner who faces the adjacent street from the participating lot, are eligible to purchase a vacant lot for a discounted price, with the potential for additional discounts if income requirements are met. Generally, buyers must share a boundary with the lot, but other programs are more flexible and simply require buyers to be on the same block.

---



#### Considerations

This program is a strong opportunity for clear residential markets to increase property values and space where other development is not likely to occur.

Promotion and the processing of these programs should be aimed at all levels and ensure that applications are not overly restrictive for neighborhoods with limited access to information.

---

#### Challenges

Often, the cost to gain clear access to a vacant lot well exceeds the amount that can be earned from a sale. These types of programs are often subsidized and require ongoing personnel to manage the transactions.

## Disposition

### Mow to Own

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#### Overview

A Mow to Own program is a sweat equity program where residents may apply the costs and labor of maintaining a publicly owned vacant lot toward future ownership.



Programs must decide on 1) Lot eligibility requirements, 2) Applicant requirements (e.g., up to date on taxes on primary property, lot adjacency), 3) Maintenance requirements and duration, 4) Administration, inspection & enforcement schedules.

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#### Considerations

Each applicant should be screened carefully, and every transaction should have public oversight. Some programs will determine land transfer around the market value of the lot, for example, early transfer for a cash down payment or maintenance duration equal to the lot's value. In some cases, ownership can be granted immediately while a maintenance lien is placed on the property, in others, residents would act simply as stewards until the minimum investment has been met. Actions on the lot may range from mowing, debris removal and snow removal on any adjacent sidewalks. A timeline or dollar amount can be set as the end point. After that milestone has been reached, if there are no violations and no complaints, the maintenance lien can be removed and the owner will fully own the property. Most programs give first choice to an adjacent landowner, but cities can also work with non-profit organizations, land banks, stormwater management organizations, etc.

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#### Challenges

Programs can be viewed as land giveaways. Cities need to be prepared to reclaim properties if maintenance obligations are unmet. Cities may or may not supply title insurance, though this can be an important investment for the landowner of seized lots.

## Activation: Permanent Community Spaces: Play Spaces

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### Overview

For communities with younger demographics and limited greenspace or park options, a play space is a creative reuse strategy for vacant land.

Generally found within residential areas, this type of project can help communities provide interactive spaces for kids to learn and play while repurposing found materials.

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### Considerations

Soil testing is absolutely critical to ensure it is safe for more vulnerable populations to interact on site. Community and youth should be involved in the idea generation and build process as much as possible to ensure ownership and interest in the outcome. Include activities for a variety of age groups and a mix of open space, play elements, and game elements for all activity levels, leaving room for additions and change over time. Youth art and bright colors can help mark the site. Seek partners who may help program the space, think about security and access, and use recycled and reclaimed materials to reduce costs and limit vandalism.

---

### Challenges

Soil quality is a critical step in this process to ensure the site is safe for others.

As demographics change, you want to make sure the site can respond and adapt to changing interests.

The project owner must be willing to accept the liability of public play, and ensure design elements meet the level of risk you're willing to take.



## Activation: Permanent Community Spaces: Parks



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### Overview

Neighborhood parks serve as social focal points for neighborhoods and provide relief from the urban built environment for residents. Many include a playground, but do not need to. Vacant parcels of larger size or underutilized paved areas can be transformed into community spaces.

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### Considerations

Projects like this are likely done in partnership with City Planning departments to determine the zoning, accessibility, and use requirements governed by code.

These are larger investments and therefore considered more permanent interventions.

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### Challenges

Fundraising

## Activation: Permanent

### Productive Landscapes: Stormwater Management



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#### Overview

Many communities are facing multiple challenges related to their aging infrastructure and declining tax base. Land banks can prioritize disposition of vacant lots to stormwater agencies or organizations with water quality missions. Alternatively, long-term or lifetime leases can be made to ensure the investments made are protected while the property is regularly maintained in partnership.

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#### Considerations

Assigning this use to vacant land often will open up new opportunities for investment, enabling larger projects to be implemented.

If the property is not being sold outright, there should be an agreement between the land owner and responsible agency, highlighting maintenance, access, and a timeline.

Requires specific expertise in water management, while only some parcels will be an ideal fit based on overland flow, permeability and size.

---

#### Challenges

Maintenance is even more critical, as these interventions need to be maintained below the surface in addition to their aesthetic value. Ownership and maintenance responsibility must be clearly designated to avoid reversion to previous states.

## Activation: Permanent Productive Landscapes: Urban Reforestation

---

### Overview

The goal of programs like this are to reforest the city by planting and maintaining thousands of trees on vacant lots. Planting trees in vacant lots can also provide much needed community green space for local residents. Other benefits of planting trees in vacant lots include wildlife habitat, shading, soil stabilization, improved air quality, and reduced stormwater runoff.

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### Considerations

Consider partnering with Conservancy programs or local university programs with forestry departments for technical assistance and support. Appropriate tree selection is critical for programs like this with an awareness for soil quality, overhead restrictions, root depth and future diameter.

Provide clear sight lines around the site perimeter for pedestrian safety. This may involve mowing, limbing trees up to 6 feet, or planting only very low growing vegetation.

Cluster trees in the center of the lot to provide shared rooting space and an even canopy, using species that grow at about the same rate so they do not shade each other out. Do not include turf in tree clusters. Instead, use mulch rings and mow around the clusters.

---

### Challenges

Before the trees are established, there is a higher need for monitoring and protection, so the incorporation of a tree pruning volunteer program for at least the first 2 years of growth. Low growth groundcover, edged planting beds and lighting can also help deter vandalism.

## Activation: Long-Term- Permanent Productive Landscapes: Community Gardens



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### Overview

Many urban neighborhoods are “food deserts” – places where it’s nearly impossible to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. Community gardens provide fresh, nutritious produce for many families who couldn’t otherwise afford it, improving their diet and their overall health. They also relieve hunger by donating their excess produce to food pantries.

---

### Considerations

All long-term lease ideas require a multi-year agreement to get started and should have a pathway to make them permanent through sale or the inclusion into a land trust. Planning should address both the physical needs of your future garden, as well as the social support your garden needs to function and keep going. Soil quality is absolutely critical and testing will help identify safe and unsafe areas on site for direct in-ground planting. Otherwise, raised garden beds with clean soils should be used for consumable crops. Think about integrating programming centered around farming, cooking, and food security. Most sites will benefit from having tools on site in a secure location and either a ready water source.

---

### Challenges

Community gardens require a lot of human capital. Many hands are needed to ensure success and keep it well maintained and productive. Often, interest wanes over time so it’s important to think of a succession plan as individuals move on and ensure there is a network who can support the effort.

## Activation: Long-Term

### Passive Parklets

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#### Overview

Passive parklets are simply designed to provide places of quiet beauty and reflection. Often, these sites will be limited to simple landscaping, flower gardens, with seating.

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#### Considerations

Though simple in execution, these projects require a regular maintenance regimen to ensure they continue to look nice. Some programs that plant extensive flower gardens sometimes partner with local markets to sell cut flowers and attract attention to the sites.

Partnerships with local garden clubs and greenhouses can help design for biodiversity. Seating, signage, and shade can help attract people into the spaces in order to be more welcoming.

Trash receptacles are often necessary as a sign of care and to encourage shared stewardship of these spaces.

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#### Challenges

Ongoing maintenance is the biggest challenge for these types of projects.

## Activation: Long-Term

### Active Parklets

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#### Overview

Active parklets can be designed in many ways, but are intended to be gathering places for communities and include amenities that encourage people to come together and interact on site. Often, there will be seating, shade, a stage or focus area, but can also include outdoor kitchens and other features aimed at group activity.

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#### Considerations

Local service organizations can be great partners for ongoing programming and celebrations. These spaces require a long-term or permanent steward, places of worship or local community groups may be interested in taking this on.

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#### Challenges

The balance of creating open and inviting open spaces while preventing vandalism is an important one. Incorporating neighbors in the process of design, building and programming can help share the responsibility for the space.

## Activation: Temporary- Long-term

### Urban Meadows/Pocket Prairies

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#### Overview

A research backed approach for low maintenance interventions. The installation of various habitat treatments on city vacant lots instead of a regular mowing treatment. Installations might include, non-native 'no mow' lawns, non-native flowering lawns, native grasses, and mixed native wildflower species. The intent is to increase aesthetics, reduce the maintenance and attract bee species.



---

#### Considerations

Some testing and monitoring may be required to find the most successful interventions to see what cover crops grow best and what the long-term maintenance requirements will entail. Community education, signage and resident engagement can help with the long-term success of these lots to ensure the ecological benefits are widely known. While in the long-term, this can be a lower-cost option, it requires more upfront investment to clear and oversee the lots until the new crops take hold. These sites can be used as ongoing research labs for biodiversity and runoff patterns increasing the ecological findings within cities.

---

#### Challenges

Often, sites using these types of interventions result in healthy ecosystems that are more natural and wild in appearance, which may require a strong outreach strategy to communities to help redefine aesthetic preferences.

## Activation: Temporary-Long-Term

### Public Art

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#### Overview

Public art can be installed or staged on vacant land so that it is visually and physically accessible to the public. By doing so, vacant lots can draw attention to the issue of the underutilized space

as well as provide information and pleasure to passersby. Used either as a temporary measure to highlight or celebrate an issue, or as a permanent use for the space, generally leaves additional opportunities to add to the site in other ways that supports, or eventually replaces the artistic feature.

---

#### Considerations

Common vacant land art installations will include murals on adjacent walls, freestanding sculptures, creative signage or markers within the space, or temporary installations.

Discussion should be had regarding who owns the art, how long it should be allowed to stay, and whether there would be ongoing maintenance requirements.

Consider local art competitions to generate publicity while also tapping into local community talent. This is generally a more sustainable intervention with the majority of the costs up front. Review and ensure compliance with zoning requirements and site lines for safety purposes.

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#### Challenges

Some cities have stricter rules guiding art in public spaces to ensure messages are not political in nature, for example, but often private property is used to minimize those obstacles.





## Activation: Temporary

### Tactical Urbanism

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#### Overview

Tactical urbanism includes low-cost, temporary changes to vacant land, intended to improve local neighborhoods and city gathering places. Tactical urbanism is also commonly referred to as guerrilla urbanism, pop-up urbanism, city repair, or D.I.Y. urbanism.

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#### Considerations

Tactical urbanism installations can be a great way to draw attention to a particular lot or future project. It helps to build social capital by drawing neighbors together and helps them view the lots in new ways, helping to envision ways in which it may be repurposed in the future.

Activities are generally short term and celebratory in nature and can include art, games, food, activities and music. It can be helpful to partner with local organizations for programming and local vendors for food and drink. It is also an opportunity to invite elected officials who can answer questions and respond to resident interests.

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#### Challenges

It is important to follow up on the momentum generated by TU events, so dedicated attention to fostering the connections made during an activity is critical.

## Activation: Temporary

### Seasonal Pop-ups | Farmer's Markets

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#### Overview

A research backed approach for low maintenance interventions. The installation of various habitat treatments on city vacant lots instead of a regular mowing treatment. Installations might include,

non-native 'no mow' lawns, non-native flowering lawns, native grasses, and mixed native wildflower species. The intent is to increase aesthetics, reduce the maintenance and attract bee species.

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#### Considerations

Some testing and monitoring may be required to find the most successful interventions.

Community education, signage and resident engagement can help with the long-term success of these lots to ensure the ecological benefits are widely known.

While in the long-term, this can be a lower-cost option, it requires more upfront investment to clear and overseed the lots until the new crops take hold. These sites can be used as ongoing research labs for biodiversity and runoff patterns increasing the ecological findings within cities.

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#### Challenges

Often, sites using these types of interventions result in healthy ecosystems that are more natural and wild in appearance, which may require a strong outreach strategy to communities to help redefine aesthetic preferences.



## Stabilization

### Clean & Green

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#### Overview

Clean & Green programs build and rely upon trusting relationships with the community and provide stipends to community groups that take on an initial maintenance effort until a long-term use is determined.

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#### Considerations

While this program is a strong opportunity for quick action to stabilize particular parcels, it should not be considered a long-term solution due to the ongoing costs without necessarily elevating the parcels to a future productive use.

Although vacant property maintenance is at the core of this kind of program, it is not about maintenance alone. Empowering youth, increasing community-based capacity, inspiring reuse of vacant land, and strengthening relationships with the Land Bank are also goals. Administering the program in pursuit of these goals requires extending trust and mutual respect to small community-based organizations.

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#### Challenges

Program participants should be provided a high level of flexibility because maintaining vacant lots is difficult and costly work. Each group should be allowed to manage and structure its work as it sees fit, including selecting properties for maintenance and budgeting its stipend.

## Maintenance & Stewardship

### Workforce Development

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#### Overview

Vacant land maintenance provides the opportunity for ongoing hands-on work experience. Workforce development programs connect those seeking employment in the horticultural and landscape industries by providing training, job placement, and ongoing support throughout the year.

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#### Considerations

Consider the target focus of the workforce programs - this can include formerly incarcerated participants, at-risk youth, or anything other group of interest.

Partnerships with education and training providers for subjects like horticulture, landscape maintenance, greenhouse operations, carpentry and masonry, tool maintenance, as well as other personal development classes project management, budgeting, health education and so on.

Programs should focus on continued case management support and job placement through partnerships in the industry.

Funding may be leveraged through workforce and training programs.

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#### Challenges

Depending on the target workforce, additional wrap around services may be needed to support the crews.

Strong partnerships and focus on permanent job placement after their time with a program.



## Maintenance & Stewardship

### Timebanking

#### Overview

Timebanking programs represent a kind of currency and can be adapted for the ongoing stewardship of vacant land. Residents in a program can give one hour of service and receive one time credit, which can be redeemed for social service benefits as a sign of valuing their commitment and labor. There is a high level of engagement in these types of programs that are built on the premise that if you take care of your community.

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#### Considerations

This is an innovative approach for communities with small maintenance budgets seeking to build more social capital on the ground.

Partnerships with local businesses and utility companies can make beneficial reward systems. Some cities may have the authority to credit tax bills or other administrative fees.

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#### Challenges

Focus is on recognizing and honoring the volunteer efforts of residents while providing reasonable incentive for the work performed. Programs should place emphasis on resident engagement and strengthen the social networks of stewards. While a stipend assists in offsetting costs, groups must contribute time and materials in-kind.

# Appendix C

Category	Community Spaces	
Program/ Project Type	Play Spaces	Parks
Considerations		
Site	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communities with high youth populations and limited access to greenspace</li> <li>- Ideally connected or adjacent to a community anchor with youth programming such as a school, church, community center etc</li> <li>- Accessible to residential community in a safe manner with sidewalks, low traffic areas etc</li> <li>- Good sightlines to other properties and limited blindspots for safety</li> <li>- Site can be any shape/ size, though depending on levels of accessibility within the site, adjusting to a heavily sloped site, for example, may add cost but also add interest and creativity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Walkable and accessible</li> <li>- Prominently located in high residential areas</li> <li>- Size relevant to community population (suitable for the entire community, or focused on a small block)</li> </ul>
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Youth programming partner / anchor to help with design and planning as well as ongoing management and programming of the space</li> <li>- Can make use of donated, upcycled and recycled materials to reduce costs</li> <li>- Higher start up costs and consistent maintenance costs to ensure safety of DIY elements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Municipal planning departments and zoning staff will be required to ensure it officially meets the standards of a "park" as defined by that municipality</li> </ul>
Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inclusion of youth voices and partners will help make the plans stronger and encourage ownership by users</li> <li>- May require higher insurance limits</li> <li>- May require limited contractor support depending on design</li> </ul>	
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intended for long-term use</li> <li>- Extended implementation time due to a thorough, inclusive design process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Permanent adoption as public property</li> <li>- Limited regular maintenance of more typical park elements</li> </ul>

Category  
Program/ Project Type  
Considerations

**Productive Landscapes**

**Stormwater Interventions**

**Urban Reforestation**

Site	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Preference for sites within floodplain, in CSO areas and highly developed areas</li><li>- Design interventions are possible on almost any shape/size</li><li>- Preference to sites with clear overland flow, downspouts or adjacent to catch basin</li><li>- Can include both above and below ground interventions</li><li>- High soil permeability preferred</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Large parcels or linear swaths of land are ideal</li><li>- Access to water during establishment</li><li>- Can be any shape or size</li></ul>
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Higher cost to implement, generally requires soil amendments, specialized materials and connections into the main system as a backup</li><li>- Need to refresh annually and maintain regularly to remain effective</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Overall, less expensive up front costs, but requires dedicated care during the establishment period</li><li>- Mulch, stakes, gator bags or similar</li></ul>
Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Specialized design support in detailed drawings stamped by engineer or LA and submitted for review to public agencies</li><li>- Combination of specialized construction and volunteer labor</li><li>- Ongoing regular maintenance by trained crews or volunteers</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- May want to engage an arborist or nurseryman to help select species depending on site conditions and to include a diverse palette that is less susceptible to pest and disease</li><li>- Consistent early care for watering, light pruning, staking as needed etc</li><li>- If trees are near a public sidewalk, care should be taken to ensure leaf litter is removed regularly</li></ul>
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Permanent project if maintained</li><li>- Longer lead time due to design process</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Longer time to establishment and "finished" product</li><li>- Fairly quick installation time</li><li>- Ideally planned as permanent investment</li></ul>



Category	Productive Landscapes	
	Community Food Gardens	Passive Parklets
Program/ Project Type		
Considerations		
Site	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Larger sites for maximum food production, at least .5 acres for community access</li> <li>- Preference toward flat land</li> <li>- Full sun exposure</li> <li>- Access to consistent water sources</li> <li>- Public access and space for storage of communal tools and supplies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Appropriate for sites of all shapes and sizes</li> <li>- Helps to improve aesthetics for sites in public view</li> <li>- Designs can be creative and incorporate landscape elements where there is access to water or use static amenities or public art for areas without</li> <li>- If desirable for public access, can include seating and other amenities that invite people into the site</li> </ul>
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Extensive materials needed in start up phase</li> <li>- Ongoing resources for seasonal refresh, harvest, and winterizing</li> <li>- May extend growing season with the addition of hoop houses/ greenhouses</li> <li>- Potential partnership with farmer's markets or farmstands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Resources can be as minimal or as extravagant as the imagination and capacity of those stewarding the site</li> <li>- If landscaping is installed, then a specific maintenance plan would be required</li> <li>- If not highly publicly situated, vandal proof elements may be preferred</li> </ul>
Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Requires dedicated garden leadership</li> <li>- Significant amount of resident capacity to maintain</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Flexible based on design</li> </ul>
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ideally planned for a minimum 10 year lifespan with sustained capacity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Flexible based on design</li> </ul>

Category

Program/ Project Type

Considerations

**Productive Landscapes**

**Active Parklets**

**Urban Meadows / Pocket Prairies**

Site

- Appropriate for sites with varying shapes and sizes
- Preferable to have site lines for safety purposes and accessibility
- Designs can be creative and incorporate landscape elements where there is access to water or use static amenities or public art for areas without

- Large open swaths without boundaries are more ideal than between residential structures due to the 'natural' condition of this treatment
- Soil condition may help inform crop to be planted
- Great temporary strategy to help improve soil quality and fill space until further need

Resources

- Resources can be as minimal or as extravagant as the imagination and capacity of those stewarding the site
- If landscaping is installed, then a specific maintenance plan would be required
- If not highly publicly situated, vandal proof elements may be preferred

- Relatively low cost intervention, may require soil amendments and water early on

Capacity

- Flexible based on design

- Tilling the soil before planting and adding amendments may be done by volunteers, or by landscape contractor depending on size of site and current condition
- Limited maintenance during peak growing season and higher efforts at the start and end of season to cut back the cover crop as needed

Time

- Flexible based on design

- Temporary

# Appendix D

## Partner Organizations in Attendance at Vacant Land Framework Kick-Off, October 28, 2020

### Organization Name

- Allegheny City Parks Foundation
- Allegheny Conference on Community Development
- Allegheny County Department of Economic Development
- Allegheny County Health Department
- Allegheny Cleanways
- Allegheny Goatscape
- Allegheny Green Web
- Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania
- Grounded Strategies
- Grow Pittsburgh
- Negley Run Watershed Task Force
- Rachel Carson Trails Conservancy
- Scenic Pittsburgh
- Three Rivers Wet Weather
- Trail Pittsburgh
- Western Pennsylvania Conservancy

# Appendix E

## National Project Examples and Resources

### Side Lot Program Calhoun County, MI

**Active since:** 2007

**Administrator:** Calhoun County Land Bank Authority in collaboration with Calhoun County Treasurer's Office

**Purpose:** To aid in stabilizing neighborhoods, increase property values, and put properties bank on the tax roll. The Side Lot Program provides the opportunity for qualifying homeowners to purchase adjacent vacant lots for sale by the Calhoun County Land Bank Authority. The purchase of a residential vacant lot enables homeowners to expand their yard, increasing the overall value of their property and giving them space for additional improvements. It is also an efficient way to promote neighborhood stabilization and return these properties to the tax roll to benefit the entire community.

Homeowners purchasing adjoining residential vacant parcels may be able to claim a Principal Residence Exemption (PRE) on the purchased parcel.

**Process:** Applications that are submitted will be reviewed by the Calhoun County Land Bank Authority staff to determine compliance with policies and procedures as well as existing neighborhood plans.

To apply for a residential side lot, submit the Side Lot Program Application, Applicant Certification Form, and all required attachments to the Calhoun County Land Bank Authority.

#### **Eligibility:**

- Tax current on personal real estate taxes
- No outstanding code violations
- Must submit list of properties owned, or with ownership interest as part of application

#### **Website:**

- <https://public-cclb.epropertyplus.com/>

**Other Details:**

- Available Side Lot properties can be found [here](#)

**Akron Neighborhood: Mow to Own  
Akron, OH**

**Active since:** May 2020

**Administrator:** Mayor's Action Center via the Department of Neighborhood Assistance

**Purpose:** Created to combat vacancy and abandonment and to help keep Akron properties maintained. Allows current property owners to acquire vacant lots near their home in exchange for neighbors mowing and maintaining the property for **6 months**. Maintenance includes mowing, cutting, weeding, snow shoveling, litter removal and leaf raking.

**Process:** Applications due by June 15 for planned maintenance from June-November. Maintenance begins immediately and work will be monitored by inspectors to ensure appropriate care. After that period, assuming consistent stewardship, ownership of the lot will be transferred to the resident who will then continue to be responsible for ongoing upkeep. Additional conditions may be placed on the property including on new development etc.

**Eligibility:**

- Tax current on personal real estate taxes
- No outstanding property violations
- Priority to those who own and occupy a home immediately adjacent to the lot
- 501(c)3 organizations are also eligible if property is in designated service area, not tax delinquent, and complaint free
- Any rental properties must be registered with Akron's Rental Registration Program
- If interest is limited, other property owners may apply if not more than 300' from the parcel

**Website:**

- <https://www.akronohio.gov/cms/news/31b8d740b0d873f9/index.html>

**Other Details:**

- 250 eligible properties that are currently under City control, list found [here](#)

- Estimated \$385/parcel for maintenance by City using taxpayer funds, estimated \$100,000 annual savings through this program of 250 properties
- Property owners adjacent to eligible Mow to Own parcels were directly mailed to explain program details, with applications included.

### **Mow to Own Program St. Louis, MO**

**Active since:** May 2016

**Administrator:** City of St. Louis Land Reutilization Authority (LRA)

**Purpose:** The 'Mow to Own' Program is designed for City residents who wish to acquire a vacant lot owned by LRA. A 'sweat equity' program enables residents to take immediate ownership of a vacant lot that is located next to an occupied residential or commercial property that they own, for a nominal fee. Participants must agree to continually maintain the lot, including regular mows and debris removal, for **24 months**.

The LRA Board of Commissioners must approve each transaction. Following approval by the Board of Commissioners, the successful applicant will receive a deed to the property with a maintenance lien, allowing the property to be reacquired by LRA should the applicant fail to maintain the lot. After 24 months, if there are no findings of violation from the City's Forestry Division and no complaints, LRA will remove the maintenance lien and the owner will own the property.

**Process:** After identifying an eligible lot, submit an application with a \$25 fee, deadlines are monthly prior to regularly scheduled LRA meetings. Staff will review and provide a recommendation to the board of Commissioners at its next meeting.

If approved, a \$100 administrative fee will cover the initial deed recording and release of the parcel - there is no additional cost for the land itself. Participants must then keep property free and clear of debris and excess vegetation. Participants must also comply with City ordinances, including keeping grass below 7" and pay current real estate taxes assessed on the lot.

#### **Eligibility:**

- Must have paid all real estate taxes on all properties owned in the City of St. Louis, and have no outstanding violations on those properties
- Must own property with an occupied residential or commercial structure, immediately adjacent to the desired lot

**Website:**

- <https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/sldc/real-estate/mow-to-own-program.cfm>

**Other Details:**

- Eligible lots may not exceed 40' frontage, is not contiguous to 3 or more LRA, LCRA, or PIEA owned parcels, LRA owned for at least 3 years, vacant and unimproved property, list to search from can be found [here](#).

**The Pollinator Project  
Saginaw, MI**

**Active since:** June 2017 (planning in 2015-2016)

**Administrator:** Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy

**Purpose:** The Pollinator Project uses re-naturalization techniques to stabilize vacant urban land. It helps with crime reduction, boosts community beautification efforts, removes blight, helps threatened pollinators, and reconnects people in the most isolated parts of the community with the people around them.

Program includes cleaning up trash, mowing, wildflower and grass seeding. Ongoing mowing several times during the growing season. A variety of techniques were developed that include both low-growing flowering lawns and more rustic wildflower plots.

**Website:**

- <http://www.sblc-mi.org/pollinator-project.html>

**Other Details:**

- 3 year pilot completed, looking to implement 3 year program that would add full 200 acres of blight removal
- Full program would be equivalent to nearly half of all Saginaw County Land Bank vacant residential properties or about 260 acres
- Approximately 50 parcels addressed/year
- Existing and planned coverage can be found [here](#)

**Allegheny Grows**

## **Allegheny County, PA**

**Active since:** 2010

**Administrator:** Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and Grow Pittsburgh

**Purpose:** To provide material and technical support to preexisting vegetable gardens in Pittsburgh and across the region. Growing food as a strategy to reuse vacant land and stimulate neighborhood reinvestment assists communities that seek to utilize their vacant land and start their own community vegetable gardens, or to improve the growing on active sites. Thanks to many community support partners and many volunteers, active community vegetable gardens exist throughout the region.

**Process:** Applications are accepted and communities selected for next season. Applicants must demonstrate capacity, interest, and access to property.

### **Website:**

- <https://www.growpittsburgh.org/category/allegheny-grows/>

### **Other Details:**

- Has supported the implementation of 33 community gardens and support of 60 existing gardens
- Program assume permission to access and maintain the land has been addressed already

### **Vacant Land Toolkits:**

Vacant to Vibrant, *CMU Heinz College Systems Project*

<https://groundedpgh.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Vacant-to-Vibrant.pdf>

Lots to Love, *Grounded*

<http://www.lotstolove.org/>

Vacant Lot Toolkit, *City of Pittsburgh Planning*

[https://apps.pittsburghpa.gov/redtail/images/1760\\_VLTK\\_FINAL\\_10-28-15.pdf](https://apps.pittsburghpa.gov/redtail/images/1760_VLTK_FINAL_10-28-15.pdf)

Working with Lots: A Field Guide, *Detroit Future City*



<https://dfc-lots.com/>

Vacant Lot Treatment Guide, *Keep Growing Detroit*

[http://detroitagriculture.net/wp-content/uploads/Treatment-Guides\\_All\\_web.pdf](http://detroitagriculture.net/wp-content/uploads/Treatment-Guides_All_web.pdf)

Vacant Property Toolbox, *Detroit Vacant Property Campaign*

[https://www.mml.org/resources/sample\\_docs/ordinances/blight/toolkits-and-reports/vacant%20property%20toolbox\\_2nd%20ed.pdf](https://www.mml.org/resources/sample_docs/ordinances/blight/toolkits-and-reports/vacant%20property%20toolbox_2nd%20ed.pdf)

Vacant Land Reuse Resource Guide, *Youngstown Community Development Corporation*

[https://www.yndc.org/sites/default/files/Vacant%20Land%20Reuse%20Guide\\_0.pdf](https://www.yndc.org/sites/default/files/Vacant%20Land%20Reuse%20Guide_0.pdf)

Albany Vacant Lot Toolkit, *Albany Land Bank*

<https://www.vacantlottoolkit-albanyny.com/>

Omaha's Vacant Lot Toolkit, *City of Omaha Planning*

<https://planninghcd.cityofomaha.org/images/stories/pdfs/VLT%20Reduced.pdf>

Vacant Lot Field Guide, *Duluth Community Garden Program*

<https://www.duluthcommunitygarden.org/gardener-resources/publications/vacant-lot-field-guide>

Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide to Working with Lots, *Urban Neighborhood Initiative*

<https://uni-kc.org/initiatives/vacant-to-vibrant/fieldguide/>

Vacant Lot Handbook, *City of Milwaukee*

<https://city.milwaukee.gov/ImageLibrary/Groups/cityDCD/planning/pdfs/VacantLotHandbook.pdf>



**TCLB**

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Cover photo in blue courtesy of Grounded Strategies.

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