

# Seeking Solutions:

## BLIGHT & VACANCY IN WILKINSBURG



2022



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*This report, vacant property information, and updates around this work will be maintained on the WCDC’s website, [www.wilkinsburgcdc.org](http://www.wilkinsburgcdc.org).*



Since 2000, Wilkinsburg Borough has lost approximately 4,000 residents. This has had a significant impact on the local economy and housing market.<sup>1</sup> Over 18% of Wilkinsburg’s building stock is vacant, along with more than 600 vacant lots. Many of these vacant properties are also tax delinquent. Borough-wide, Wilkinsburg has a vacancy rate of 22%, more than double that of Allegheny County.<sup>2</sup> Property values have remained stagnant during this time, with houses in Wilkinsburg valued at just over half of those located elsewhere in the county.<sup>3</sup> Facing a reduced tax base and plummeting property values, Wilkinsburg has been forced to cut services for residents, resulting in a lower quality of life. **The reality is that widespread blight and its negative impacts on the greater community are issues that the borough cannot handle alone.** Wilkinsburg requires all available resources to tackle the ongoing issue of blight at the source.

This report seeks to provide context on the issue, provide an overview of available programs and resources, and outline solutions to make meaningful change. We look forward to sharing this report with the public as well as:

- **Elected officials** at the municipal and state levels;
- **Appointed public officials** from a variety of public agencies, such as community and economic development, code enforcement, and planning and zoning;
- **Nonprofit organizations** seeking to improve the quality of life in a community, including those engaged in economic development, neighborhood revitalization, and affordable housing; and
- **Business and civic leaders** concerned about their community’s future and health.

1 ACS 2010-2020  
2 Calculated from the Property Inventory conducted in 2021  
3 ACS 5-year Estimates 2015-2019

## TOP RESIDENT CONCERNS:

- Code enforcement accountability
- Threat to personal property from adjacent vacant and deteriorating structures
- Being displaced through rising development costs
- Renters and transient population resulting in less community pride and ownership
- Cost to rehab properties
- Complicated and unclear acquisition and control processes
- Aging in place concerns
- Lack of planning for future of owner-occupied structures
- Insufficient basic services to attract new residents



During 2020 and 2021, the Wilkesburg Community Development Corporation (WCDC) worked directly with residents to form the first **Strong Neighborhoods Committee**, an initiative to tackle blight and vacancy issues specific to each of Wilkesburg's 19 unique neighborhoods. This work was made possible through funding from a Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement Fund (PHARE) grant through the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency.

While addressing blight and vacancy has been a core component of the WCDC's work over the past 13 years, Strong Neighborhoods offers more opportunities for residents to get involved, learn more about the issues in their community, and seek resources to support local projects. Beyond that, the work of the Strong Neighborhoods Committee, detailed in this report, involved compiling the most current information so that neighbors, elected officials, and others interested in the future sustainability of Wilkesburg fully understand the current state of blight and vacancy in Wilkesburg.

The reality is that, despite efforts to address and remediate blight and vacancy in Wilkesburg, the issue continues to worsen over time. Wilkesburg has seen a decline more drastic than any of its neighboring municipalities, with 22% of properties currently vacant and blighted. Systemic, strategic change is needed to reverse course and give Wilkesburg a chance to succeed. Strong Neighborhoods is a crucial step in ensuring this work is done equitably, with all areas of the borough represented by people who live in the community and/or have a deep understanding of Wilkesburg's history, culture, opportunities, and needs.

The goals of the Strong Neighborhoods Committee are to **(1) build strong neighborhoods** through an investigation of the causes and impacts of blight and vacancy in Wilkesburg, **(2) work with the WCDC to develop a Vacant Property Reuse Plan** to address vacancy and blight, mitigate threats of displacement and gentrification, and **(3) create catalysts for reinvestment** driven by community vision.

This report first details the most current statistics and information about the state of blight and vacancy in Wilkinsburg and throughout the region. This background information is critical to fully understanding the issue in Wilkinsburg and how it has changed, and worsened, over time. This section also includes information about the complex challenges specific to Wilkinsburg, current resources available in the community, and current activities to address blight and vacancy.

Next, the report covers the approach taken by the Strong Neighborhoods Committee, including conducting an updated vacant property inventory and leading community conversations across the borough. The report includes borough-wide findings compiled through this process and strategies for how the borough can enact policy changes, better support residents, and partner with other groups working to create a viable future for Wilkinsburg.

Complementing this report is a series of specific neighborhood findings at the end of this report. Each neighborhood is documented, including the process for convening residents, the strengths, opportunities, threats, and needs of each neighborhood, priorities, and potential project ideas. The purpose of documenting these findings is to provide a hyper-local guide to support neighbors as they work together to take the next steps in addressing blight and vacancy in their neighborhoods.

**Through engagement, accountability, and borough-wide policy changes, Strong Neighborhoods seeks to rebuild Wilkinsburg’s neighborhoods, fairly and equitably, calling on the borough to support this work and enact meaningful change that will help the committee’s work move forward.**

*Current information about Strong Neighborhoods as well as resources and technical assistance for residents seeking to address blight and vacancy in their Wilkinsburg neighborhood is available at [wilkinsburgcdc.org](http://wilkinsburgcdc.org).*

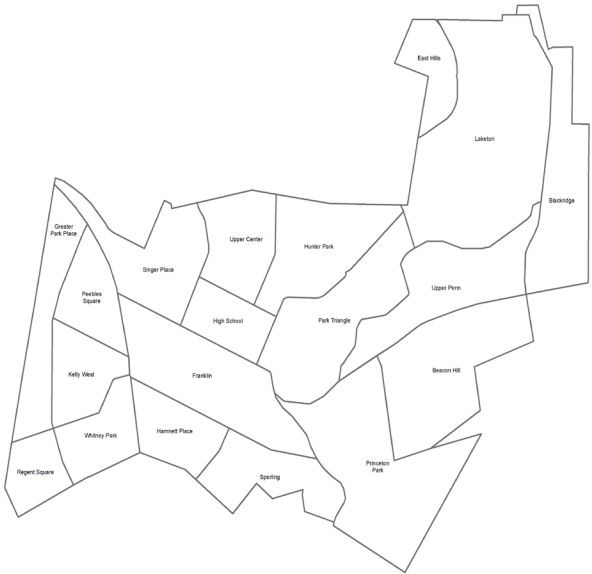


**BOROUGH OF WILKINSBURG**

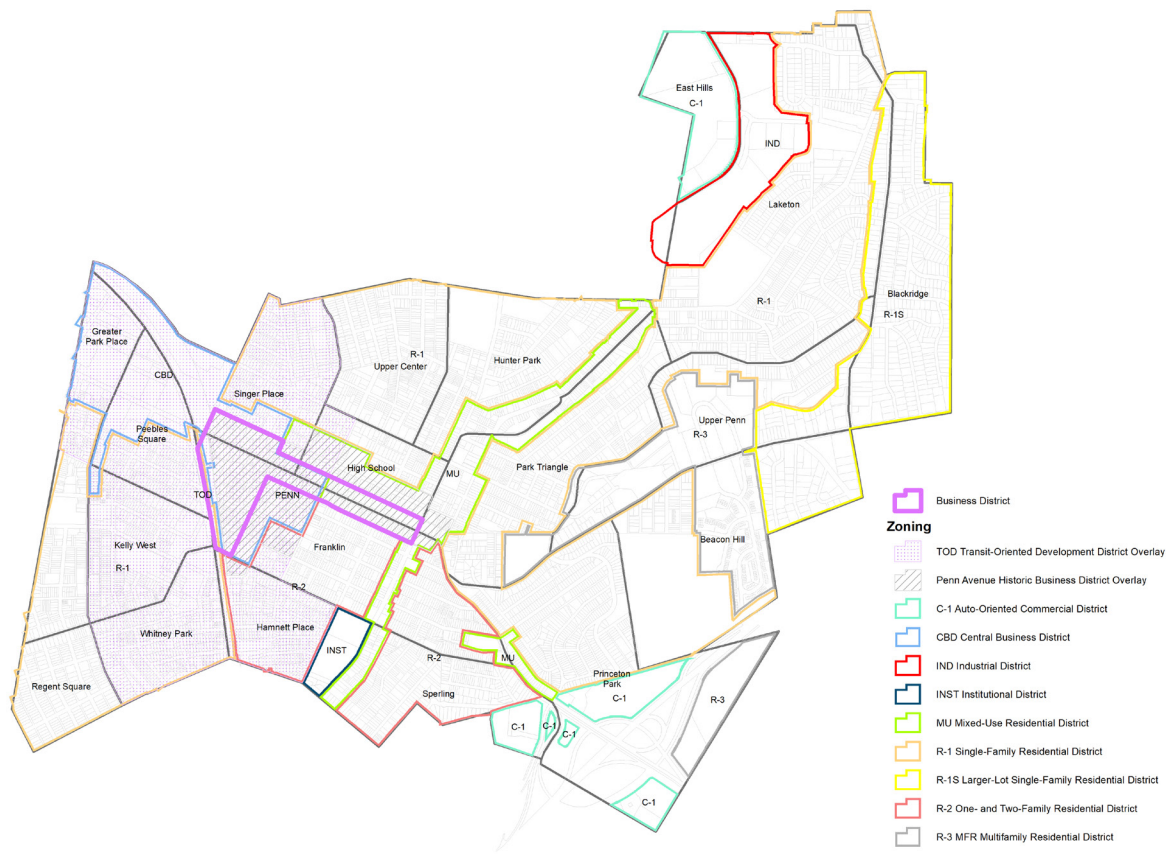
Wilkinsburg is a borough located in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, just east of the City of Pittsburgh. A first-tier suburb, Wilkinsburg appealed to many wealthy and middle class residents who wanted to live outside of crowded and polluted Pittsburgh. Once one of the wealthiest suburbs in southwestern Pennsylvania, Wilkinsburg features many large, ornate houses and commercial structures. The older, western portion of the borough has a distinctly urban feel with walkable neighborhoods and a centralized business district. In contrast, newer development on the eastern portion offers a much more suburban feel, with emphasis on larger lots and easy access to adjacent highways. On an average day, 20,000 vehicles drive through Wilkinsburg along Penn Avenue. There is an ongoing challenge in encouraging those passing through to stop in Wilkinsburg and experience what the community has to offer.

In the 2010 Wilkinsburg Comprehensive Plan, 19 unique neighborhoods were identified and named. While many of these neighborhoods fall along clear boundaries of greenspace and major thoroughfares, not all identify as unique neighborhoods, allowing residents to define their own boundaries.

The borough encompasses 2.25 square miles. At its peak in the mid-1900s, Wilkinsburg was densely populated and home to over 30,000 people. Today, the most recent 2020 Census shows that Wilkinsburg’s population has dropped by more than half, with 14,349 residents living in the borough. Still, Wilkinsburg remains a diverse community with 59% of residents identifying as Black, 32% white, and 9% other, though there has been an ongoing shift in the community’s



demographic makeup.<sup>4</sup> The per capita income in the borough averages \$30,445, well behind the county at \$38,709. Males had a median income of \$31,163 versus \$25,005 for females.<sup>5</sup> About 24.5% of Wilkinsburg residents live below the poverty line, with women and Black residents at twice the risk of poverty compared to their male and white counterparts.<sup>6</sup>



Wilkinsburg Zoning Map

While Wilkinsburg has its own school district, it only serves students from Pre-K through 6th grade. After 6th grade, students attend Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS). Residents also have the option to send their children to Wilkinsburg-based private schools, including Pittsburgh Urban Christian School and Sister Thea Bowman Catholic Academy. Over the past 10 years, the borough has seen a continual decline of school age children, dropping from 3,042 in 2010 to 2,285 in 2020.<sup>7</sup>

4 2020 ACS Decennial Census  
5 2019 ACS 5-year estimates  
6 2019 ACS 5-year estimates  
7 2020 ACS Decennial Census

CONSULTING TEAM



The **Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation (WCDC)** works to drive economic development in Wilkinsburg with an emphasis on strengthening the Central Business District. The WCDC envisions Wilkinsburg as a prosperous, healthy, and inclusive community regarded for its strong business district and neighborhoods, historic charm, convenient location, desirable quality of life, and community pride.

In the WCDC’s 2019-2025 Strategic Plan, vacant property and homeowner programs that help to improve the overall quality of life for all residents was highlighted as a key goal of the organization’s Community Vitality initiative. The WCDC has historically had a paid staff member assigned to the role of vacant property coordinator to assist residents with navigating public processes and opportunities related to the acquisition and rehabilitation of properties. The WCDC has become known as the place to get technical support in understanding and navigating the issues related to vacant and abandoned properties.

**EKS Solutions LLC** is a WBE and WOSB certified consulting agency built on over a decade of community-based design work, inclusive engagement expertise, training in the public policy realm, and experience leading in the nonprofit sector by its owner, Evaine K. Sing. Her role in this effort was to manage the deliverables for the PHARE grant, including providing support for neighborhood convening, data collections and analysis, findings report, and the development and provision of technical assistance and education resources related to vacant properties.

**Ellen Sylves Ruddock** is an independent consultant and retired entrepreneur who strategized with residents 15 years ago and returned at the request of the WCDC to facilitate community concerns and neighborhood meetings in 2020-2021.

**The Hill Group** is a long-term consultant for the WCDC, assisting with meeting facilitation, strategic planning, and organizational development. For this effort, the firm’s role included scheduling, logistics, facilitation, and transcription of community focus groups and Strong Neighborhoods meetings.



**BRIEF OVERVIEW**

The challenges in addressing the complex issue of vacant property are compounded by owners who have stopped paying taxes and maintaining their property, resulting in a need for stabilization, stewardship, and long-term planning. These vacant and abandoned properties are more than just a symptom of larger economic forces at work in the community. Vacant and abandoned properties negatively impact public health outcomes and adjacent property values, escalating municipal costs and leading to community decline and disinvestment.

Vacant and abandoned properties have long plagued southwestern Pennsylvania and the industrial cities of America’s Rust Belt, where manufacturing jobs have been replaced with education, medicine, and technology. This shift has been occurring since the 1950s, but the spike in foreclosures following the 2008 recession compounded problems for these areas, causing vacancy rates to surge nationwide. These communities face mounting blight and physical deterioration of properties, declining tax revenues, and rising public costs. Local factors, such as the condition of the properties, the health of the local housing market, and the strength of the regional economy, are what shape the range of options available for returning these properties to productive use.

During the latter half of the 20th Century, many Rust Belt communities experienced substantial population loss as longtime residents moved to growing suburbs or other regions with more opportunities. This decline in the number of households created a gap in housing supply and demand. Not only did this mismatch leave many structures vacant, but it severely weakened local housing markets, limiting the potential of market-based solutions to vacancy. Jobs and retail moved to the suburbs as well, leaving behind former industrial sites and main street commercial corridors. Both residential and commercial foreclosures are at high risk of becoming vacant or abandoned. Former occupants are likely to vacate the property, and because the costs associated with the foreclosure process are high and the value of a given property is often very low, lenders or servicers may walk away.



Local political and economic contexts, as well as limitations of capacity and resources, shape the tools that local governments, nonprofits, and neighbors employ to address and reuse vacant and abandoned properties. The most desired outcome is to quickly return a property to its previous use – an owner-occupied residence or a thriving business. However, tight credit, weak markets, population loss, or other factors may require other solutions such as demolition, conversion of owner-occupied housing to rental housing, or replacement (such as constructing a solar farm on a former industrial site). Strategies for reuse aim to stabilize and revitalize neighborhoods and may stimulate economic recovery and growth or, in the case of shrinking cities, manage decline in ways that improve quality of life for the remaining residents.

**DEFINING TERMS**



Not all vacant properties are the same. A property that is for rent or sale can be vacant for a short time and a vacation home might be vacant for most of the year. If these properties are well maintained by responsible owners, they will not become eyesores or depress neighboring property values. The lack of an active occupant in a structure does not necessarily mean that property will become a liability to the community. In this case, **vacant** simply means unoccupied, without specifying habitability. As it relates to land, this notion is applied to the lack of any active utilization for any ongoing purpose.

**Abandonment** occurs when a responsible party forgoes all responsibilities and obligations toward real property. This may include not paying taxes, not completing regular maintenance or repair, and not responding to requests or obligations of residents and public summons. In Allegheny County, chronic tax delinquency (i.e. three or more consecutive years) is a key indication, in addition to a vacant status, of abandonment. This is also the minimum threshold of qualifying for public processes for the future acquisition of such properties.

Often, abandoned properties become blighted due to the lack of maintenance. **Blight** is a term used in reference to properties which have visible indications of decline. Overgrown weeds, evidence of rodents, crumbling infrastructure, broken windows, collapsed roofs, and so on are all characteristics of a blighted property. Some of these conditions can be reversed through direct investment, while others require more drastic measures, resulting in the demolition or clearing of property to remove the blight. However, without a plan for the remaining property, blight may

return in a different form, creating a cycle.

**Tax delinquency** refers to the failure to pay the three local taxing bodies (i.e. the county, the municipality, and the school district). While any of these may result in a property being considered tax delinquent, county tax delinquency is often the trigger for access to available programs to acquire a vacant property. For example, in Wilkinsburg, it is not entirely uncommon for some property owners to pay only their county taxes (which are significantly lower than the borough or school district tax rates) in order to protect their property from being eligible for acquisition programs.

**Chronic tax delinquency** refers to a property that has not had its taxes paid in two consecutive years, which is often the minimum threshold for enacting any public acquisition processes. For the purpose of this effort, three or more years, counting back from 2019, was used as a more generous threshold for struggling property owners. Additionally, 2020 was excluded for these purposes, partly due to the timing of the data released as well as the significant hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Owner-occupied** refers to a structure where the regular occupants are also the owner of record. This excludes rental properties and is primarily used to refer to residential properties.



## **CHALLENGES IN ADDRESSING VACANCY AND BLIGHT**

Investors and renters looking to become property owners in Wilkinsburg face numerous challenges, including high property taxes and complex legal proceedings to acquire property. When it comes to vacant property, the difficulty ramps up far beyond what a normal sales transaction entails. The first barrier is the legal status of a property and establishing ownership. In many instances, owners have simply walked away or never established an inheritance plan, leaving these properties in a legal limbo where the ease of transfer is slowed to a crawl.

### ***Strict Property Rights Laws***

Pennsylvania is a landowner friendly state, and regulations strongly support the rights of the owner of record. There are only a few mechanisms, none of which are quick or easy, for transferring the rights of real property from an absentee owner to another. In addition, many of the current processes are complex, sometimes obscure, and difficult to navigate for those without the technical knowledge and supporting resources. This means that larger entities are more likely to make use of these tools than the average community resident, which has real implications for the future character of the community.

This is a major concern in Wilkinsburg where most abandoned properties are the result of the owner of record passing away. Therefore, these properties have no responsible steward to continue to manage the property. This does not, however, result in any leniency or efficiencies in navigating the legal mechanisms to gain access to a property.

Formal quiet title actions are required in order to obtain a legal title, which is a special legal proceeding to determine ownership of real property. A party with a claim of ownership to land can file an action to quiet title, which serves as a sort of lawsuit against anyone and everyone else who has a claim to the land. This process can vary in length of time, depending on the capacity of all parties involved, though there are specific timing constraints for activities, meaning the minimum length of the process is nine months but can extend to two years or more in some cases.

### ***Scale and Condition of Property***

The condition and type of housing stock that is prevalent within the borough may actually be a barrier to the reclamation of these properties. Many of the houses in Wilkinsburg were built to accommodate larger, multi-generational families and are

too large for today's needs. These large, older homes also pose a challenge for people who want to age in place as most are multi-story with stairs inside as well as outside leading into and out of the property. As such, many residents struggle not only to maintain their property as they get older, but also to conveniently live in them.

### ***High Tax Rates***

With a heavy tax burden and increasing vacancy, owners are less inclined to invest in their properties. This is particularly true for landlords of rental properties. As more properties become blighted, less investment occurs and renters seek out better quality units. This leads some landlords to rent out their units until a major cost arises and then they walk away.

Currently, Wilkinsburg has some of the highest taxes in the county with a total millage rate of 48.23, including municipal, school, and county taxes (Wilkinsburg Borough Website 2021). This tax burden has been seen as a major actor in potentially increasing the barrier for investment in the borough, leading to its continued decline. This is especially apparent when looking at some of its neighboring municipalities, such as Pittsburgh, which has some of the lowest taxes in the county. For example, for a property assessed at \$100,000 in both municipalities, Wilkinsburg property owners would pay an extra \$2,524 more than if they lived in Pittsburgh. This applies also when looking at smaller municipalities, such as Swissvale or Edgewood boroughs, which offer annual savings of \$851 and \$1,988 respectively.

What's more, many residents have fallen significantly behind on their taxes over multiple years. A total of 2,320 properties were tax delinquent in 2019, and of those, 1,683 have been delinquent for at least three years.<sup>8</sup> This means that roughly one-third of all Wilkinsburg property owners are not able to keep up with their taxes, totaling \$1,030,185 in lost revenue just in 2019. The loss of this revenue not only puts a heavy burden on Wilkinsburg's finances, but it also adds additional costs to future homeowners and business owners who now must pay these owed taxes or engage in lengthy bureaucratic processes to get them removed. As such, it is fairly common to see homeowners simply walk away from properties they cannot sell or afford to continue maintaining because of the tax burden and lack of market.

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8 2019 tax data provided by MBM Collections in 2020

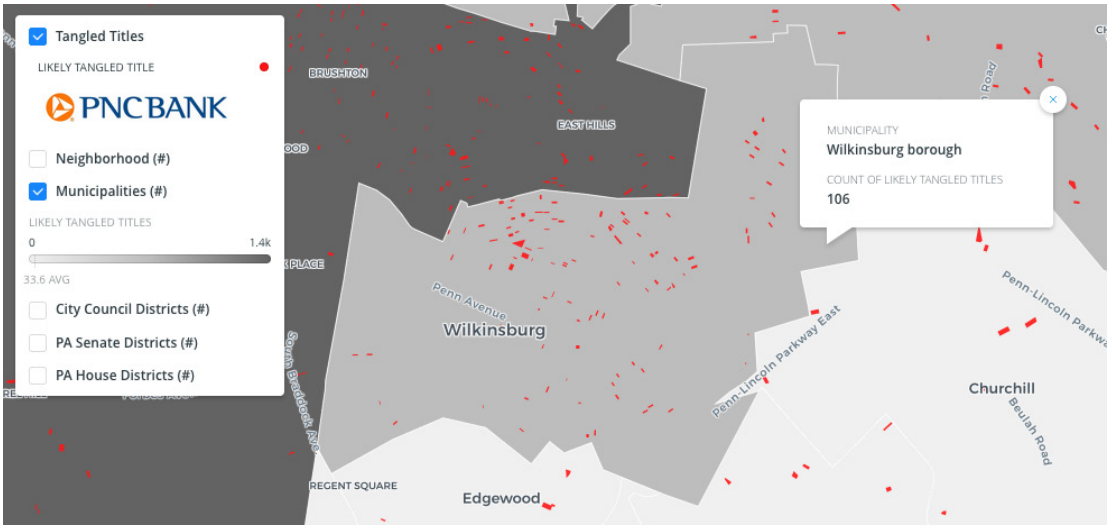
Tangled Titles

Having the title to your home means that your name is on the deed. “Tangled title” refers to the situation when you live in a home you own (or have a right to own) but your name is not on the deed.

Most often, titles get tangled because the person whose name is on the deed passes away and that person’s relatives continue to live in the home without putting the deed in their name. At that point, the surviving relatives have a tangled title because they inherited an interest in the home, but their name is not on the deed. There are a few other ways for titles to get tangled, but the result is the same.

Tangled titles leave a home at risk for deed theft. Deed theft is when someone puts the title of a house in their name without the current occupant knowing about it or agreeing to it. It is important to prevent tangled titles or address them as soon as possible. In addition, if a title is tangled, it can make it harder or impossible to maintain the home. Setting up utilities, applying for utility or mortgage assistance, and getting help making home repairs are all harder with a tangled title.

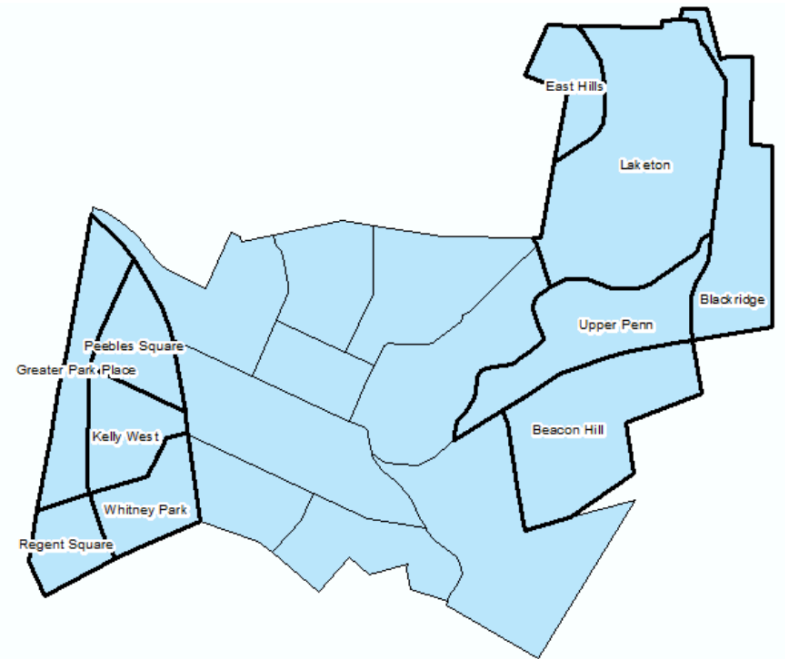
According to an analysis conducted by the Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center in 2017, there were an estimated 106 likely tangled titles in Wilkinsburg. This number has not likely changed drastically, but it is difficult to get a true count based on secondary data. Tangled titles, if left unaddressed, make it difficult to hold residents accountable to property maintenance expectations, but also opens up further confusion if someone wants to acquire such a property and the owner can not represent themselves in the transaction.



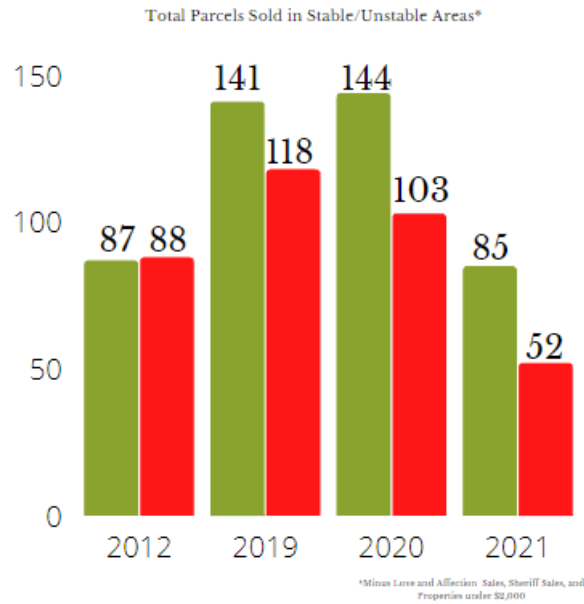
Data provided by WPRDC from 2017 study.

Sales and Market Trends

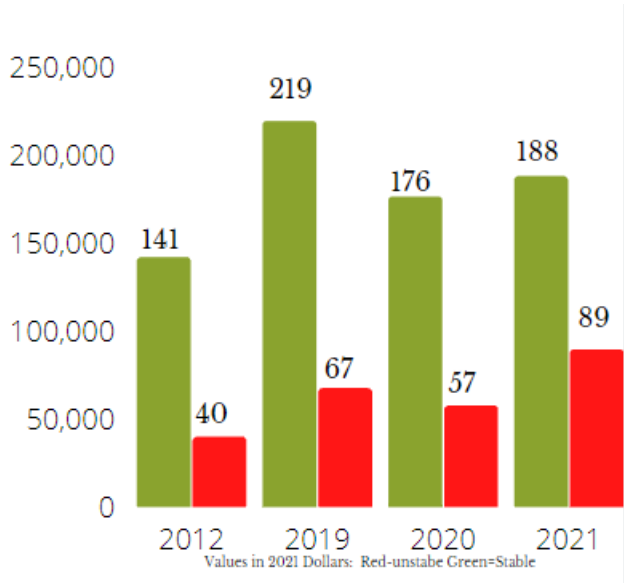
While the average price in Wilkinsburg has increased steadily over the years to \$158,842 in 2019, this is largely carried by the western and eastern neighborhoods of the borough. Those areas marked in the map below make up roughly 40% of the borough’s properties but 57% of all properties sold in 2019 (the last full year pre-pandemic).<sup>9</sup> The trend continues into the pandemic years, widening the gap with each passing year.



Strong market neighborhoods outlined in map. Graph shows number of sales in both stable and unstable areas.



Similarly, the average cost of these transactions is disproportionately spread across the borough. As seen in the figure below, the central portion of the borough has significantly lower values than Wilkinsburg’s eastern and western border neighborhoods. The average property transaction in the border neighborhoods was four times that of a property in Wilkinsburg’s central core in 2012. That gap has shrunk over the past decade, but even with the soaring national prices in 2021, the central market is around half of its eastern and western counterparts.



9 2019 Allegheny County Sales Transactions

Blight and vacancy play a crucial role in perpetuating the downward spiral of most of Wilkinsburg’s real estate market. While prices have grown somewhat across the borough, the distribution is not equal. Properties in central Wilkinsburg grew in value by \$27,000 from 2012 to 2019, compared to properties in the eastern and western neighborhoods, which saw a jump of \$78,000 during the same period. While there was a jump in 2021, this has to be taken into context as a probable anomaly generated from the spikes seen on a national and regional level in the waning months of the COVID-19 outbreak. For perspective, Swissvale, a borough adjacent to Wilkinsburg, saw a 28% spike during 2021 as well. If vacancy continues to increase, the borough will become more reliant on the market of these areas to carry it forward. Additionally, with the reduced tax base, there is decreased investment in other key areas, such as public infrastructure, commercial and job opportunities, transit alternatives, educational diversity, and public services, that might attract new residents to the borough.

**2010 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN**

The Wilkinsburg Comprehensive Plan, completed in 2010, addressed some aspects related to vacant property, specifically in its housing, public safety, steering committee goals, and focus on transit-oriented development.

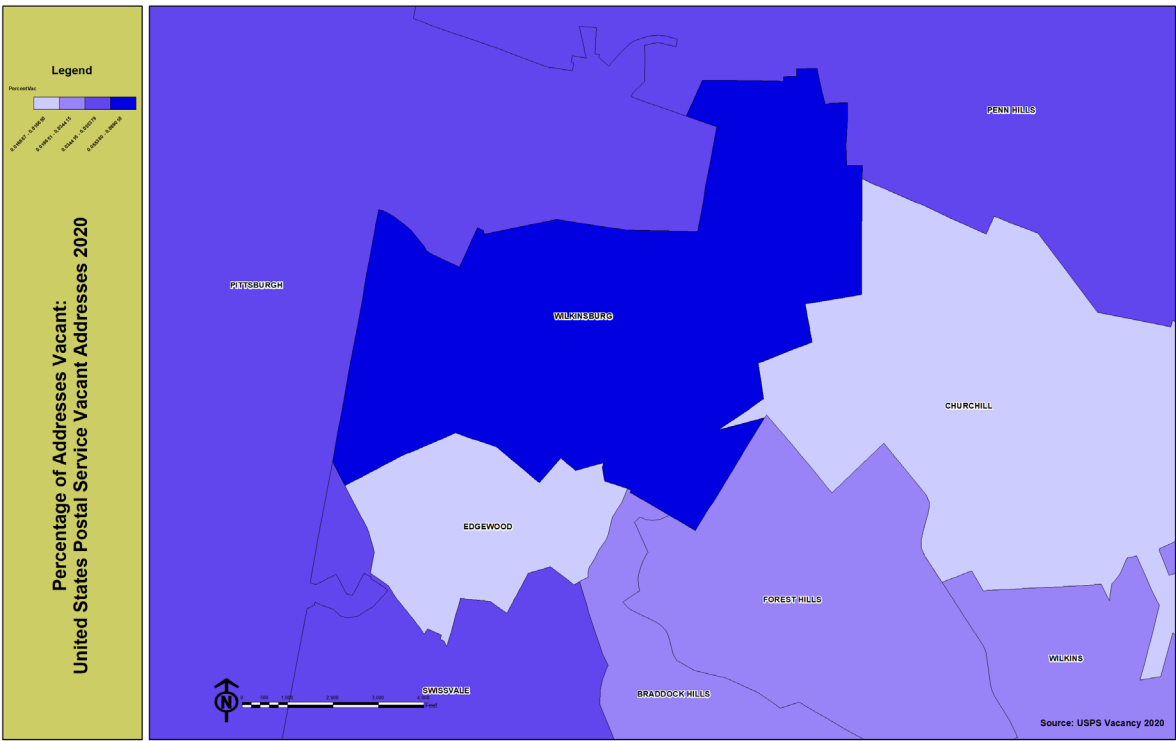
In Princeton Park, the plan notes several vacancies in the area, and proposes a strategy for countering these vacancies by infilling vacant lots around their occupied counterparts. While structures have been removed, the remaining land has not yet been repurposed. In the Franklin and High School neighborhoods, the intent was to focus on investment along corridors of each neighborhood in an effort to create growth and improve visuals of the borough as a whole. The plan mentions high vacancies in the area, and while some demolition has taken place, the heart of the neighborhoods still struggle. The plan notes a significant push from residents to address road conditions throughout the borough, which remains a primary concern for many residents in 2021.

A prioritized focus was placed on encouraging development along the main transportation hubs scattered throughout the northwest neighborhoods of the borough. Since then, a Transit Oriented Development (TOD) ordinance was passed and a new planning effort by the Port Authority is set to begin in 2022.

While efforts have taken place to improve public safety and visual aesthetics of the borough through branding, wayfinding, public art, and litter campaigns, the community has continued to witness a decline of quality housing stock and individual investment in the existing properties to increase affordability and diversity of options.

**VACANCY IN PERSPECTIVE**

Vacancy and blight are regional issues in southwestern Pennsylvania. Industrial decline from the 1940s through its eventual collapse in the late 1970s led to massive migration and population loss, which continues today. Despite this, many communities in the region have found stability through the tech and healthcare boom centered largely in the City of Pittsburgh. Many of the city’s neighboring communities have been revitalized as new families seek out more affordable and quiet suburbs. **This has not been the case for Wilkinsburg, which has seen a decline**



*Wilkinsburg/County comparison of USPS data.*

**more drastic than any of its neighboring municipalities.**

According to the United States Postal Service (USPS) data on vacant addresses, Wilkinsburg ranks first among its neighbors with a vacancy rate of nearly 9%. By comparison, Penn Hills comes in second at 5.5% followed closely by Pittsburgh at

5.2%. It is important to note that USPS only looks at addresses and not structures themselves.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, looking at the most recent results of the 2020 Census, Wilkinsburg lost over 800 housing units, or 8.5% of its total stock, in the past 10 years most likely due to demolition or disrepair and are no longer habitable. Out of Wilkinsburg’s eight neighbors, only two others lost housing, with Swissvale being second with 182 units lost or 3.6% of its total stock.<sup>11</sup> The 2019 American Community Survey Estimates tell a similar story with over 20% of the borough’s housing units being vacant with the next closest municipality being Swissvale at 14%.<sup>12</sup> Wilkinsburg’s level of vacancy more closely resembles a former steel town. The major difference is that steel towns relied on a single industry to keep themselves afloat, whereas Wilkinsburg was once a bustling streetcar suburb with a diverse economy.

Wilkinsburg is not alone in its battle against blight. However, the scale of Wilkinsburg’s vacancy sets it apart in its own unique category given its history, size and scale of properties, and the context of its neighbors. **While other communities have effectively been able to slow their blight, Wilkinsburg has not had nearly the same level of success.**

CAPACITY & ROLES

Wilkinsburg Borough

Wilkinsburg Borough has several committees and strategies in place to address and remediate vacancy and blight.

The **Infrastructure & Blight Committee** focuses on the condition of streets and paving suggestions, stormwater issues, and vacant properties that are in disrepair or dangerous. The committee meets on a monthly basis to determine if code enforcement needs to take any action to get properties boarded up or demolished. Code enforcement will usually refer people who are interested in acquiring vacant property to the Allegheny County Vacant Property Recovery Program.

Together with the **Wilkinsburg School District**, the borough developed a **Tax Abatement Program** to reduce the amount of taxes paid for the first 10 years on a newly renovated property and a **Tax Compromise Program** to help people acquire

property that may be severely tax delinquent by forgiving the previous debt. In addition, many council members assist their neighborhood block club efforts and participate in community improvement efforts.

More recently, the borough created a **Joint Tax Committee** to review properties and to increase the number of viable properties taken to Sheriff’s Sale as a strategy to reduce the number of tax delinquent properties and increase outside investment within the community.

In addition to these strategies and resources, the borough’s **Department of Public Works (DPW)** is tasked with the general maintenance and upkeep of the borough, including bulk waste removal, recycling collection, graffiti removal, street resurfacing and maintenance, and more. DPW has also led efforts to board up vacant properties and coordinate borough-wide clean ups.

Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation

The WCDC has been committed to the vacant property challenge in Wilkinsburg since its founding. It has not often been a primary focus, but rather a necessary one given how prevalent the issue is throughout the borough. WCDC staff members have participated in many ways, including providing basic information and technical assistance to the community as a development partner, community advocate, and community organizer.

A renewed commitment was emphasized in the WCDC’s most recent Strategic Plan 2019-2025, which highlights several ways that the WCDC can and will work on this issue moving forward. By prioritizing vacant property and homeowner programs, the organization is committed to filling in capacity gaps and remaining a consistent source of support for residents seeking help addressing vacant properties.

Maiello Brungo & Maiello, LLP (MBM Collections)

MBM Collections and Maiello, Brungo & Maiello, LLP have decades of experience in delinquent real estate tax collection representing 18 taxing bodies in their collection efforts. MBM has been appointed to Wilkinsburg since 2014. MBM’s team, composed of tax office staff, legal staff, and attorneys are fully knowledgeable in all facets of the tax collection process. MBM’s comprehensive process addresses all delinquencies, large and small, while their team addresses taxpayer concerns and questions.



10 USPS Vacancy 2020  
11 2020 Decennial Census  
12 2019 ACS 5-year estimates

### Community Partners

There are several local organizations who play a role in addressing and remediating vacancy and blight and, overall, improving the quality of life in Wilkinsburg. These organizations offer programs, educational and physical resources, and support for the improvement of real property within Wilkinsburg, in addition to making their own investments to further their mission in Wilkinsburg. Several of these organizations are listed below.



**Hosanna House** provides health and human services to children, youth, and families in Wilkinsburg and surrounding communities. The organization has also taken on a more tangible role in the built environment. As one of the borough's largest single property owners, Hosanna House has begun to acquire, redevelop, and activate many of the abandoned buildings and lots adjacent to their anchor location at the former Horner School, which was renovated as a community and social service hub.



**Wilkinsburg Christian Housing** is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving Wilkinsburg through the renovation of homes. The organization started in 2010 when a long-time property owner donated two houses to Covenant Fellowship Reformed Presbyterian Church. The Covenant Fellowship RP Church is also the host of the annual Transform the Triangle Community Clean-Up Day, which organizes and hosts volunteers to board up abandoned houses and clear brush in the Park Triangle neighborhood.



**Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation (PHLF)** develops real estate on a nonprofit basis, working primarily in low-income communities to create affordable housing through the restoration of historic neighborhoods. They have over 50 years of experience in developing real estate in some of the most challenging real estate markets in the region. In Wilkinsburg, PHLF has worked in the Hamnett Place and Franklin neighborhoods since 2004. The organization has invested over \$25 million in rehabilitation of historic structures, resulting in over 80 affordable housing opportunities, including single family homes, townhouses, and apartment units, as well as two gardens and a former auto repair shop, which was transformed into their Housing Resource Center.



**Young Preservationists Association (YPA)** represents and promotes younger voices in historic preservation that use community engagement and education to advocate for the preservation of historic sites and structures in the Greater Pittsburgh region. YPA advocates for historic preservation as an essential tool for economic

development and regional revitalization. In 2019, after attending a Hamnett Place Neighborhood walking tour to advocate for the rehabilitation of the west side of Whitney Avenue, the organization placed the street in their annual Top 10 Historical Sites to preserve.

**Wilkinsburg Pollinator Garden Group** assists residents with implementing pollinator gardens to help transform yards and open lots into an oasis for pollinators and birds. These gardens help residents not only enjoy more natural beauty, but also support local wildlife while reducing stormwater runoff and improving air and water quality. There are several active block clubs in the borough. The clubs are organized and driven entirely by residents who care deeply about the future of the community. Participation in a block club is an effective way to stay involved and create positive change in your neighborhood.



**UpStream Pgh** (formerly Nine Mile Run Watershed Association) is an environmental nonprofit with a mission to restore and protect our watershed ecosystem. Based in Wilkinsburg, they have overseen several large-scale stormwater improvement projects in the borough. Their most recent project is located on three vacant lots on Hill Avenue owned by the borough. This project, a public garden with native plants, is estimated to capture up to 750,000 gallons of stormwater annually. UpStream is also working on another very large project for the Wilkinsburg Stormwater Resiliency Project through a \$590,000 grant for this project from DEP Growing Greener. It will renovate two borough-owned parking lots, one on South Avenue and the other on Wallace Avenue. Fundraising will continue to expand this project.



Beginning in 2022, the **Port Authority of Allegheny County** will initiate more detailed design and planning of some of the recommendations outlined in a 2018 Transit Revitalization Investment District (TRID) Study that was completed for the Borough of Wilkinsburg. The year-long study confirmed that Wilkinsburg has an abundance of development potential but the transportation infrastructure to support those opportunities is dilapidated and disconnected; the resulting plans will have an impact on the potential for vacant properties in close proximity to transit infrastructure.



**Grow Pittsburgh** serves as a resource and guide for backyard, school and community gardeners, as well as urban farmers across the Greater Pittsburgh region. Recently taking over the former struggling Garden Dreams business and property, they have been putting the focus on continuing to invest in a 20-year business by expanding



the vision of what’s possible in the space. The effort resulted in the replacement of a blighted building with new greenhouses and an intention to acquire an adjacent vacant lot. Additional programming and opportunities for Wilkinsburg residents will continue to expand from this investment.

**Resident Stakeholders**

Residents and business owners are the primary Wilkinsburg stakeholders for outreach and input. Interested investors as well as former residents have also participated in the discussion regarding vacant property in the borough. Resident input must continue to be prioritized in planning efforts since many improvements will rely on the will and capacity of those who call Wilkinsburg home.

**CURRENT PROGRAMS AND TOOLS**

While programs and tools to address vacancy and blight are available to residents and other stakeholders, there is room for improvement, both locally and across the state. Below are the resources currently available.

**[Statewide] Conservatorship**

In response to a petitioner’s request, a judge may designate a conservator, which is usually a responsible private or nonprofit entity, to bring a blighted property into compliance with property maintenance and building codes. This process can be complicated and requires legal representation and some upfront investment that has the potential to be reimbursed if the owner of record steps up during the process. There are specific eligibility criteria for both the property and petitioner, but conservatorship provides access to a property legally without full ownership.

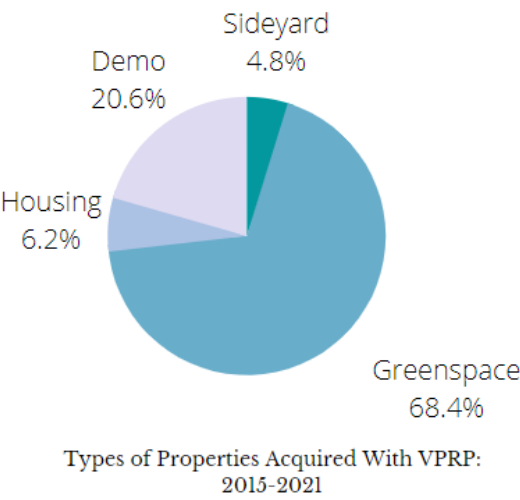
This tool is gaining popularity, but due to its complexity, interest comes primarily from established entities with ample financial resources to navigate the system. A statewide effort is underway to attempt to close some problematic loopholes in Act 135. In addition, renewed efforts to inform more community-minded entities and provide the support needed to successfully become a conservator would be worthwhile. More information about conservatorship can be found here:

[https://rhls.org/wp-content/uploads/ConservatorshipManual\\_Final\\_05102011.pdf](https://rhls.org/wp-content/uploads/ConservatorshipManual_Final_05102011.pdf)

**[Countywide] Vacant Property Recovery Program**

The Allegheny County Vacant Property Recovery Program (VPRP) acquires vacant, blighted properties and conveys them to applicants who have developed a concrete

reuse plan and demonstrated the capacity to implement it. Applicants may include individuals, municipalities, community groups, local businesses, and private and nonprofit developers. The VPRP process is lengthy. To be eligible, a property must be vacant and tax delinquent for at least three years. The application process then takes a minimum of nine months from submission to property acquisition. During this time, applicants are not permitted to complete any work or inspections on the property. Prospective applicants cannot have any ties to the previous owner, even if the previous owner is now deceased.



Over the past six years, the VPRP has moved 209 vacant properties to new owners within Wilkinsburg, with 181 of them being acquired by the borough itself. As seen in the figure below, the majority of acquired properties were vacant lots to be repurposed as greenspaces or side yards. Of the total, 13 properties were acquired for housing, either private, rental, or affordable housing.

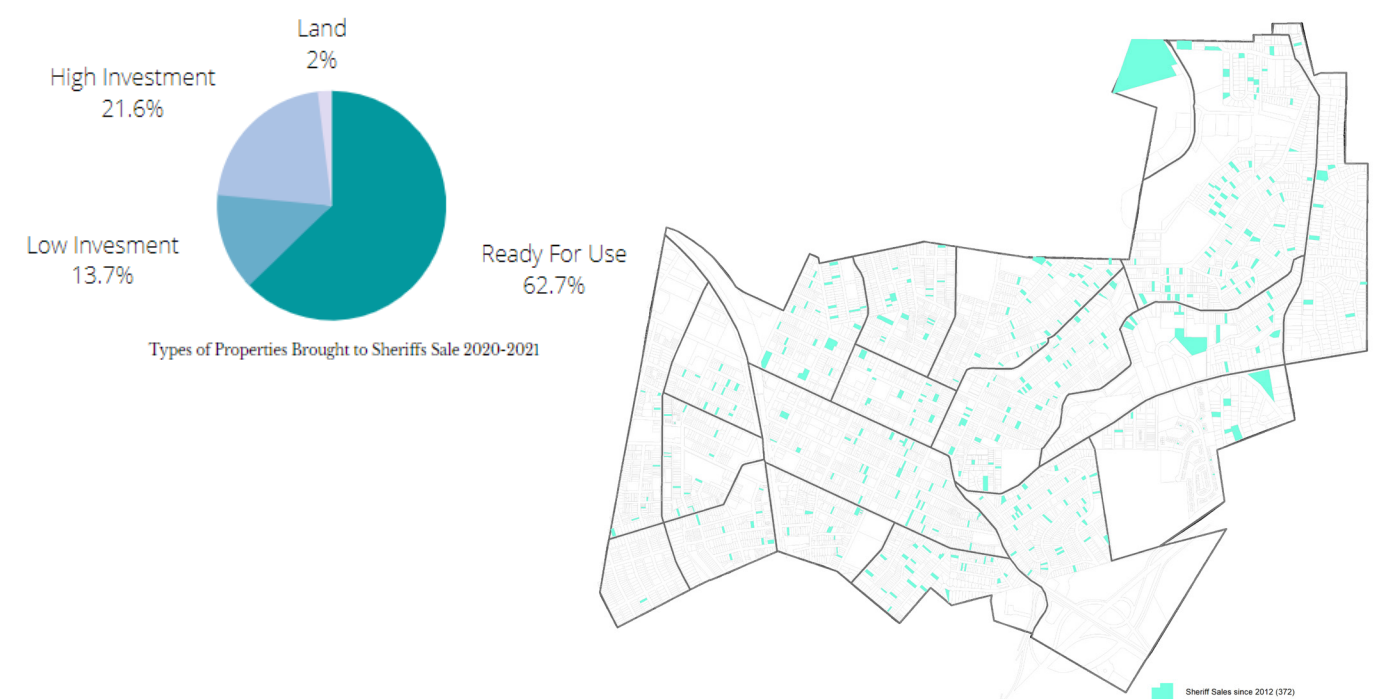
Lots and properties acquired for demolitions or greenspaces cost the interested parties around \$600 on average. Those that went through for side yards paid a slightly higher amount, ranging anywhere from \$650-\$800. The average cost to acquire a vacant house ranged anywhere from \$5,800-\$7,200 on average. If acquired for affordable housing, that cost decreased to around \$2,000.

While the VPRP is a valuable tool, there are several reasons it has not been widely used. First, the program is not being regularly marketed as a tool for individuals to invest in their community. Second, while the initial acquisition cost is low, the renovation costs and taxes may be too high. Finally, as described above, this process takes a significant amount of time, which is a deterrent for many people.

**[Countywide] Sheriff’s Sale**

A sheriff’s sale is a public auction that is conducted upon court order after an owner fails to pay a judgment, usually back taxes, mortgage default, or unpaid municipal bills connected with a property. In Allegheny County, this monthly auction includes tax sales (i.e. failure to pay back taxes) and mortgage foreclosures (i.e. failure to pay

lender) that are published by the sheriff’s office as sales listings, informally known as a “bid list.” Sales results and postponed results are also maintained by the sheriff’s office. The proceeds from the sale are used to pay mortgage lenders, banks, tax collectors, and other lien holders.



Properties that have recently been sold through Sheriff’s Sale and the distribution of properties conveyed.

The sheriff’s sale process helps make tax delinquent property available for acquisition by a new owner via the highest bid. Properties are specifically selected as having the best chance of being bid on at auction. This often means that the properties brought are still considered to have market value, rather than the more blighted properties. The primary goal is to recoup as much of the lost tax revenue as possible while ensuring the tax delinquent properties do not end up becoming more blighted. The downside is that the bid prices have continued to rise as well as construction costs, preventing many residents from being able to benefit, which can lead to more outside developers investing in the borough.

In the past, auctions would be an easy way to get property at a cheap price. In 2012, for example, the average sale price was \$3,620. Today, the average price has reached \$30,000.

Sheriff’s sales have been a valuable tool in combating vacancy, but they are not as effective at solving the issue of truly blighted and abandoned property. When

comparing properties brought to auction since 2020, only 11 were marked as needing more extensive renovations during the vacant property inventory. Additionally, many vacant, abandoned, and tax delinquent properties in Wilkinsburg (approximately 675 according to the 2021 property inventory) require such extensive renovation and are so encumbered with tax liens that it makes them unlikely to be purchased at sale. Currently, sheriff’s sales are an effective way for a new owner to step in before a property becomes too blighted, but these sales fail to make an impact on the blight that is already occurring.



While sheriff’s sales are a useful and necessary tool that can return properties to tax-paying ownership, they do not offer any safeguards to protect the culture of the community. Due to cost and complexity, sheriff’s sales are not a resident-friendly tool and they encourage speculation and outside interest more than they encourage redevelopment and security from within the community. **This issue is particularly important to Wilkinsburg residents, and it was brought up by every group that participated in the community conversations this year.**

**[Borough] Tax Abatement**

The Wilkinsburg Tax Abatement Program offers a 10-year graduated increase in property taxes on improvements made to real property in Wilkinsburg. Any person, organization, corporation, limited liability company, partnership, or association may apply. In addition to this tax abatement, the borough also offers an Enhanced Tax Abatement. The difference between the regular and enhanced tax abatement programs is dependent on the property type. Both programs require the same application, which must be submitted when acquiring a building permit for improvement or construction.

**[Borough] Tax Compromise**

The Tax Compromise Program addresses the issue of back taxes on real estate owed to the borough and the school district. This ordinance is a result of the borough’s joint tax committee, the school district, and Allegheny County. The aim of these efforts is to reduce barriers to private investment in the borough and to enhance existing and upcoming economic development projects. In order for the compromise to

go into effect, all properties must have a sales agreement in place with the current owner before the application can be approved. The issue with this requirement is that many tax delinquent properties have been abandoned for over a decade and the owners cannot be found or are deceased. The other downside to this program is that an eligible property may only be sold for a maximum of \$2,000 in the sales agreement. Investors may choose to hold onto their assets in hope, assuming the market will eventually turn and they can recoup more of their investment instead of settling for such a small amount.

*[Individual] Direct Sale by Owner*

Direct sale by owner is the most straightforward path to an acquisition of vacant property. If the current owner is unresponsive, this option may not be feasible, but outreach attempts should be documented. Furthermore, acquiring a property from the owner does not remove any owed taxes on the property, which would be shifted to the new owner.

**Working with secondary data always has its limitations since the various entities that collect or process it retain different standards, in addition to the data being from varying years.** Where possible, the same standards of analysis were used despite the year or context the data was collected.

The Allegheny County parcel file was used as the basis for the graphic representation of the borough, created by clipping out the borough and then joining all .csv files to it via the parcel ID number (PIN) or the lot-and-block. In some instances, some rows of data were excluded; in a cursory review, it appeared to be due to mismatching PINs, duplicate entries, or missing information. Though not ideal, the margins of error were low enough to be acceptable from a planning and context setting perspective, as is the basis of this analysis.

Additionally, the primary data – observed blight and vacancy condition of all parcels in Wilkinsburg – were collected by residents and volunteers, none of whom are considered real estate, construction, or development experts and collected from the right of way and not from a thorough examination of each structure/property. As a result, there are natural errors in misclassifications and less obvious cues. The analysis related to current status of properties is to be viewed with skepticism since conditions can change rapidly through sales, emergency demolition, and ad hoc redevelopment efforts.

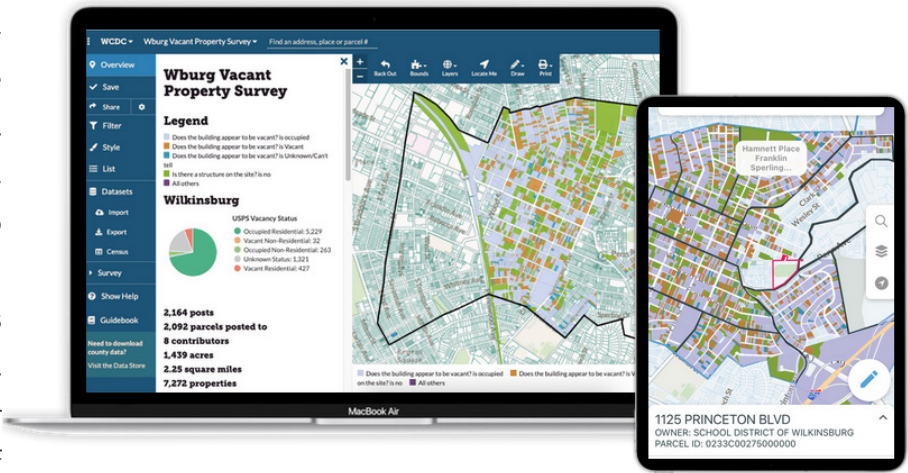


VACANT PROPERTY INVENTORY

Without a universal definition of vacancy and abandonment, it is difficult to assess the number of vacant and abandoned properties. Because of this, a parcel by parcel inventory is the best tool for determining a community’s vacant and abandoned property rate. **Regrid** is a mobile application developed by Loveland Technologies to assist communities with the collection and visualization of parcel-based data.

The WCDC trained residents to use the app and conducted a walk-through with participants to ensure uniformity when inputting data. After the training was completed, participants were allowed to survey on their own with back end support available for any questions they might have while surveying. Collection started in November 2020 and ended in early 2021. Of the borough’s 7,000 parcels, 6,700 were assessed during this time period. Properties were assessed based on their occupancy, current state, and use in order to capture as many variables as possible in understanding the spread of vacancy within the borough. Observing every vacant property, both structures and land, residents took a pass at assessing the condition of each structure (e.g. whether it was currently viable with some cosmetic updates, if it needed some structural updates or a full rehab, or whether it should be assessed for demolition).

Over the duration of the surveying process, weekly assessments of the surveys were made to ensure that the data collected was as accurate as possible. In addition to these spot checks, a robust review of the data was completed at the conclusion of the



collection process in order to assess any properties that may have been miscoded. These spot checks and assessments were done both virtually and on-site to mitigate any potential mistakes. Additionally, through the planning conversations, clarity was added by residents most familiar with their neighborhoods.

**BOROUGH-WIDE FINDINGS**

*Vacant Property Trends*

This report is an update of previous inventories which have occurred over the last decade. The first vacancy list was created by the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation (PHLF) in 2009 in partnership with the now defunct Community Technical Assistance Center (CTAC), which identified 647 vacant structures. In 2014, the borough sponsored an update for the 2009 list with a group of interns who identified that the number of vacant properties had grown to 735. Notable changes from 2009 (or earlier) to 2014 included: 88 properties were either occupied or being renovated, 23 were demolished, and an additional 133 were newly vacant.

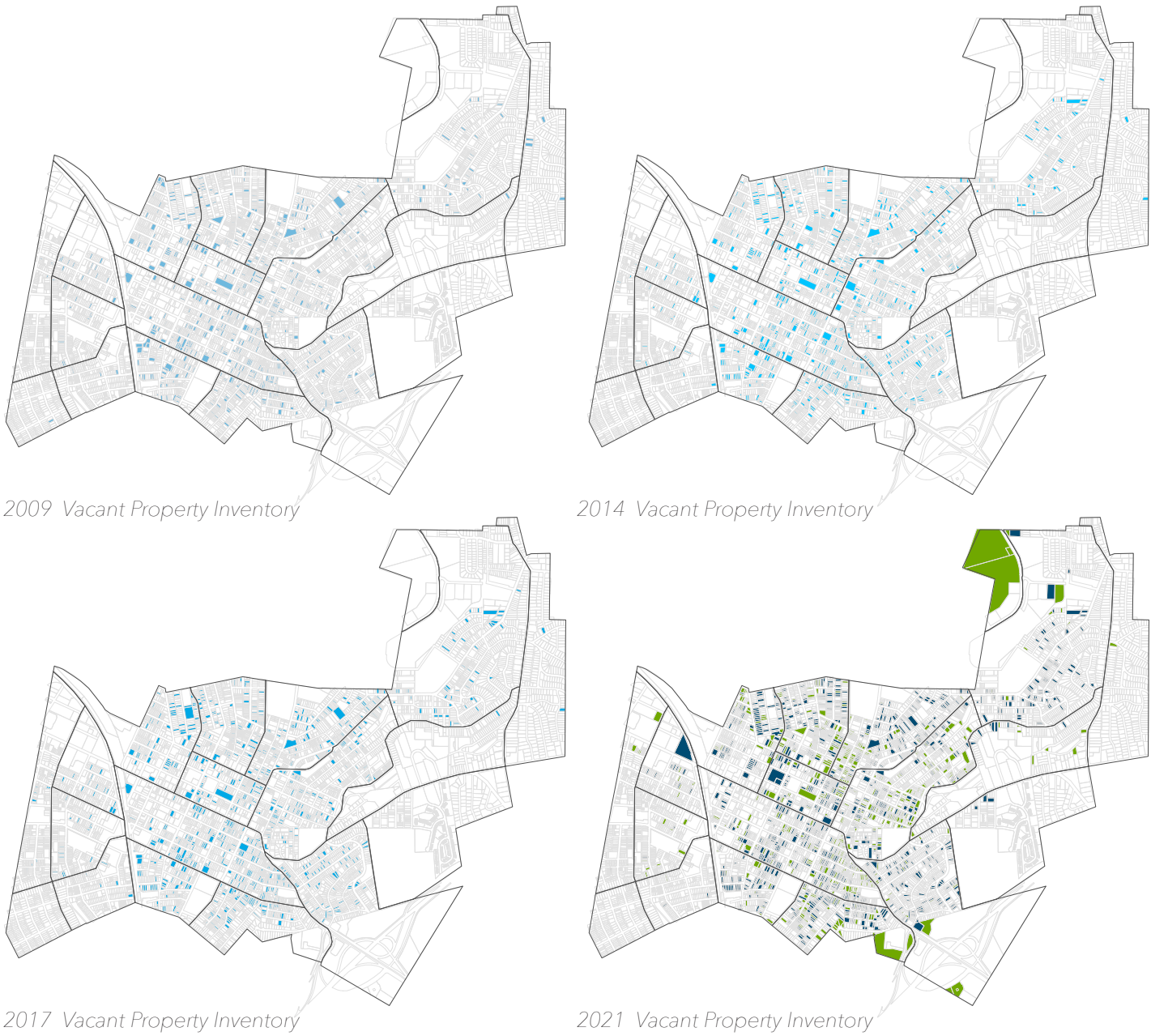
In 2017, the inventory was updated once again by WCDC staff. Completed over a season by a single observer, the survey prioritized vacant structures throughout the entire borough. The total identified properties were 834, with over 100 of them appearing on the 2014 list, implying chronic vacancy and abandonment.

In 2021, the WCDC, in an effort to get a full grasp on vacancy, decided to update and expand the 2017 list by including both structures and land. This resulted in a more robust list, which found 1,026 vacant structures with an additional 604 lots of land identified as vacant. **Reviewing the data over the past 10 years, it is clear that vacancy in Wilkinsburg is worsening over time.**

In the 2021 inventory, we found that 147 structures from the 2017 inventory were no longer present during the 2021 update, meaning that they were demolished during the intervening period. Some of these lots have been reused for parks, playgrounds, and urban gardens, however, many remain empty.

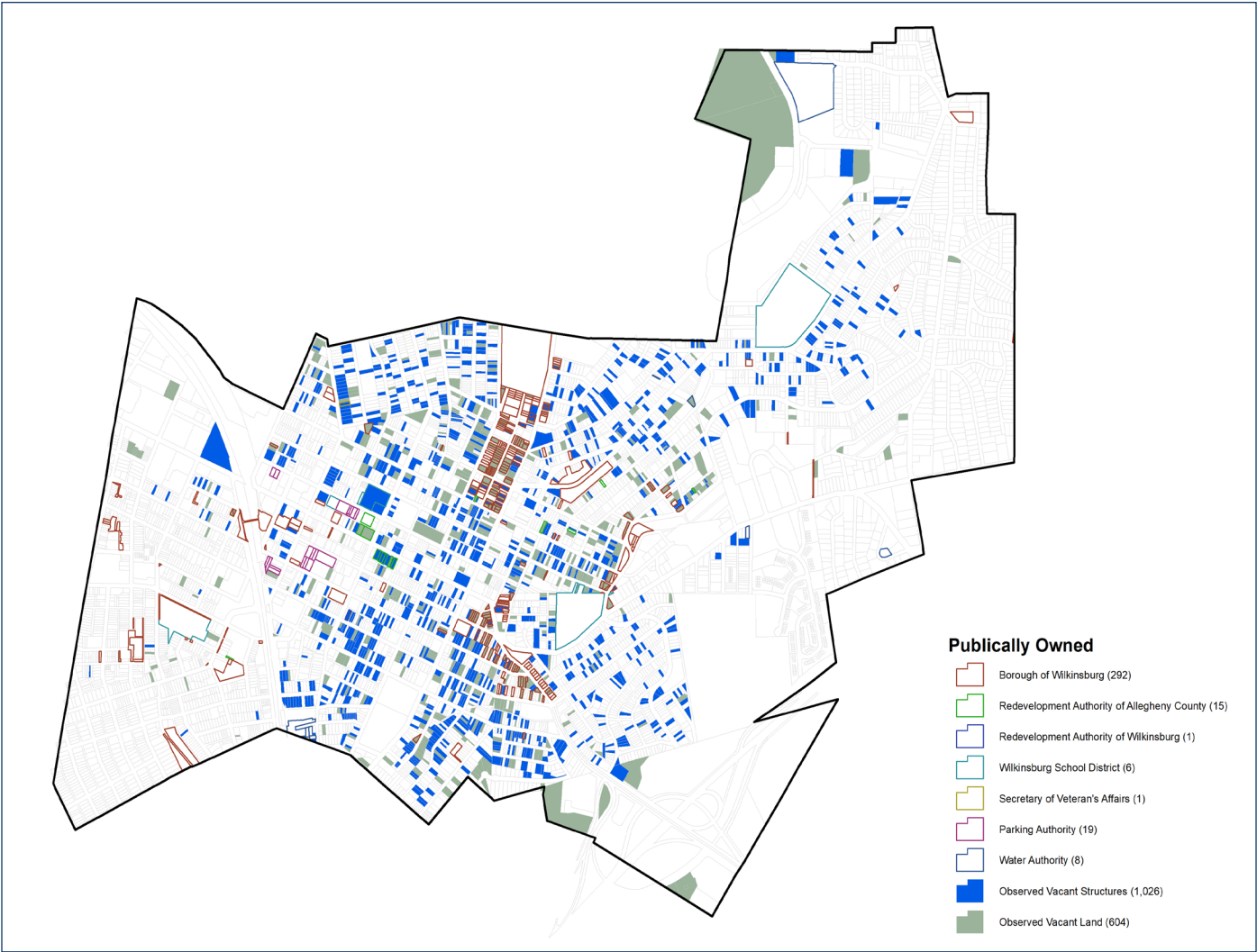
Previous iterations of the inventories largely built upon previous surveys and focused only on structures, however, the current inventory looked at all properties borough-wide, classifying both land use and building use. This means our findings have to be taken into account with the knowledge that older surveys may have missed properties so changes may be smaller than we illustrate. That being said,

**the borough’s overall vacancy has grown dramatically over the past 67 years and will likely continue to be a growing challenge without significant and focused investment of capacity and financial resources.**



Vacancy is concentrated within the central portion of Wilkinsburg. These communities have high demolition rates, vacant structures, and land scattered throughout. Some of these areas have engaged in reuse strategies for these empty lots, but most remain either vacant or act as both official and unofficial parking for residents. The neighborhoods on Wilkinsburg’s periphery have remained largely stable over time, as reflected in the low or non-existent vacancies from the most recent surveys.

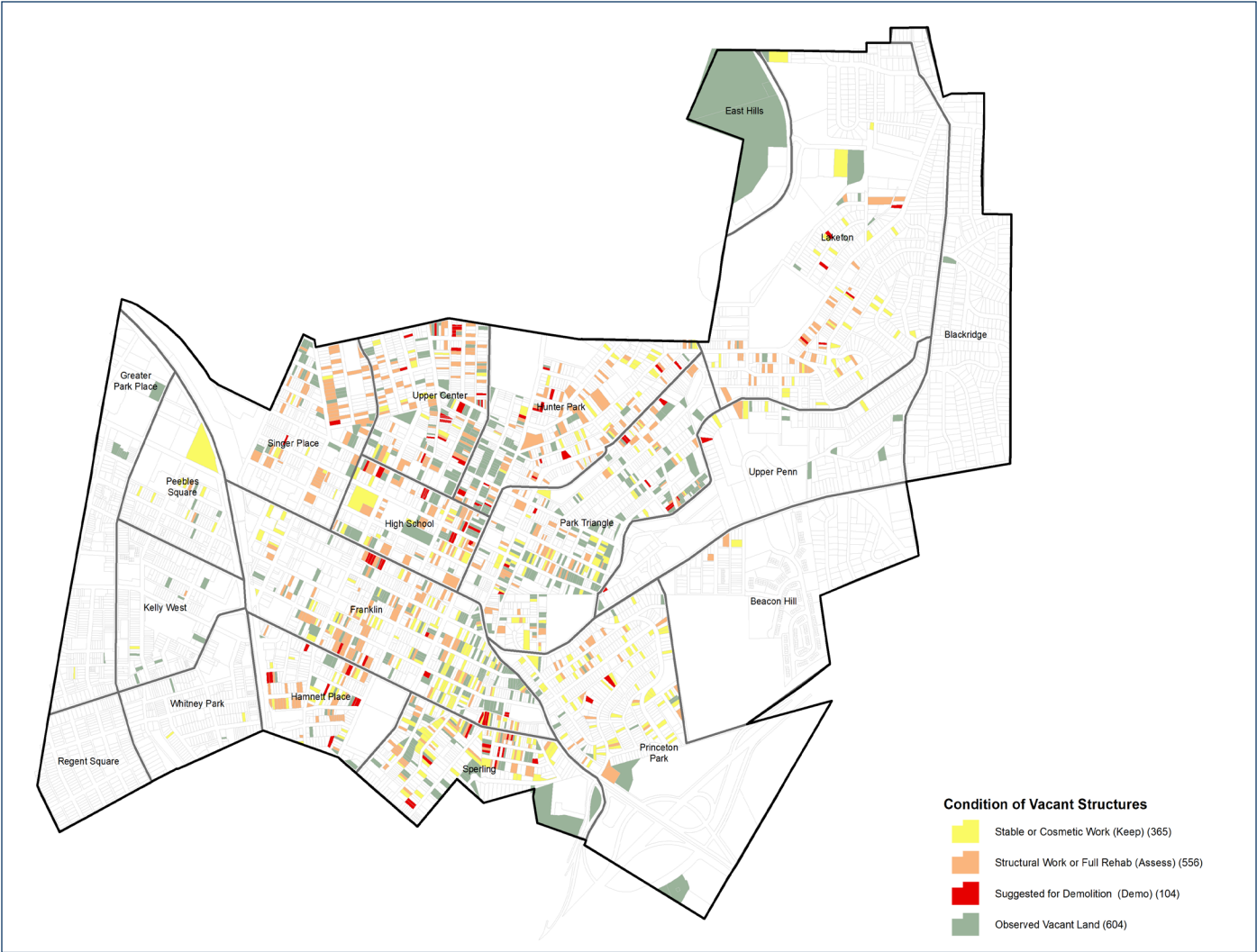
**PUBLICLY OWNED PROPERTIES & VACANCY**



Several public entities collectively own 342 properties within the borough. When overlaying this information with the vacant property observations, there are things to note. Of the 1,026 vacant structures observed in the recent inventory, 30 of them are owned by public entities with a clear plan for their future use. Out of the 30, 23 are in Wilkesburg Borough's name, with five under the Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County, one by the Redevelopment Authority of Wilkesburg, and one under the school district. For land, there is a similar pattern with 122 of the total 604 vacant lots owned by public entities. Of those, 115 of them are owned by Wilkesburg Borough, six are owned by the Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County, and one is owned by the Wilkesburg-Penn Joint Water Authority.

Though it is not directly clear if there is a plan for the borough-owned structures; it seems the majority of their vacant land holdings were acquired through eminent domain with the county. There is a concentration of these just south of Hunter Park, which were intended to be part of a previous park expansion plan. The other grouping of lots are along Ardmore Blvd, where the borough undertook a significant demolition effort in 2018, cleaning up one of the key intersections in the heart of the community.

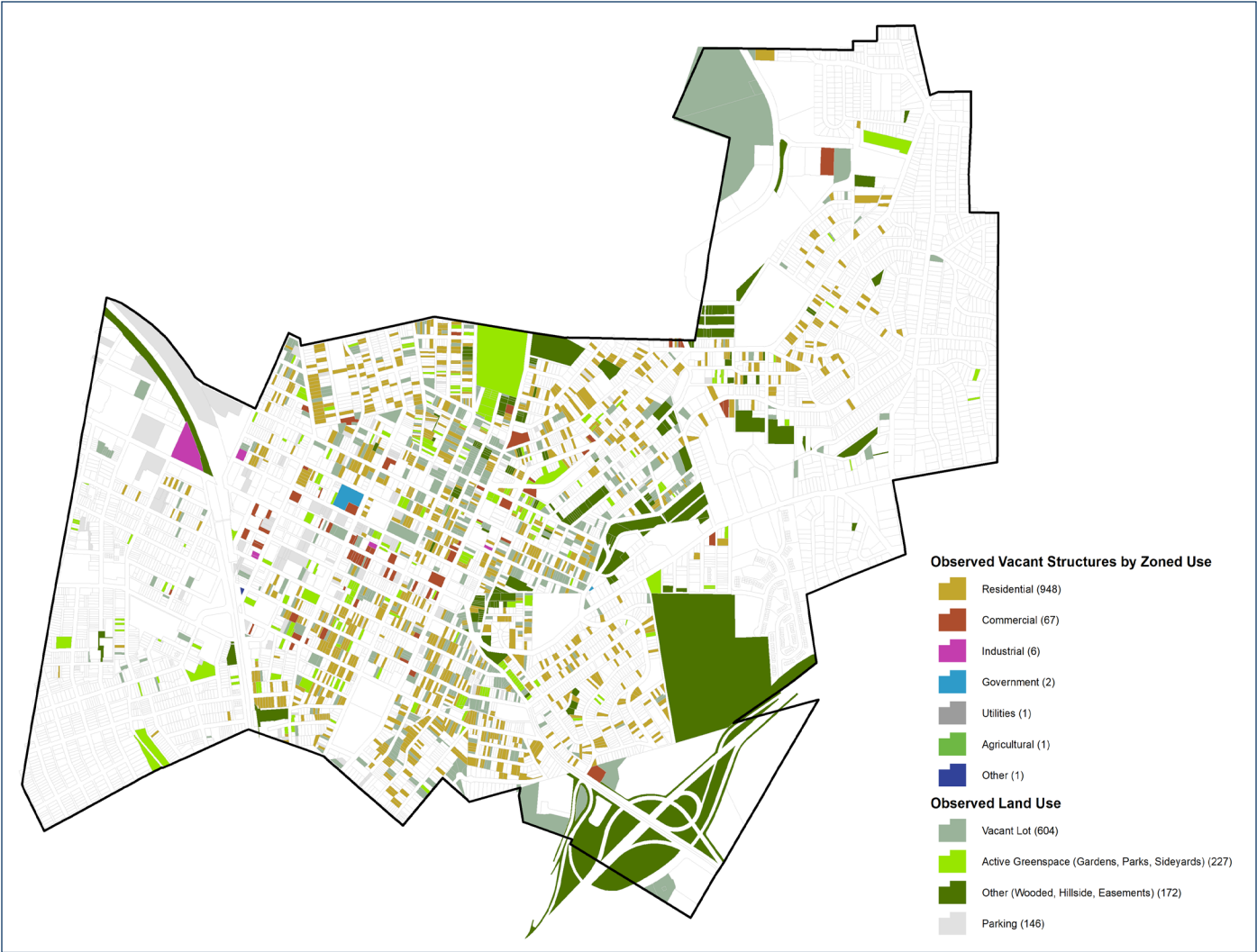
**VACANCY BY CONDITION**



The concentration of vacant properties is in the central area of the Borough, or the areas previously noted as being less / unstable market areas. There is a total of 1025 structures classified as vacant from the resident conducted inventory, with a majority of them noted as requiring additional assessment regarding their re-use potential meaning they have shown some external signs of decay or disrepair and professional expertise in the building or architectural trades can not only help determine if a property is able to be rehabilitated but also whether it is financially feasible to do so as well as further prioritize a list of easier properties to work with over others. The yellow classification could be a mix of temporarily or recently vacated structures as well as those which may benefit from superficial upgrades to increase sale opportunity. Finally, the inventory identified 604 vacant lots of various condition; this is the first officially documented count of vacant lots recorded and will serve as a baseline in the future.

Just over 100 properties were identified as requiring demolition, though that number is believed to be conservative as residents have a clear interest in retaining the architectural and historical quality.

**VACANCY BY PROPERTY USE**

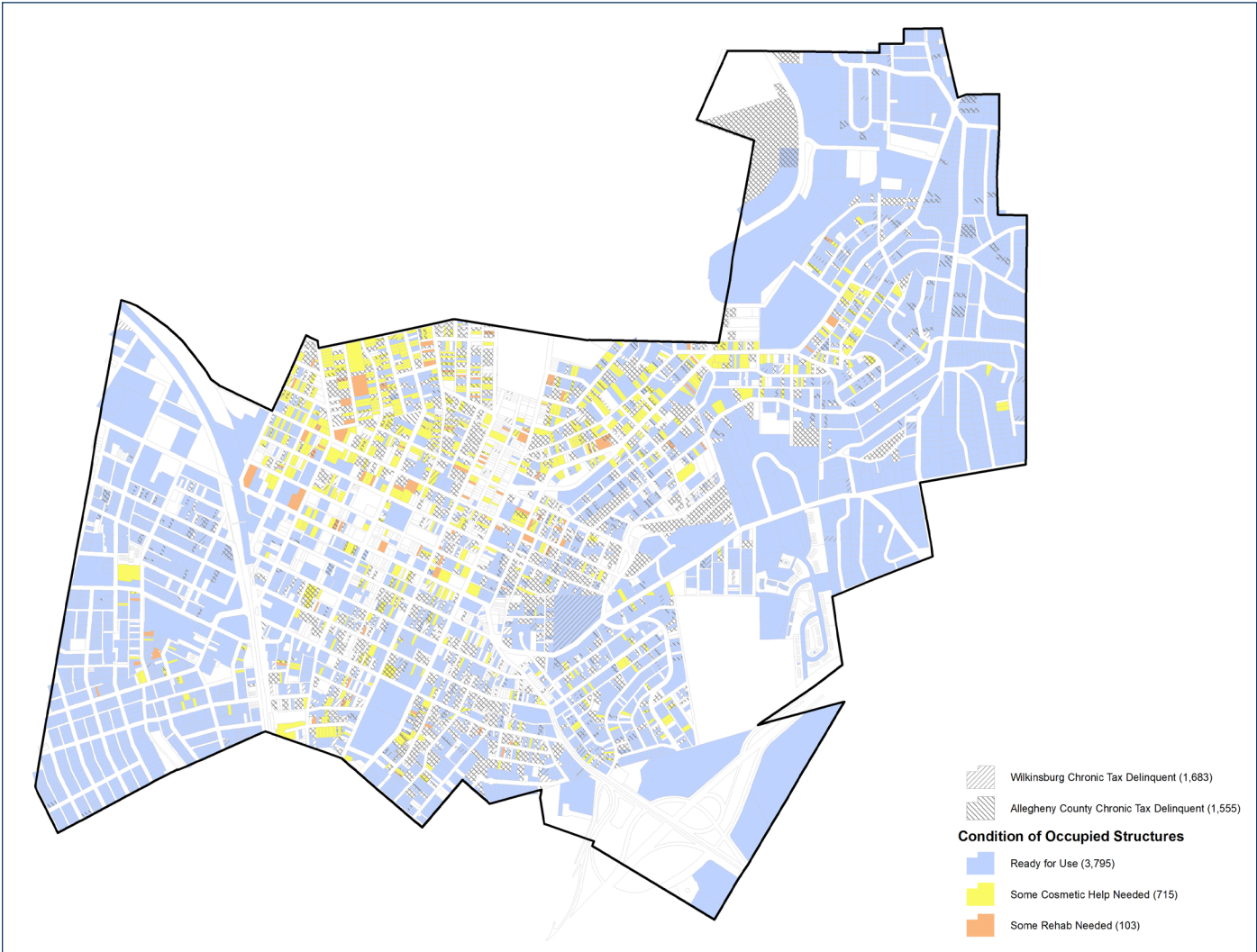


When looking at the vacancy trends by zoning classification, there are several things to note. Residential uses are the highest in the borough. In total, 950 of the 6,420 parcels zoned residential are vacant. The commercial vacancy rate is 67 of the 561 commercial parcels. The industrial vacancy rate is 6 of a much smaller sample of 27 parcels classified as industrial. The remaining classifications are so minor that they are not worth mentioning by a percentage, with government vacancy being two out of 149 parcels; utilities and “other” classifications have a vacancy rate of one out of 22 parcels; and agricultural vacancy of one out of 27 parcels. The total classifications were extracted from the 2019 County Assessment file and cross referenced against those parcels that were observed to be vacant.

Land use counts, as noted in the legend, grouped similar categories with vacant land correlating to a more typical lot that is underutilized and possibly not well-maintained; these represent some opportunities for infill development, ecological improvements, sideyard acquisition, and more. Active greenspace represents land uses that include programmed use with a likely or acknowledged steward, such as gardens, parklets, sideyards, and playgrounds, while the other category refers to more passive greenspace uses

such as wooded areas, hillsides, easements, and the cemetery. These are areas that may benefit from additional investment and improvement, but they are not the most critical as it relates to the blight and vacancy conversation. The WCDC also tracked the numerous parking lots within the borough as these can sometimes be misclassified as vacant lots, but certainly serve a different purpose and are often privately owned and attached to a business use.

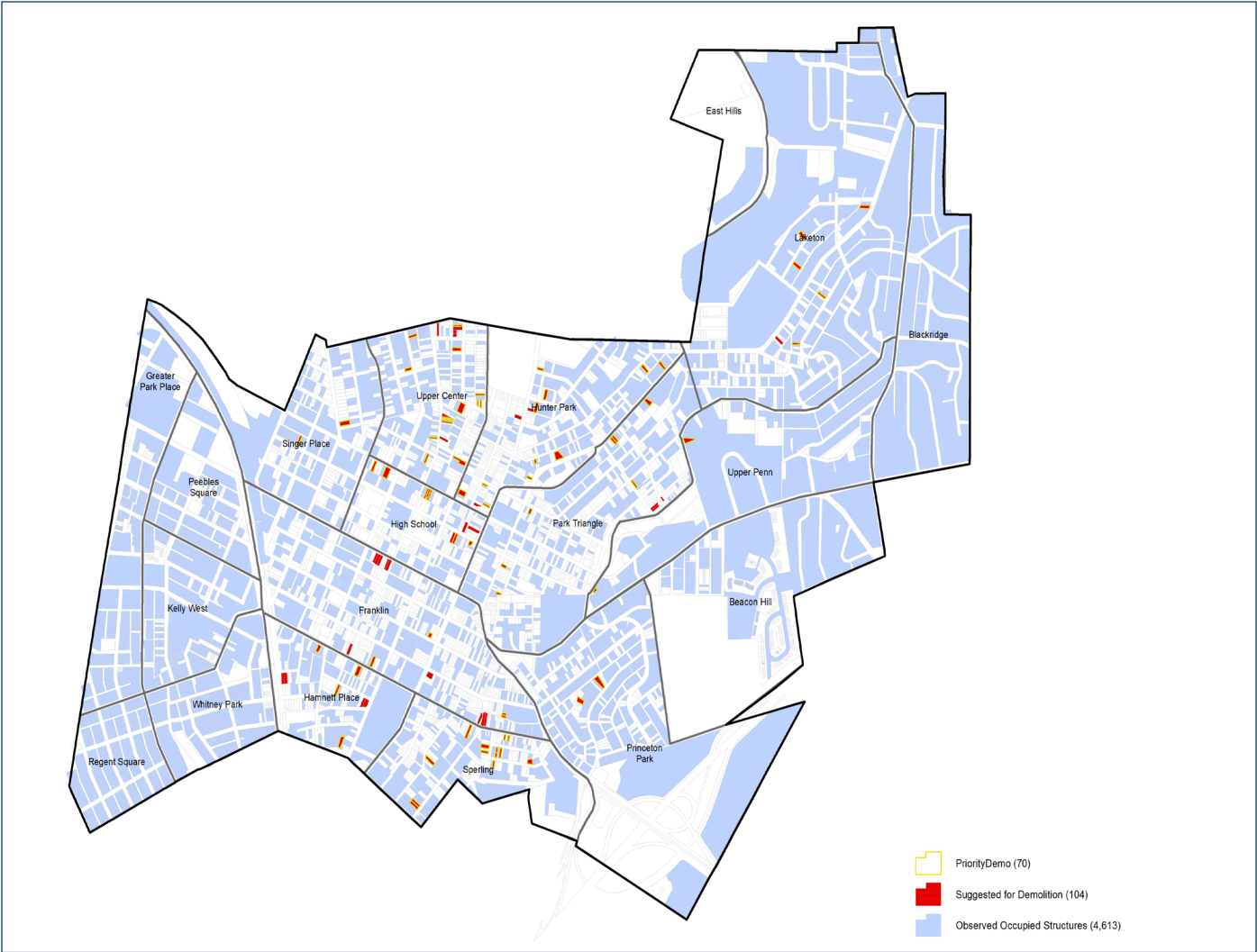
**CONDITION OF OCCUPIED STRUCTURES**



There are over 800 occupied structures that volunteers noted required at least some assistance with either cosmetic or structural work on their properties. This demonstrates a need to support current Wilkinsburg residents, rather than only attracting new residents into the Borough. Each of these properties represent a potential future vacancy if the property isn’t well-maintained or if the homeowner does not have the support services needed to live robustly.

**It is also worth noting that 704 of the occupied properties are also listed as being tax delinquent either by the County or by the Borough and School District and represents an opportunity.**

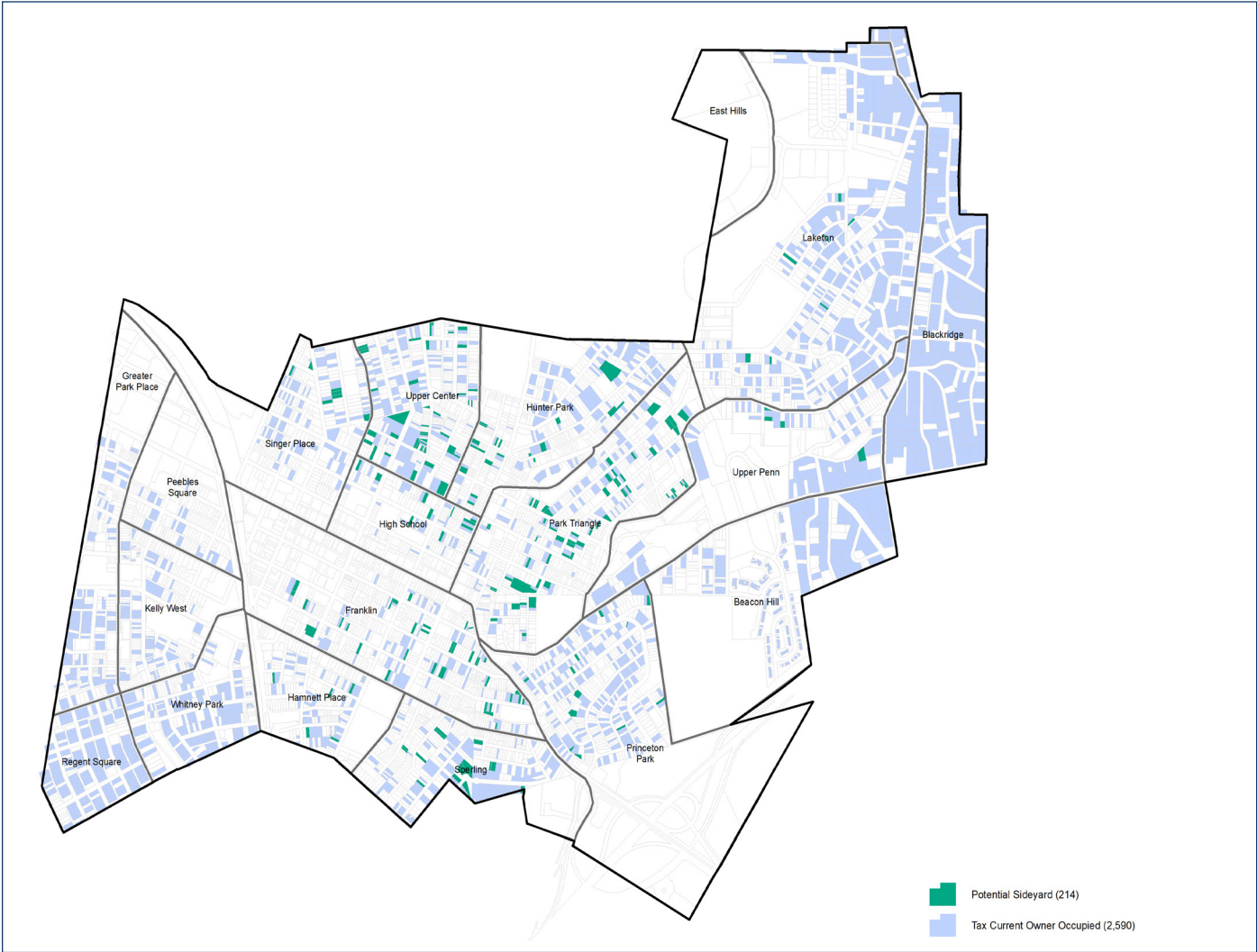
SUGGESTED PRIORITY DEMOLITION ADJACENT TO OCCUPIED STRUCTURES



An examination of properties suggested for demolition shows 70 of the total 104 are directly adjacent to existing occupied properties. This emphasizes the need for strategic demolition as these properties carry further risk of affecting currently viable properties. It also suggests a need to be strategic as there may be additional costs to protect the adjacent properties during a demolition. This is further complicated by properties that share a wall.

Additionally, an accompanying strategy should be developed to ensure that once the unsafe structures are taken down, the resulting lots can be put into productive use, such as being acquired as sideyards by the adjacent occupants. These properties were identified by finding all suggested demos that shared a boundary with an occupied structure, regardless of ownership status.

POTENTIAL SIDEYARD OPPORTUNITIES



Though a limited strategy, there is still the potential to have vacant lots become productive as legally acquired sideyards to property owners. Both commercial businesses and residents can benefit from having additional space for their use. The 214 potential sideyards were identified through publicly accessible data by initially filtering out chronically tax delinquent vacant lots, meaning they would be eligible for acquisition through the Vacant Property Recovery Program. Then, within the structures observed to be occupied were filtered to identify which are ‘owner-occupied’ by seeking those properties where the mailing address and the property addresses matched<sup>13</sup> and finally a query to identify which of the lots share a boundary with one of the resulting owner-occupied properties. A campaign targeted toward the adjacent owner-occupied structures could encourage owners to acquire the additional land and possibly offer supporting resources to do so.

13 This is not a full-proof method of analysis, but is the best method for an initial screening.



## BACKGROUND

The WCDC invited 350 Wilkinsburg stakeholders to participate in a visioning process from June to August 2020. Because large community gatherings could not be held during COVID-19, participants engaged in a series of surveys and Zoom sessions to replicate the community meeting process.

This process found that:

- Wilkinsburg’s **population continues to decline**, which places the tax burden on fewer residents each year;
- Occupied **housing units continue to decline** resulting in less tax revenue;
- The **borough and school district’s financial viability becomes unsustainable** without strategies for increasing revenue and/or decreasing expenses;
- **High tax rates** continue to make the borough uncompetitive for private commercial investment;
- Wilkinsburg residents are among those who **pay the highest property taxes** in the county, with low income residents being the most affected.

In the findings, it is noted that the high property taxes seem to be the root cause of increasing numbers of people abandoning their properties, families moving from Wilkinsburg, lack of investment and improvement in the business district, and the perception of crime and resistance to change. As a result, one of the two recommendations included the formation and ongoing management of a Strong Neighborhoods Committee in order to dive deeply into the issues related to property management and viability. This committee officially launched in October 2020.

Through virtual meetings, the committee shared available tools and resources and provided a platform for residents to voice concerns, ask questions, and share lessons learned. Committee members helped shape the meeting schedule, make vacant property inventory updates, and support outreach efforts.

Participants were recruited through word-of-mouth and borough-wide channels. Residents were asked to fill out an outreach form to help the committee understand which neighborhood they were from and what their interests were. The monthly meetings ended in May 2021, as the committee transitioned into individual neighborhood conversations.

**Resident Leadership**

The work of the Strong Neighborhoods Committee was shaped by input from founding co-chairs, Pam Panchak and Deborah Rose, long-term residents of Wilkinsburg’s Hamnett Place neighborhood. Both residents evolved from renters to homeowners. Their leadership was also instrumental in securing support for the WCDC to oversee a renewed vacant property assessment and recommended strategies.



Efforts were made to recruit local stewards with a deep understanding of their community and who were willing to mobilize their neighbors to maximize representation from all 19 of Wilkinsburg’s neighborhoods. In addition to residents, stewards were also recruited from organizations that work in Wilkinsburg due to their community connections and unique ability to attract potential participants.

**Committee Purpose**

The goals of the Strong Neighborhoods Committee are to (1) build strong neighborhoods through an investigation of the causes and impacts of blight and vacancy in Wilkinsburg and (2) work with the WCDC to develop a Vacant Property

Reuse Strategy to address vacancy and blight, mitigate threats of displacement and gentrification, and create catalysts for reinvestment driven by community vision.

To achieve this goal, the Strong Neighborhoods Committee will:

- 1. Complete a vacant property inventory of the borough
- 2. Develop a robust, active outreach plan
- 3. Develop a framework for community planning sessions
- 4. Conduct neighborhood planning sessions
- 5. Create a borough-wide vacant property strategy
- 6. Connect residents to housing and vacant property resources
- 7. Work closely with established groups to create and implement plans

**NEIGHBORHOOD CONVERSATIONS**

**Outreach**

In order to effectively reach the entire population of the borough for this effort, multiple outreach strategies were utilized. Strategies included:

- Yard signs placed at prominent locations to advertise the initiative. These signs were made to last outside and be moved as the process worked its way through the community.
- With the completion of a physical inventory, the team was able to compile a list for occupied properties and prepare mailings. These mailings provided an overview of the Strong Neighborhoods effort, encouraged residents to get online and stay involved, and how to register and participate in their own neighborhood meeting.
- Most importantly, committee members were asked to go door-to-door, pass out flyers, post them in public places, and spread the word to their own personal networks. Where possible, a resident was selected to provide direct outreach to their neighbors as a trusted and accessible source.

**Meetings**

Beginning in May 2021, the Strong Neighborhoods Committee meetings transitioned to individual sessions held in each of Wilkinsburg’s 19 neighborhoods. The 19 neighborhoods were identified in the 2010 Comprehensive Plan and were used as an organizing tool to help ensure the conversations were manageable. In an effort to reach as many people as possible as well as accommodate flexible schedules and lingering COVID-19 protocols, the WCDC settled on a hybrid model for the community meetings. This allowed for people to stay at home and log onto a

Zoom meeting while others who preferred an in-person format, or who were limited by technology, were invited into a community space to participate.

It was important to move the meetings to individual neighborhoods in order to engage residents in identifying the problems specific to their area and planning relevant improvements. The purpose of these meetings was for residents and stakeholders to envision desired changes and priorities for change in their neighborhood and to identify neighborhood leaders and volunteers. One or two meetings were facilitated by the WCDC team for each neighborhood to help build initial momentum. Residents were then encouraged to continue meeting as a collective to advance immediate actions and build consensus toward future projects, requiring them to develop the informal leadership necessary to get ideas to a proposal level stage.

Meeting agendas were planned and facilitated by Ellen Ruddock. Follow up meetings and subsequent neighborhood gatherings were arranged by the stewards with the support of WCDC staff, Strong Neighborhoods Committee chair Pam Panchak, and volunteers.



The first meeting in each neighborhood focused on background and context for both the consultant team and the residents. Local historian, Anne Elise Morris, provided a brief overview of the neighborhood’s history. The WCDC team provided an overview of the effort, the process, the data collected so far, and other summary facts about the neighborhood. The WCDC also reviewed the types of strategies to be identified. Meeting participants were asked to provide their own insights through a feedback exercise, open dialogue, and relationship building through a shared understanding of how the neighborhood is perceived and what residents hope to see in their community.

MEETING SCHEDULE

- Singer Place: 5/1, 5/11 (6.30-8.30 pm) @ the Sleeping Octopus
- Upper Center: 5/6, 5/20 (6.30-8.30 pm) @ the Sleeping Octopus
- High School: 6/8, 6/15 (5:30-7:00 pm) @ Christian Church of Wilkinsburg
- Franklin: 6/24, 7/8 (6-7:30 pm) @ PUCS
- Hunter Park: 7/20, 7/27 (6-7:30 pm) @ Mt. Calvary Baptist Church
- Park Triangle: 7/22, 7/29 (5:30-7:00 pm) @ Covenant Fellowship Reformed Presbyterian Church
- Sperling: 8/3, 8/10 (5:30-7:00 pm) @ Western PA School for the Deaf
- Princeton Park: 8/19, 8/26 (5:30-7:00 pm) @ Community Forge
- Blackridge, Laketon, East Hills: 8/31, 9/7 (5:30-7:00 pm) @ Turner Elementary
- Peebles Square, Regent Square, Whitney Park, Greater Park Place, Kelly West: 9/14 (5:30-7:00 pm) @ St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church
- Beacon Hill, Upper Penn: 9/23 (5:30-7:00 pm) @ WCDC Office
- Hamnett Place: 9/21 (5:30-7:00 pm) @ WCDC Office

The second meeting was aimed at gathering more specific feedback from residents by featuring specific cluster areas of vacancy within the neighborhood, sharing the unique combinations of vacant structures and land while considering the quality, context, and adjacencies of each area. Residents were asked to think about what their guiding principles for re-use might be while considering things such as rehabilitation, demolition, new development, missing amenities, and so on. The outcomes of the second meetings were more focused on individual areas within the community that could become potential projects for future funding.

The meetings were recorded and documented for review, compilation, sharing, and analysis. They began in May and extended through the end of September. Meeting participants primarily included residents as well as interested investors and realtors with familial ties in Wilkinsburg, members of the business and nonprofit community, and many members of local religious congregations. A few groups were able to envision projects for the future in their neighborhood. Other groups were too concerned about the status quo to dream big. Diverse groups in each neighborhood discussed desired changes, opportunities, threats, concerns, issues,

and needed improvements. The common themes among neighborhoods included:

- Vacant and Blighted properties
- Need for urgent demolition
- Safety
- Litter and garbage collection
- Broken sidewalks
- Overgrown trees and vegetation
- Parking
- Parks and gardens

At each meeting, WCDC team members presented detailed maps and pictures of vacant and blighted properties in each neighborhood to help encourage dialogue about critical areas in the neighborhood and how meeting participants might want to see them reclaimed. Participants discussed the sites presented and identified additional sites or problems they felt needed to be addressed. Four areas of action were discussed as a means to categorize strategies and new ideas:

A diverse group of resident participants at each meeting gave voice to their individual neighborhood concerns. Desired changes and priorities varied with each neighborhood just as the amount of vacancy and blight varied.

The WCDC informed participants on the resources available and offered to work with property owners or prospective buyers on their individual pursuits. Residents shared unique analyses of their neighborhood with enthusiasm, courtesy, and frank and specific information. Many neighborhoods are taking initiative and have accomplished many projects on their own, including cleanups, boarding vacant buildings, general improvements, and beautification efforts with their own volunteer neighbors.

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

In addition to planning for long-term change, this effort included the provision of ongoing support for individual resident concerns and questions related to vacant property challenges. Residents have the opportunity to reach out to the WCDC for one-on-one assistance in researching property histories, navigating public processes, and following up with various partners. The WCDC’s website includes content related to various aspects of homeownership, vacant property acquisition and rehabilitation, vacant land reclamation projects, and more. Resources include a mix of informational sources as well as local partners and programs that residents can apply for. Workshops were developed as an opportunity for residents to learn more about specific programs, meet partners, and ask common questions.



**PREVENTION STRATEGIES**

*Support for current residents can stop additional abandonment and prevent further deterioration*

- Financial incentives and resources for repair
- Educational opportunities regarding home ownership, home repair, refinancing, and more
- Financial counseling including estate planning
- Neighborhood programs to support maintenance needs of neighbors (grass cutting, snow removal)

**REDEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES**

*Large project investments can help catalyze additional interest and provide additional amenities to the existing community.*

- Large capitol projects - what and where?
- Strategic demolition - decision criteria
- New construction - what kind?

**REMEDICATION STRATEGIES**

*Through the rehabilitation of salvageable structures and the activation of land, projects can serve as catalysts for additional investment.*

- Facade programs
- Vacant lot activation and reuse
- Sideyard sales
- Zoning adjustments to allow for new uses

**PRESERVATION STRATEGIES**

*Protecting and leveraging existing historical and locally meaningful assets can help retain and promote the local context and identity.*

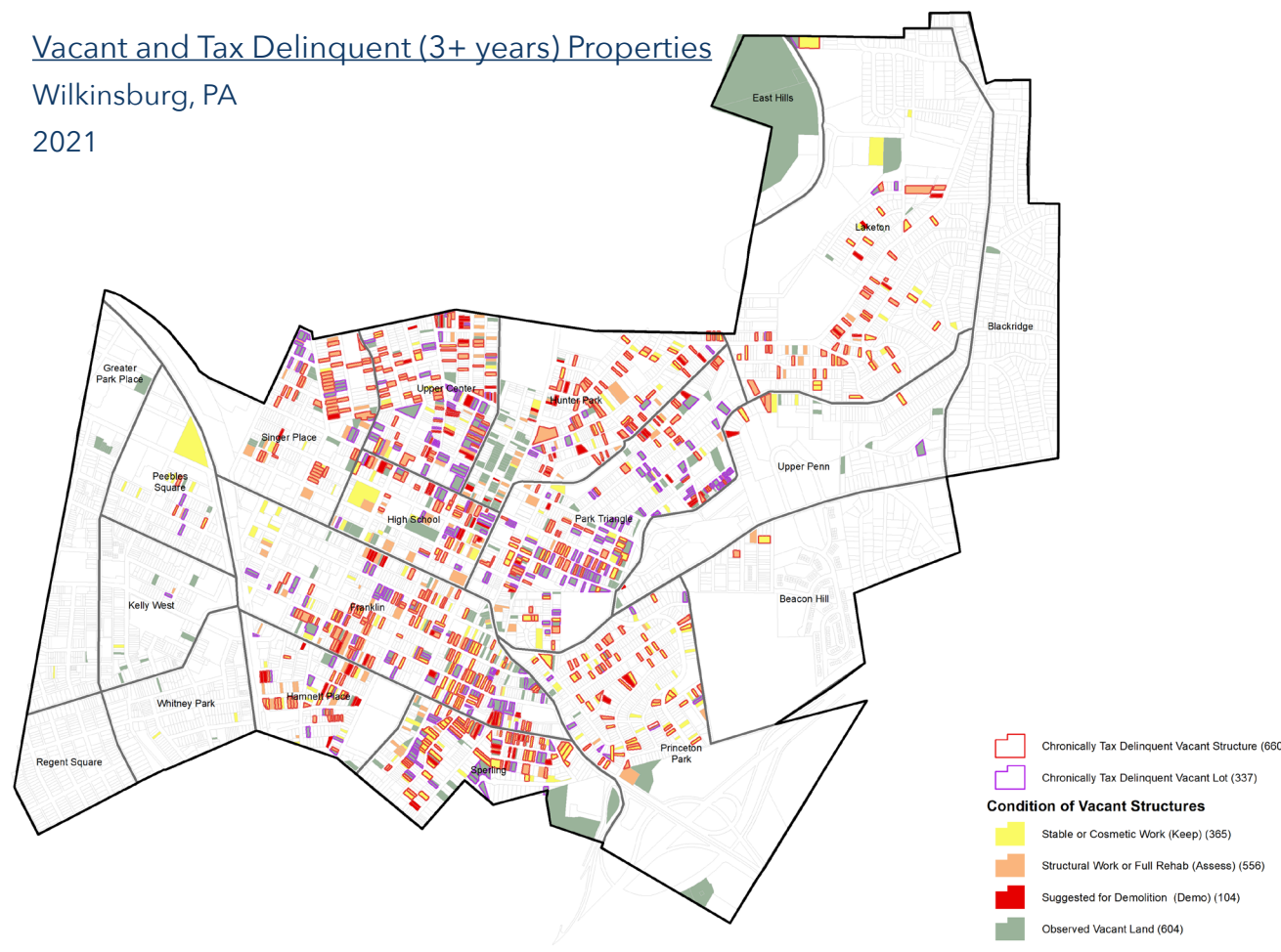
- Mothball of vacant structures
- Deconstruction prior to demolition
- Historic designations



# SINGER PLACE

## WILKINSBURG: MAP OF VACANCY & TAX DELINQUENCY

Vacant and Tax Delinquent (3+ years) Properties  
Wilkinsburg, PA  
2021



## OVERVIEW

Singer Place is located in the northern portion of Wilkinsburg, with Homewood, a Pittsburgh neighborhood, situated directly to its north. The neighborhood is one of the oldest settled areas in Wilkinsburg and as such, much of the housing stock is now over a century old. The neighborhood spans 74.79 acres and has a total of 323 properties owned by 289 individual owners. The zoning for this community has multiple overlays which allows for single family residential, central business district overlay, mixed use residential, transit oriented overlay, and the Penn Ave Historic Buildings overlay.

## NEIGHBORHOOD CONVERSATION

The Sleeping Octopus hosted two community conversations on May 1st and 11th, community residents, and WCDC staff assisting in conducting outreach to the surrounding neighborhood. A virtual option was made available; in total 39 participated, with 7 attending both sessions.



## BRIEF HISTORY

Singer Place was one of the first developed areas within the current Wilkinsburg footprint. Originally, the neighborhood was part of two estates owned by John F Singer and Alexander Nimick, local steel mill owners, who wanted to build their residences away from the smog generated by the mills in Pittsburgh. By 1915 both estates had been purchased and subdivided into the streets and avenues they are today. The area became famous for the “doctors row” or Singer Place, a street where Singer and many other wealthy residents resided. This street is still home to the original Singer and Yingling mansions but also an assortment of homes far grander and older than those found throughout the rest of the borough.



# NEIGHBORHOOD SCAN

## STRENGTHS

- Committed volunteers
- Diversity in age, race,
- Committed and active in the neighborhood
- Architecturally significant homes
- Sleeping Octopus as a venue for community conversation
- Beautiful old growth trees
- Proximity to busway
- Proximity to business district
- Mixed use zoning
- Singer Mansion

## OPPORTUNITIES

- TOD zoning to pursue funding and other resources
- Training and workforce development
- Nature, green space, gardening and urban farming
- Roof gardens in business district
- Welcome committee, increased social opportunities
- Co-housing and intentional communities
- Demo the non viable homes using space for creative re-use
- Art classes, nature classes, and community outreach
- More educational workshops & resources for adults
- Programs for wealth building
- More sports and recreations with role models and mentors
- Spray parks
- Bike lanes and bike stations to encouraging riding
- Blight eradication through green infrastructure
- Pick up litter, clean up area to make more inviting



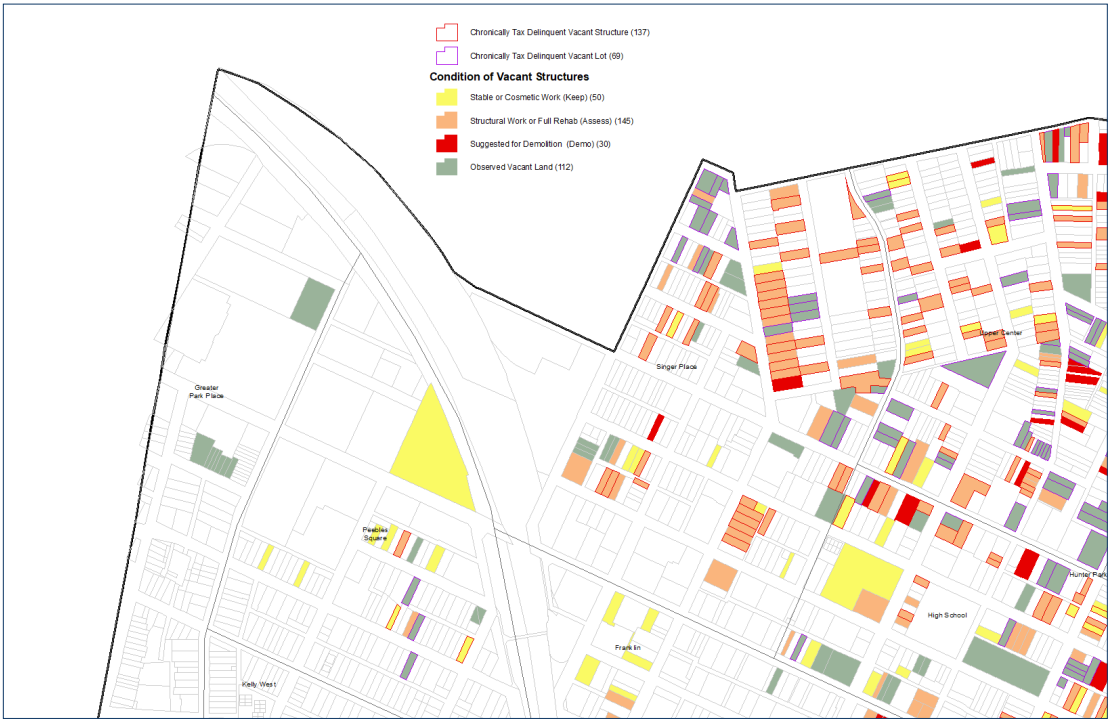
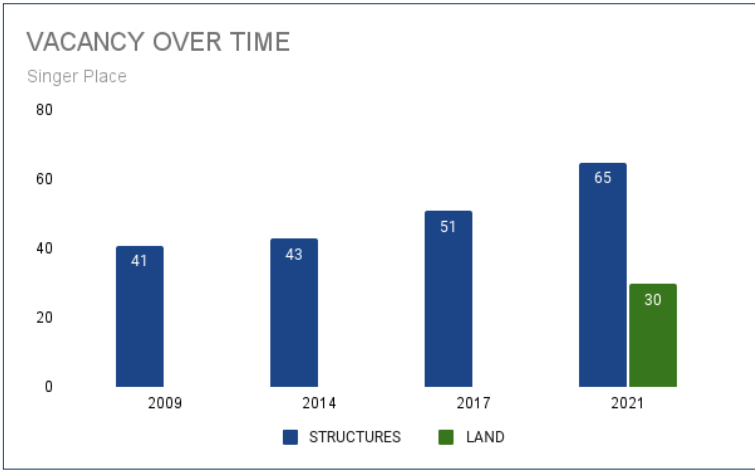
## THREATS, ISSUES, CONCERNS

- Unchecked development throughout the borough
- Deteriorated old trees
- Expensive and exhaustive rehab of large, older homes
- Development happening without neighbor input
- Misperception of Wilkinsburg results in negative reputation
- Litter and trash
- High Taxes
- Limited parking
- Emergency demo or stabilization needs
- Fast cars on Hill Ave
- Aquifer on Singer Place

## NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS

- Landscaping
- Address speculators and avoid land grabs
- Support existing residents threatened by deteriorating properties
- Community stairs need to be fixed
- Better borough and county coordination with community

ANALYSIS



KEY TAKEAWAYS

With the Singer Place neighborhood being almost entirely a single family residential area, it is not surprising that much of the dialogue was centered on the needs and concerns of the existing residents. Many discussed ways to integrate residents into larger community activities and to build connections to develop an engaged community which will thrive. There is a strong community focus with neighbors expressing the interest and willingness to help other neighbors with landscaping needs, collective rehabilitation, litter pick up and community garden and gathering priorities.

Due to the scale of the structures in this neighborhood, the homes are often considered to be out of scale with the needs associated with a typical single family dwelling. Unfortunately, the existing Borough zoning code restricts other creative uses of the many architecture significant structures and in fact encourages the reversion back to single family dwellings if it had been converted previously in order to preserve single-family residential neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup> While the intention is well-meaning, there are several structures that are out of scale with current needs and may benefit from a more individualized approach to reuse.

There is concern for the many properties in need of major repair and maintenance that pose a danger to both a passerby and adjacent, occupied property - often in the form of unmaintained large canopy trees, unstable roofs and chimneys, or multiplying raccoon and rodent populations that have access to unsecured structures. In addition, as an edge neighborhood, they suffer from lack of consistent Borough services and an excess of pass-through traffic, placing a burden on existing infrastructure, resulting in a need for wayfinding, traffic calming and road repair.

<sup>1</sup> Zoning Code 260-308,309 strictly regulates further conversion of single-family dwellings into two-family and restrict further conversion of single-family dwellings into multifamily.

PRIORITIES

- Focus on threats directly adjacent to existing occupied properties rather than seeking to clear new development areas
- Encourage (or mandate, where possible) the use of deconstruction prior to demolition to preserve the integrity of the historic architectural character of the community and make those pieces available for rehabilitation and restoration projects
- Embrace the current neighborhood population which has a large number of creatives and incorporate public art within the community
- Take a proactive approach to tree care and develop a plan for the 100 year old trees that are ready to fall
- Support programs to transition renters into owners and encourage existing residents to invest in the neighborhood
- Encourage sustainable practices in new projects such as permeable paving, greenspaces, and stormwater management
- Restore vacant homes for new owners
- Health and safety are critical elements that must be addressed otherwise trauma continues
- Events and activities to build community (Vac Prop Home Tour, welcoming committee)

SPECIFIC PROJECT IDEAS: Singer Place

- 523 North Ave - demolition
- 520 North Avenue - desire to turn into intentional living space
- 742 Hill Avenue, 717 Hill Avenue, 715 Hill Avenue known as “Doctor’s Row” - co-housing opportunity
- Lower Hill Ave between Wallace and Holmes need to be inspected for best use/next steps.

UPPER CENTER



OVERVIEW

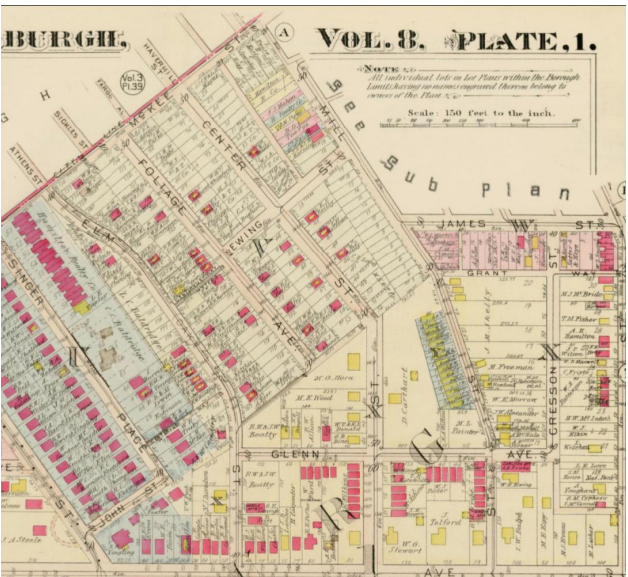
Upper Center is located in the northern portion of Wilkinsburg, with East Hills, a Pittsburgh neighborhood, situated directly to its north. The neighborhood is one of the oldest settled areas in Wilkinsburg and as such, much of the housing stock is now over a century old. The neighborhood spans 54.14 acres and has a total of 467 properties owned by 429 individual owners. The zoning for this community is restricted to only single family residential.

NEIGHBORHOOD CONVERSATIONS

The Sleeping Octopus hosted two community conversations on May 6th and 20th, community residents, and WCDC staff assisting in conducting outreach to the surrounding neighborhood. A virtual option was made available; in total 22 participated, with 12 of them attending both sessions.



BRIEF HISTORY



Nestled next to the Singer Place neighborhood, Upper Center is a mirror of its neighbor in many ways. Largely built on the Singer and Nimmick estates, Upper center was built as a residential neighborhood in the early 20th century after the estates were divided and sold.

While Upper Center does not have houses in scale with those found in Singer Place, there are

still numerous large homes scattered throughout with some later period houses filling in the gaps.

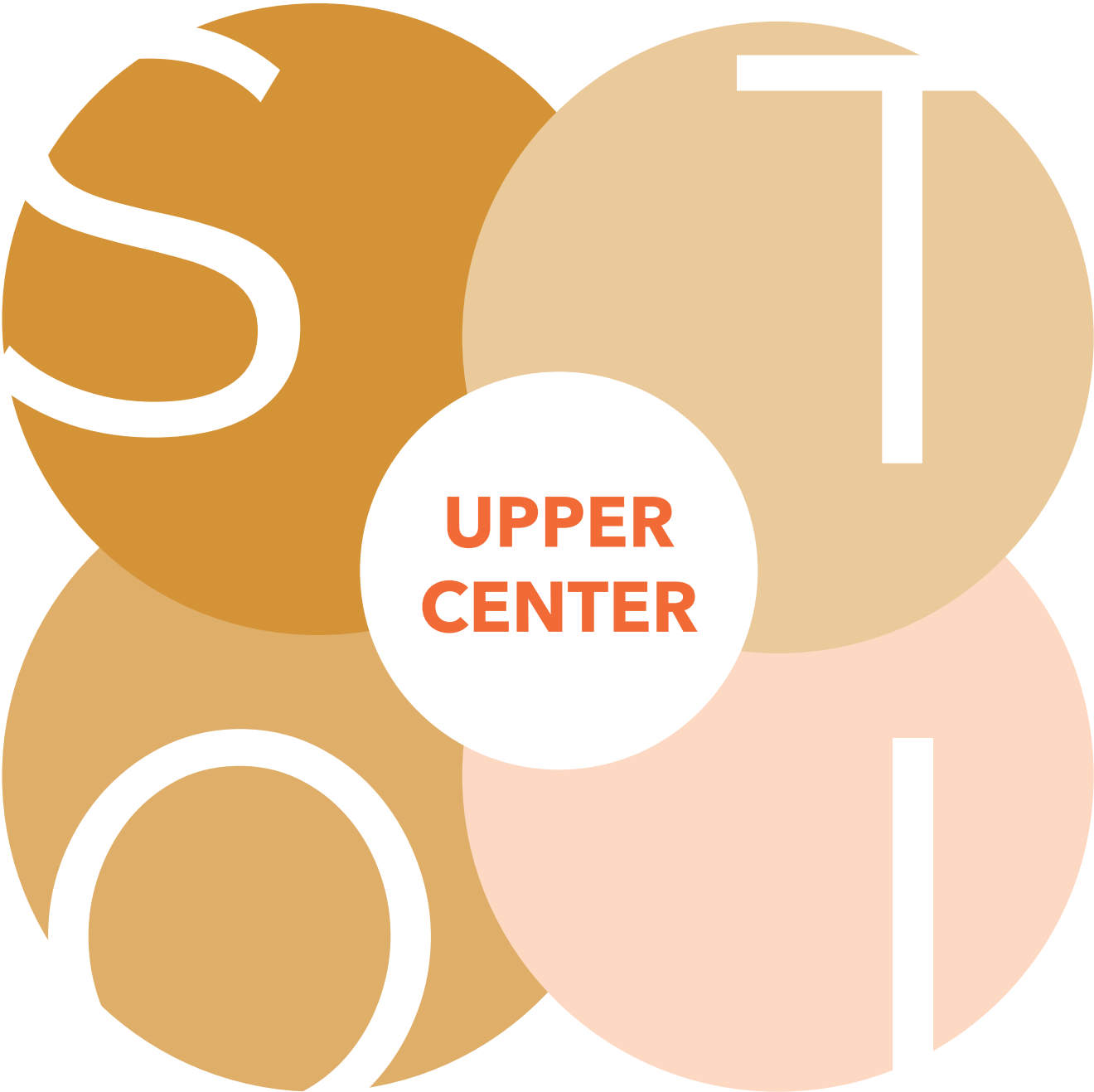
# NEIGHBORHOOD SCAN

## STRENGTHS

- Community pride
- Concerned neighbors present on this call with patience, perseverance and passion
- Relatively quiet and safe neighborhood feeling
- Many families here for generations
- Many neighbors with clean lots and nice landscaping
- Good camaraderie among neighbors who know one another
- Great new neighbors building community

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Protect trees and green spaces
- Dumpster Days
- Create incentives for resident renters to rehab
- Incentives for sale of blighted properties
- Occupancy permit amendment with extension to one-year
- Better information on who owns rental properties to enhance owner accountability
- Industrial type garbage cans for residences to minimize rodents and critters
- Aggressive marketing campaign to promote the good
- Land bank
- Habitat for Humanity home building programs



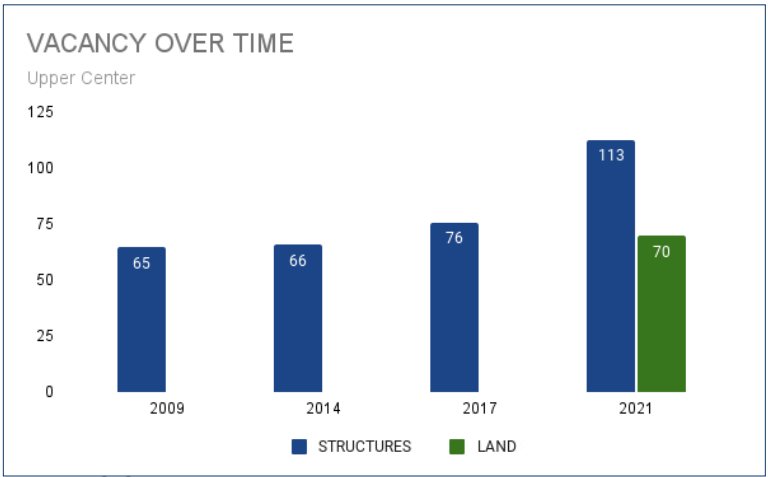
## THREATS, ISSUES, CONCERNS

- Potholes
- Food insecurity
- Burdensome hurdle for renters to become homeowners setting up opportunity for out-of-town speculators with deep pockets
- Financial and cultural displacement
- Lack of living wage jobs
- Image of bad reputation hangs like a “dark cloud over Wilkinsburg”
- Need faster police response
- School choice
- Tax liens and difficulties on vacant lots and structures
- Duquesne Light over prunes our trees

## NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS

- Tree around power lines
- Address abandoned houses including emergency remediation
- Put garbage in garbage cans; Street cleaning in alley ways
- Speed bumps on James Street and Coal Street
- More frequent grass cutting on vacant lots
- Clean streets with posted no dumping sites
- More presence from Borough officials in Upper Center
- New affordable programs for residents to rehab houses
- Support for our mental and emotional health
- Increase homeownership with incentives for renters
- Cleanup and repair of steps between Polish and Elm Streets
- Improved code enforcement and fines for neglected property
- Improved Section 8 regulation/enforcement
- Revisit Borough’s demolition list

ANALYSIS



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Similar to Singer Place, the Upper Center neighborhood is also a primarily residential neighborhood on the northern edge of the borough. There is a strong interest in supporting renters and converting them to homeowners by providing support via occupancy restrictions, permitting, funding and timing. There is a desire to have protected and private gathering space for residents to interact with both active and passive elements as well as an emphasis on community events and activities. There was a shared interest in the expansion of basic amenities such as trash cans, benches, safe places for kids to play, and a community center. There is a bit of nostalgia that

is present in the residents’ desire to return Upper Center to how it was 25 years ago, which may no longer be feasible given the population decline and slow decline of the properties and infrastructure due to chronic abandonment. The residents in this neighborhood often feel isolated given their location at the edge and adjacency to Hunter Park, which is separated due to overgrowth and not seamlessly integrated into the neighborhood. Many residents consider demolition of key properties as essential and necessary.

PRIORITIES

- Assess the viability of architecturally important structures and encourage deconstruction before demolition
- Demolition is a very real need that is essential to the health of the neighborhood
- Code enforcement accountability of both the inspectors/borough as well as property manager
- Respect the scale and context of the neighborhood in any new development
- Consider future development to meet current aging population - creative design of single family ranch style homes that match surrounding character
- Properties adjacent to the park should benefit from its proximity; currently Hunter Park is often considered unsafe or inaccessible
- Protect existing greenspaces with an eye on improvement and stewardship

SPECIFIC PROJECT IDEAS: Upper Center

- Steps between Foliage Street and Elm Street.
- Center St and Foliage : hopeful community garden/ urban ag opportunity.
- Coal Street, James Street, Swissvale Ave: Clean up Hunter Park edges to improve visibility, branding, and lighting and make the connection more inviting in order to benefit from the proximity.
- Grand Avenue & Fahnestock St: New townhomes on larger vacant lots with matching character but smaller scale (no prefab template housing stock).
- Center & Grant Way: possible food garden on the vacant lot with better landscaping.
- 1600 Center St: Clean up and stabilized or demolished.
- Consider small infill townshomes, improved landscaping for scattered sites.

# HIGH SCHOOL



## OVERVIEW

High School is a central neighborhood of Wilkesburg, and is one of the smallest neighborhoods of the borough. The neighborhood was named after the now defunct Wilkesburg High School which dominates its footprint. The neighborhood spans 46.24 acres and has a total of 280 properties located within High School owned by 220 individual owners. The zoning overlays for this community are single family residential, central business district, and mixed-use residential.

## NEIGHBORHOOD CONVERSATIONS

The Christian Church of Wilkesburg hosted two community conversations on June 8th and 15th, community residents, and WCDC staff assisting in conducting outreach to the surrounding neighborhood. A virtual option was made available; in total 8 participated, with 5 of them attending both sessions.

## BRIEF HISTORY

The High School neighborhood was once home to most of the original village that was Wilkesburg. Wilkesburg's first frame house was built on what is now known as Penn Avenue in 1841 and in the following decades quickly expanded with more development following the road outward. In 1886, the Horner School was built on the parallel streets of North and Wallace, but burned down only 8 years later.



# NEIGHBORHOOD SCAN

## STRENGTHS

- Location to Penn and 376
- Still close to busway and not too hilly yet.
- Rows of trees along Hill Avenue look nice
- Some larger homes, generating interest
- Some very successful but unknown local businesses
- Walking distance to the Business District
- Some buy-in among landlords to improve neighborhood
- Presence of Hosanna House
- Penn Ave Parklet
- Walkability

## OPPORTUNITIES

- High vacancy = lots of room for potential/opportunity
- Former high school building
- Retail along Penn Avenue if business corridor
- Number of people (and cars) on Penn Avenue
- Grid pattern of streets
- Penn Lincoln site is development-ready
- Large homes offer opportunity for shared housing
- Vacant land means opportunity for community gardens
- Demand for smaller affordable apartments
- Single unoccupied home among many occupied homes
- Coal Street to Swissvale offer development opportunities
- Gardens as temporary use before new construction
- Cultural opportunities coming (e.g. Caribbean restaurant)
- New single houses on vacant lots -- can do one at a time
- High School neighborhood is in an Opportunity Zone
- Leverage contractors and resources within Borough



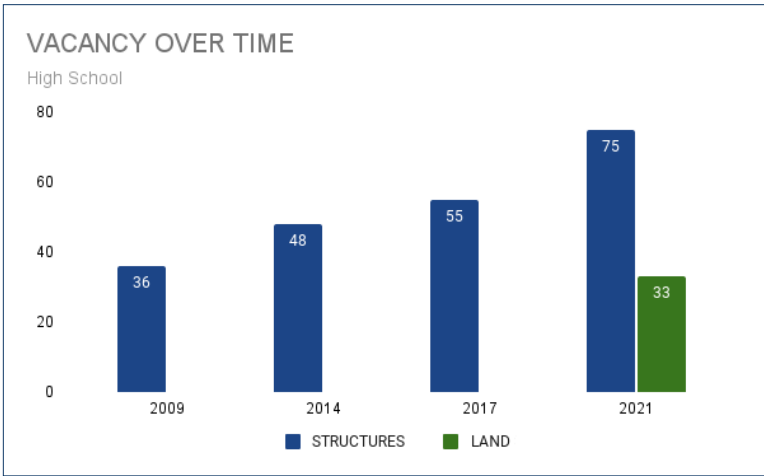
## THREATS, ISSUES, CONCERNS

- Business district is very drab and unattractive, not inviting
- Size of properties, large rehabs, values just getting there.
- Large unused high school
- Safety issues
- Unsafe structures adjacent to occupied ones
- High taxes and reassessment threats are deterrent to improving home values
- Lack of local school is a threat; families prefer local schools

## NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS

- Need more intentional demolition
- Penn Avenue business district; need a catalytic project to draw people into neighborhood and invite them to stay
- Events like car shows, walking tours and others
- Specifics locations needing attention: Penn Avenue, Hill Avenue, Center and Hill, Wood and North, along Coal to Swissvale
- Traffic patterns make it difficult to park on Penn Ave
- Improved wayfinding and signage
- Need businesses that will stay open later to address “stagnation” that occurs now after 8pm
- Coordinate with local contractors
- Priorities in three buckets -- to (1) live, (2) work, and (3) play
- More mixed use for live/work businesses

ANALYSIS



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Due to the limited size of the neighborhood and presence of large parcels and structures, there is a lack of resident capacity and focus toward improvement. It appears that Hosanna House is the largest owner of properties at 33 and has begun to assemble development plans and partnerships for demolition, re-use, and new construction moving forward. This is likely not a standalone neighborhood effort, but rather should be considered in a larger project portfolio and combined with adjacent neighborhoods to increase resident capacity.

PRIORITIES

- Invest in multi-disciplinary partnerships that can help aggregate property and invest in large-scale catalytic projects.
- Embrace the opportunities for live-work locations as allowed under the Mixed-Use Zoning classification.
- Short-term use of vacant space while anticipating future development to improve safety and aesthetics.
- Focus on sideyard acquisition to existing homeowners.
- Continue to consider the future of High School building.
- Activation/ expansion of Penn Ave to include more services that will attract visitors at all times of the day.
- Improved wayfinding for drivers as well as pedestrians to eliminate confusion and encourage people to stop and experience Wilkinsburg.

UPDATES: Singer Place, Upper Center & High School

Residents in these neighborhoods have started to combine efforts to create more synergies since many of the ideas were overlapping in each area.

The Strong Neighborhoods Committee continues to unite many residents in Wilkinsburg who truly want to see their community thrive. Existing and newly acquainted friends worked together, walking neighborhood blocks, knocking on doors, discussing negative issues in positive ways. Residents were grateful to be approached, and have their positions and concerns heard. At each of the committee meetings, frustrations were voiced; visions and dreams were shared and recorded.

A total of 54 residents within these three neighborhoods attended seven combined meetings. Additionally, 35 residents registered for continued updates, totaling 89 participants in the most blighted combined neighborhoods of Wilkinsburg. Going door-to-door was the best way to engage residents, with approximately 50 conversations over the course of six different evenings.

All of the conversations were positive and some led to Strong Neighborhood Committee meeting attendance. A shared love for Wilkinsburg was a common theme, with a desire to see manageable immediate improvements. The initiative to transform neighborhood blight and vacancy was a thread that connected each conversation.

After the third quarter 2021 Singer Place, Upper Center, and High School committee meetings, dozens of conversations continued with residents, potential partners, and resident investors. It is clear that improvements in these neighborhoods are necessary and must be made in an intentional, inclusive manner. A development strategy for Singer Place, Upper Center, and High School neighborhoods will take on a phased approach: 1) Acquisition and Stabilization, 2) Planning, 3) Fundraising/ Workforce Development, and 4) Execution.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, neighbors initiated outreach efforts to create and build partnerships that will continue to build upon the work that was started as a result of the PHARE grant for neighborhood planning. The neighborhood mapping has been integral in their efforts to build strong action items. The following list highlights areas that neighbors will work to build on.

1. Create a healthy walk connector – Pollinator Group will lead this
2. Acquire vacant properties – current homeowners looking for more land
3. Acquire and stabilize vacant housing – three to five properties annually
4. Create co-housing habitats – one or two over the next two to three years
5. Support existing owners in renovations at least five to 10 upgrades annually starting in 2022
6. Support existing property owners with large renovations
7. Look at existing large apartment buildings and work to create condo for owners
8. Renovate and sell three to five single family homes annually starting in 2022
9. Enhance business district through mixed-use development

OVERVIEW

2 Information provided by the community steward, for the full strategy and a list of properties of focus, see Appendix.

SPECIFIC PROJECT IDEAS: Singer Place, Upper Center & High School

- Hosanna House partnership: Penn-Lincoln site is a proposed 20,000 to 24,000 square ft building with ground floor retail and 40 to 55 units of affordable housing (rental) above. Expected to start in spring 2022.
- Hosanna House, Allison School property: expand parking and add a 12-unit affordable townhome project on the balance of land. Priority will be for Wilkinsburg residents or those who work in the community. Expected to start in late fall 2021.
- Hosanna House, North Avenue: four homes to be renovated in 2022 that will be for sale units. Currently, all are vacant and will require major renovations. Federal Home Loan Bank application will be submitted in summer 2021.
- Hosanna House, Penn, Center, and Wallace: expand green space for community events. Events will be slated to begin in late summer 2021 through summer 2022. Planned events include back-to-school event, business fair, art festival, holiday music and celebration; and a cultural display on the history of African American inventors and music.
- Black Wing Fighter Exhibit, in partnership with the Smithsonian and Children’s Museum, will open in late fall 2021 for 18 months at Hosanna House. This display will showcase African American fighter pilots in World War II, including the Tuskegee Airmen.
- Wood Street development, Brian Sieffert: renovate retail space and launch 10 businesses along with 11 apartments above on the block between Wallace and Penn on Wood Street. Project is underway.
- Hill Avenue housing: currently working on funding to renovate at least three larger-scale homes on Hill for specialty housing projects.
- 800 Block of North Avenue: County has purchased multiple properties and is working closely with some partners to determine the appropriate next steps to begin projects that will benefit the community.
- High School property: the Wilkinsburg School District currently owns this and has started working on reuse plan for the building.
- 913 Penn: Hosanna House is exploring options for small retail on the main floor with potential office/apartments above.

# FRANKLIN



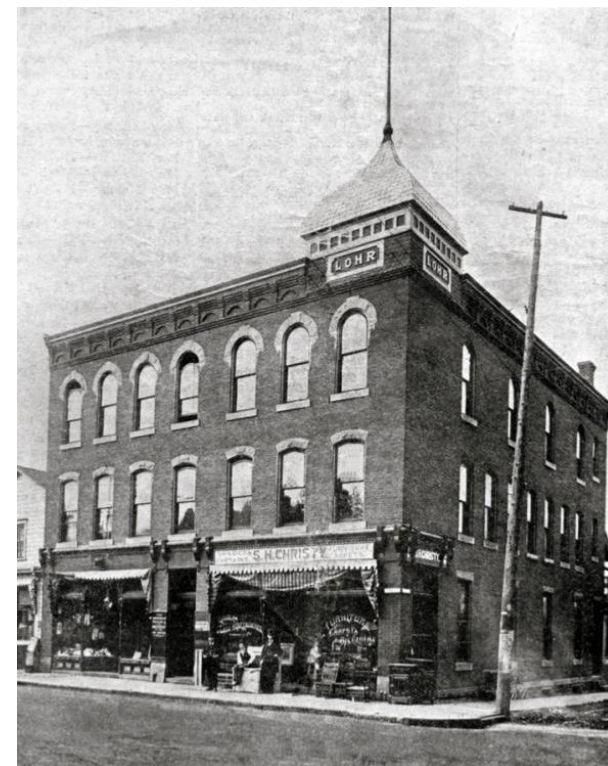
Franklin is one of the neighborhoods in the core of Wilkinsburg and is home to its business district, School District, and borough building. The neighborhood spans 106 acres and has a total of 777 properties owned by 559 individual owners. The zoning for this community has multiple overlays which allows for 1-2 family residential, central business district overlay, mixed use residential, transit oriented overlay, and the Penn Ave Historic Buildings overlay.

## NEIGHBORHOOD CONVERSATIONS

Pittsburgh Urban Christian School hosted two community conversations on June 24th and July 1st and members of the school, community residents, and WCDC staff assisted in conducting outreach to the surrounding neighborhood. A virtual option was made available; in total 13 participated, with 5 of them attending both sessions.

## BRIEF HISTORY

The Franklin neighborhood is one of the oldest developed areas within Wilkinsburg.



Many of the streets found within the neighborhood were already planned and laid by the mid to late 19th century. Many of Wilkinsburg's institutions were first housed in Franklin due to its bustling business district. The borough's first post office was established on Penn Ave in 1840 and in 1895 McNair, the first school, was built on South Ave. Several other historic buildings can be found throughout the neighborhood with the Lohr building, Wilkinsburg Train Station, and the Borough Building itself.

# NEIGHBORHOOD SCAN

## STRENGTHS

- Quality architecture
- Walkable
- Plenty of bus stops for public transportation
- Lots of interaction between neighbors and people, quiet
- Lots of trees
- Parking is easier than most urban neighborhoods
- Convenience near the parkway
- Police and Fire are nearby
- Gateway to city
- Invested residents and are concerned about the future
- Many long-term businesses
- Long-time homeowners
- Community has heart
- Lots of children in the neighborhood

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Vacant lots with potential
- Adequate demand for a dog park
- Potential for a community building
- Good potential for home ownership; buy and rehab
- Historic neighborhood could be marketed to filmmakers
- Declare development zones within the neighborhood for multi-use development
- Larger homes for co-housing
- Add bike lanes
- Historic home rehabilitation to keep character
- Churches and businesses
- Lots of schools available
- A program to help young families buy houses
- Low interest loans to help people, especially seniors



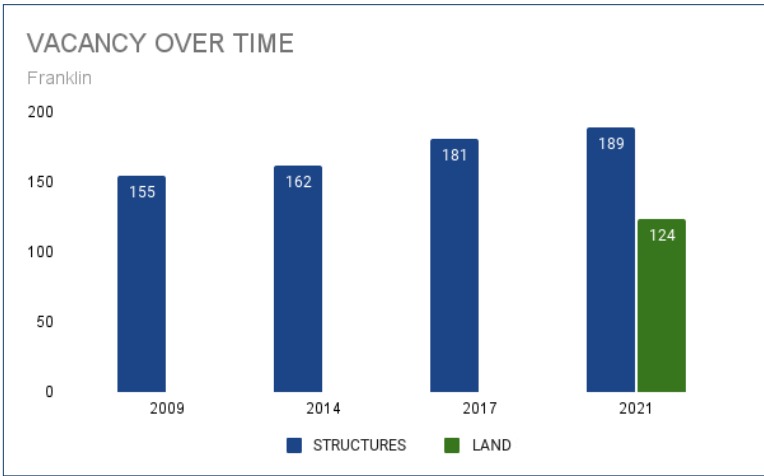
## THREATS, ISSUES, CONCERNS

- Illegal parking on wrong side of street causes danger with buses
- Landlord maintenance of large dumpsters at apartments buildings
- Lack of accountability for picking up litter and garbage
- Developers who aren't sensitive to preservation of neighborhood
- Gentrification
- Overgrown trees have caused damaged sidewalks
- Food security
- Left turn protections; heavy truck traffic patterns; speed limits
- Sacred spaces need remediation
- Demolition practices result in poor quality vacant lots
- Fear among visitors and residents of vacant lots, unkempt properties, people, and animals
- Out-migration of population causes more blight
- Merger with the City
- Traffic accidents due to so many commuters passing through
- Lack of adequate streetlights
- Increasing crime

## NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS

- Want to have corner stores
- Need more streetlights on and better-quality streetlights
- Must address and preserve the sacred spaces/churches
- Must pick up trash in vacant lots
- Improve demolition process (backfilling issues and soil rehab)
- Vacant lot remediation with reuse, gardens, etc.
- A neighborhood service to help with property upkeep for seniors
- Borough accountability to maintain standards for vacant properties
- Condemn more properties; reassess after storms etc
- Need for more animal control
- Overgrowth of trees and natural forestation causes dangers from trees falling; need to "manage the wildness"

ANALYSIS



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Franklin residents were concerned for their individual property as a result of being surrounded by blighted structures. A significant portion of the conversation was dedicated to the frustrations experienced with the lack of adherence to current road restrictions (speeding, directionality, parking, other general traffic issues). Additionally, concern related to the number of unsafe structures in the community without a clear commitment from the Borough to address them, especially in such close proximity to the Pittsburgh Urban Charter School locations. There was a strong interest in understanding in acquiring properties as well as in gaining additional

general knowledge about the state of abandonment and what is possible under current regulations. There was an acknowledgment that perhaps a focus area investment is a better use of small funds rather than spreading resources too thinly in order to demonstrate visible progress.

PRIORITIES

- Consistent code enforcement for property maintenance, including high weeds
- Defined pipeline for ensuring unsafe structures do not cause harm to adjacent residents; current zoning highlights notification and vacation of premises, but lacks action towards remediating unsafe conditions
- Education and resources for navigating tangled title and unknown ownership
- Imbalance of high tax rate with insufficient civic services - increase services and/or decrease taxes
- Encourage side yards and expansion of owner-occupied properties to decrease density
- Questions and concerns about conservatorship
- Interest in sustainable demolition practices that may support future reuse without additional amendments

SPECIFIC PROJECT IDEAS: Franklin

- 1029 South: property is falling down.
- 1009 Franklin: rooftop community garden opportunity.
- Dog park on Mill: requires ongoing maintenance and stewardship.
- Ross, Coal, and Center: infill of new construction or urban farming.
- South, Swissvale, and Ardmore: rehab, if possible, or demolish unsafe, small apartment buildings; opportunity for construction of new rentals.
- 812 South: recommend demolition of infill properties.
- 816-820: consider development package for rehabilitation of structures.
- Rebecca between Center and Swissvale: there are three or four vacant lots that should be reused (possible dog park).
- Franklin between Mulberry and Center on the right-hand side: there is only one occupied house; this area needs to be addressed urgently.
- Property at Center and Franklin: owned by two people, which makes it difficult to acquire; a hassle that is unique to Wilkinsburg.
- Apartment building rehab between South and Mill.

# HUNTER PARK



## OVERVIEW

Hunter Park is one of the most northern neighborhoods of Wilkinsburg and shares a border with the East Hills neighborhood of Pittsburgh. The neighborhood spans 78 acres, with 22 of those being dedicated to a large park located on the western portion of its footprint. There are a total of 545 properties located within Hunter Park owned by 357 individual owners. A mostly residential neighborhood, Hunter Park has a large assortment of single family homes, row houses, and apartments with the only other zoning being mixed-residential.

## NEIGHBORHOOD CONVERSATIONS

Mt. Calvary Baptist Church hosted two community conversations on July 20 and 27th and members of the congregation assisted in conducting outreach to the surrounding neighborhood. A virtual option was made available; in total 16 participated, with 6 of them attending both sessions.



## BRIEF HISTORY



Hunter Park neighborhood was originally not part of Wilkinsburg, but part of the nearby now defunct Sterrett Township. Located on the outskirts of early-Wilkinsburg the area was marked by two large ponds used by the Chautauqua Ice Company, these were later drained and filled in with housing.

In 1961, the borough established the 24 acre Hunter Park field and playground, which is now the centerpiece of the neighborhood. Over the years the park has been upgraded and now serves as the boroughs largest park.

# NEIGHBORHOOD SCAN

## STRENGTHS

- People are beautiful and loving
- People all want the same things - a safe and nice place to live and play
- People motivated to see improvement a sense of potential
- Many (majority?) homeowners who value how the community looks and want to see improvement
- This church is an asset; gym space; classroom space; full size kitchen, meeting space

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Church as a place where people can come; active
- Use Hunter Park more, it is huge
- Focus first on occupied homes that are in danger because of houses falling down near them
- Demolition and beautification
- Need to walk the community to build relationships
- Advocacy to change property rights issues to enable tear-down of vacant properties
- Take advantage of the significant amount of passing traffic



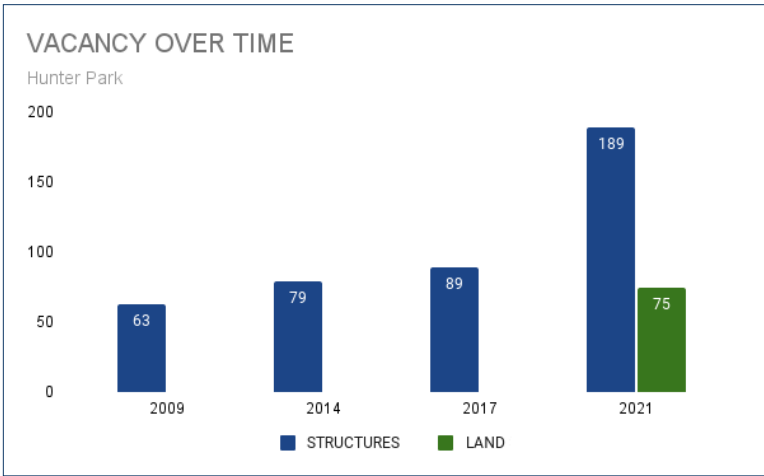
## THREATS, ISSUES, CONCERNS

- Blight surrounding the church is eye sore and detracts from it
- Short on money to get these things done
- Animals infesting vacant buildings and lots
- Trash and litter; rules are never enforced; feel like disrespect
- Seems like young people and those not from here don't have respect for community
- Memories of bad reputation from gangs
- Vacant properties are dangerous for kids
- Hunter Park used to be visible and beautiful but trees have overgrown the view; nobody knows what is down there
- Low rate of homeownership (65% rent to 35% own in Wburg) so lack of care for properties
- Need more help for senior citizens to maintain their properties
- "Take back by building up" an restore a sense of pride
- Need to hold landlords accountable

## NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS

- Contact/letter write to State Representatives
- Prioritize the parcel next to the church

ANALYSIS



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Hunter Park’s vacancy has nearly doubled over the last decade. There is still a small group of long-term homeowners but a many of the occupied properties are now rentals. Residents expressed a frustration with a lack of accountability not so much with the renters themselves but the negligent landlords themselves. Complaints to code enforcement and the borough itself have led to little change as they are rarely investigated by officials. This feeds into the spiral the community is already facing, as more and more properties are abandoned when landlords units are no longer rentable or homeowners struggle to maintain or find buyers for their property.

The park, which is the neighborhood’s namesake, is viewed as an asset but is not reflected in the real estate market. Lining the park’s borders are large swaths of vacant land and rapidly deteriorating homes which in some cases hide the park from outsiders. Many residents expressed dismay that the park is not visible due to large overgrowth and poor maintenance of vacant lots surrounding it. Many of these properties are owned by the borough and were originally acquired to expand the park, however, these plans are at least on a temporary pause leaving them with no discernible use. Not utilizing these properties feeds into the blight within the community and as such finding a purpose for them should be a high-priority for the borough.

With many long-term vacancies within the neighborhood the quality of structure has deteriorated significantly over time. Only a third of vacant structures were identified as needing light repairs with the rest needing significant investment to get them back to code or requiring demolition all together. Many residents expressed interest in seeing most if not all the vacant buildings needing large amounts of work to simply be demolished, however, with an emphasis on deconstruction and reuse of materials where applicable.

PRIORITIES

- Communication between borough and residents: the borough needs to establish and maintain contact with residents on matters of vacancy. Many residents feel isolated and alone in their struggle with living in a heavily blighted neighborhood. While the borough may not be able to fix the vacancy issue overnight, they can at least reassure residents they are being heard and supported. This effort should help property owners feel less apathetic towards maintaining and ultimately abandoning their homes, and instead hopefully keep them within their community.
- Enforcement of the borough’s ordinances must be a priority for this area. Without holding property owners accountable, the real estate market for the area will continue to slide as more properties are abandoned due to a lack of buyers. This is especially the case with rental properties, where some landlords have taken advantage of little to no oversight on behalf of the borough and have allowed their units to fall into disrepair. Pushing property owners to invest and upkeep their properties can only help motivate homeowners to stay and renters to care about the neighborhood.
- Planning: With so many borough owner properties lying vacant within the neighborhood, coming up with both a long-term and short-term plan for both

will help clean up and offset the image of blight. Bringing in residents into these conversations may help rally individuals to come up with short-term projects for these sites while the borough attempts more far reaching plans for the future. Potentially some of these lots could be transferred to nearby homeowners interested in potentially utilizing the space for a sideyard or greenspace.

- Similarly, razing unsafe structures should be a priority and a focus of the borough. This should be done with the input of residents, many of whom have voiced their preference for demos that support them over large scale projects. Strategic demos can help those who are doing the right thing, curb invasive wildlife, and protect residents from unstable structures.

#### **SPECIFIC PROJECT IDEAS: Hunter Park**

- 1301 Laketon: revival center next to church.
- Hunter: vacant lots could be used as a recreation area, keeping it simple and easy to maintain.
- Revival Center: ongoing discussion for acquisition by Mt. Calvary Baptist Church; would like to expand services to outside.
- Parkside property needs more enforcement; demolish and clear isolated properties.

# PARK TRIANGLE



## OVERVIEW

Park Triangle spans 101 acres, with several of Wilkinsburg's main avenues such as Penn, Swissvale, and Montier making up its borders. There are a total of 740 properties located within Park Triangle owned by 609 individual owners. A mostly residential neighborhood, Park Triangle has a large assortment of housing stock but also boasts a small commercial district as well. The zoning for this neighborhood allows for single-family residential, mixed-use residential, and multi-family residential.

## NEIGHBORHOOD CONVERSATIONS



Covenant Fellowship Reformed Church hosted two community conversations on July 22nd and 29th and was stewarded by Autumn Butler who helped conduct outreach with residents from across the neighborhood. A virtual option was made available; in total 17 participated, with 9 of them attending both sessions.

## BRIEF HISTORY

Originally located in Sterrett and Wilkins Township, Park Triangle was incorporated into the borough during the early 20th century. Originally, the land was used largely for farming and coal mining but as the borough expanded these lots transitioned into housing. Swissvale Avenue, one of Park Triangle's main corridors, is home to several historic churches which have served the region as a whole for decades. St Mark AME, Wilkinsburg's first African American church, was established in the neighborhood 1927 using the materials from the deconstructed Calvary Presbyterian. Park Triangle is also home to Wilkinsburg's largest athletic facility with Graham Field, which was originally the Johnson Farm until 1916, when it was sold to the borough.



# NEIGHBORHOOD SCAN

## STRENGTHS

- Friendly and welcoming neighbors
- High rate of home ownership
- Easy to get from point A to B via Swissvale Ave; Accessible
- Close to DPW supply area
- Graham Field is a big asset
- Old fire house and ideas for reuse
- Best mechanic in Pittsburgh at Belmont Auto
- Montier Street is improving
- Kids willing to help
- Very friendly neighbors when walking around
- Some Progress rehabbing properties (Hill and Montier; Glenn; Auto Museum; Family Dollar; more)
- Some interest expressed from outsiders
- Compared to other areas, vacant lots are cleaner and community is safer

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Extraordinary commercial development opportunity with high number of cars passing through
- Access to affluent communities
- Good for mobile-based businesses that need good accessibility
- As Christians, opportunity to be a witness and bring hope
- Vacant lots are opportunities (rain gardens, urban gardens)



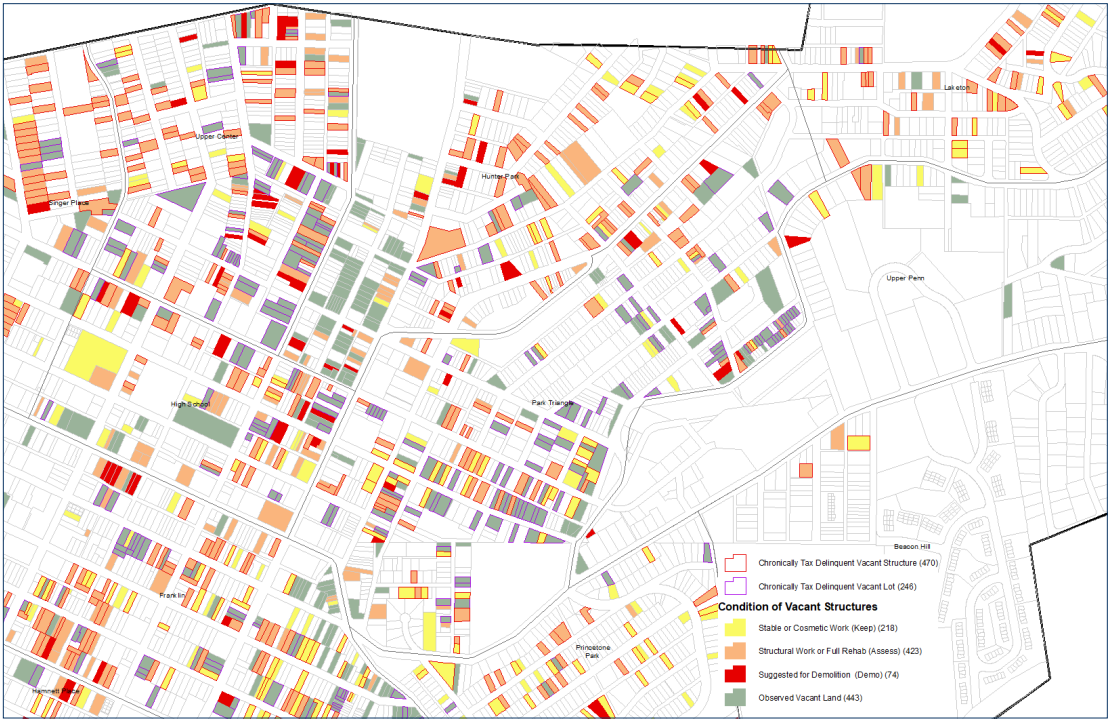
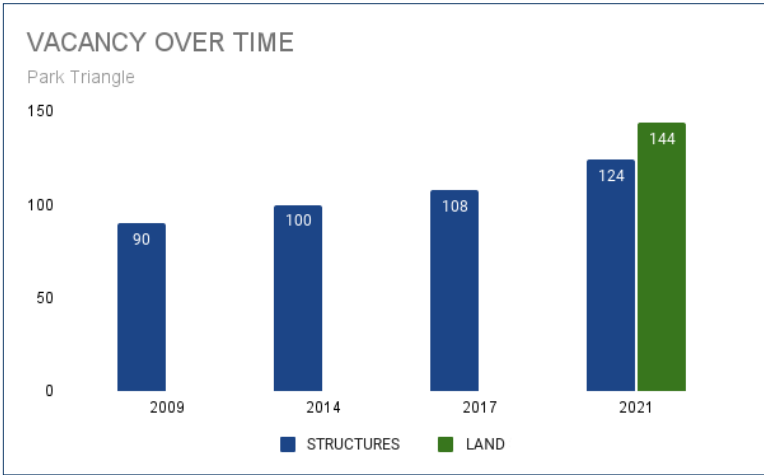
## THREATS, ISSUES, CONCERNS

- Seems more closed off that it used to be
- Less neighbor-friendly
- Safety issues
- Abandoned homes
- Worry about violence against kids on street
- Aging homeowners unable to upkeep properties
- Transient renters/families and hard to build relationships and get them to invest long-term
- Concerns about quality of public schools
- Presence of vacant lots and vacant structures “fuels itself”
- Housing stock makes difficult to age-in-place; difficult for aging residents
- Residents who live here are less engaged and they require face-to-face contact (most participants tonight are church members who live elsewhere)
- Poverty and single-parent households

## NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS

- Housing rehabs right near church
- Want a community hangout and store (other than Family Dollar)
- Top of Hill Avenue and Top of North Ave along Princeton: houses are abandoned and falling down
- Unsafe driving through neighborhood
- Many walkers but sidewalks and streets need much improvement
- Attract an anchor store

ANALYSIS



KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Park Triangle area’s vacancy has steadily climbed over the last decade or so to its current total of over 700 vacant structures. In conjunction with the rising amounts of demolitions during this time giving rise to many vacant lots scattered throughout the neighborhood for a total 443. Complaints to code enforcement and the borough itself have led to little change as they are rarely followed up on by officials. There is a strong contingent of residents working at countering blight within their neighborhood but there is limited coordination with the borough.

With many long-term vacancies within the neighborhood the quality of structure has deteriorated significantly over time. Over half of those properties identified as being vacant require significant investment to be remedied, whether that be through stabilization or demolition. Many residents expressed interest in seeing many of the long-term blighted properties be demolished due to their deterioration.

PRIORITIES

- Infill development with single level construction for aging residents
- Ensure any new development matches the character and style of existing architecture
- Prioritize demolition of deteriorating properties and repurpose vacant land for community use
- Expand Transform the Triangle event to include more properties
- Identify resources for resident-driven real estate investments
- Encourage large rehab projects of anchor structures

SPECIFIC PROJECT IDEAS: Park Triangle

- 1309 and 1313 Swissvale: demo both properties.
- 1300 Montier
- Clark and Bessica: suggest summer crew to clean and maintain vacant lots; possibly look at infill with Habitat for Humanity.
- Hill has large-scale vacancy, needs a thorough assessment; must be cleared first for better access.
- Build on previous success, such as near the orchard and church property.
- Bells Pharmacy has great potential for the right investor.
- Montier and Labelle are filled with unsafe structures that should be demolished.

# SPERLING



## OVERVIEW

Sperling lies on the borough's southernmost border with Edgewood Borough directly neighboring it. The neighborhood spans 56.59 acres, and has a total of 411 properties belonging to 351 individual owners. A mostly residential neighborhood, Sperling has a large assortment of housing stock but also boasts a small commercial district as well. The zoning for this neighborhood allows for mixed-use residential, 1-2 family residential, and auto-oriented commercial.

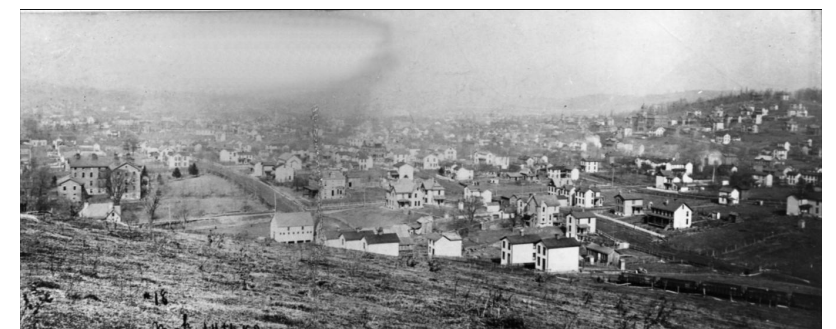
## NEIGHBORHOOD CONVERSATIONS

Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf hosted two community conversations on August 3rd and 10th and outreach was done both with CDC staff and resident volunteers from across the neighborhood. This meeting did not have a virtual option; in total 12 residents participated, with 5 of them attending both sessions.



## BRIEF HISTORY

The area that is now what we call Sperling was largely undeveloped until 1895 and was predominantly a site for coal mining. Hampton Coal Works mined the area for decades, extracting coal to nearby steel mills via a railroad which ran along Water Street, or as it is known today Swissvale Avenue. As the



coal began to run out in the hills, the area slowly began to infill with new residential areas with the abundance of lumber available from clearing the forests that stood there before. By the turn of the century, the Sperling neighborhood, which once was split between four municipalities, officially became part of Wilkinsburg. The name Sperling came from one of the boroughs longest tenured employees, Charles Sperling, who was the borough engineer for fifty years.

# NEIGHBORHOOD SCAN

## STRENGTHS

- Proximity to the parkway
- Close to great neighbors at the School for the Deaf
- Many long-term residents
- Wildlife (deer, opossum, rabbits)
- Neighbors talk with one another and are welcoming
- Diversity of housing, currently affordable
- Sunset view (Montview)

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Extraordinary commercial development opportunity with high number of cars passing through
- Access to affluent communities
- Good for mobile-based businesses that need good accessibility
- As Christians, opportunity to be a witness and bring hope
- Vacant lots are opportunities (rain gardens, urban gardens)



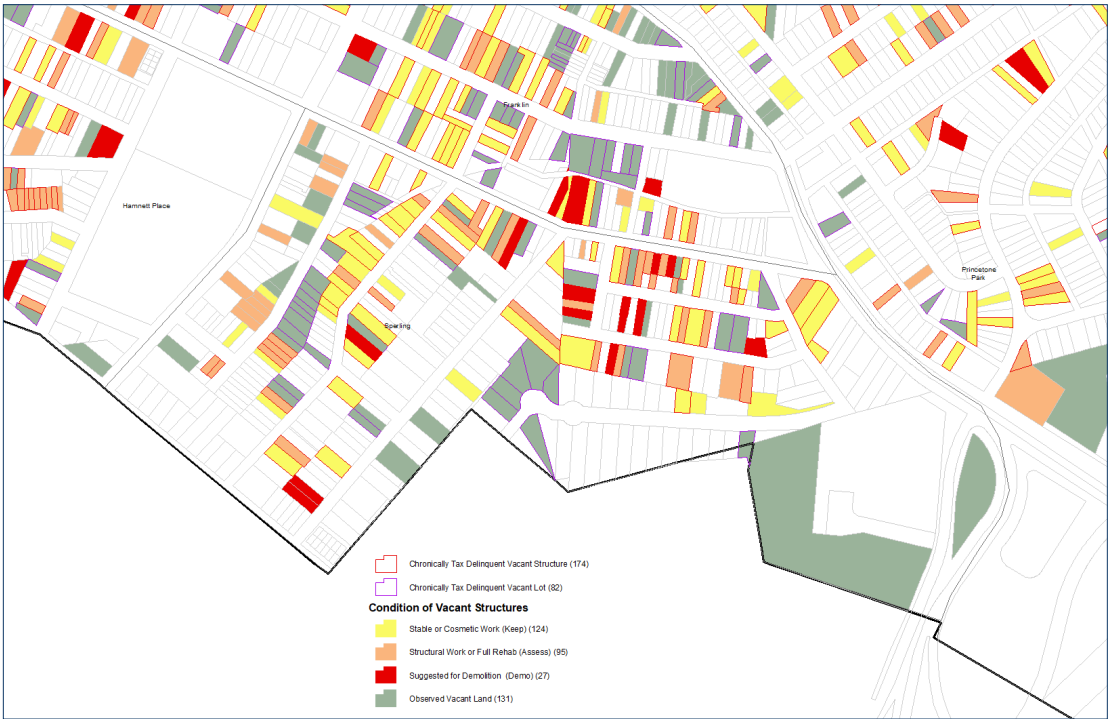
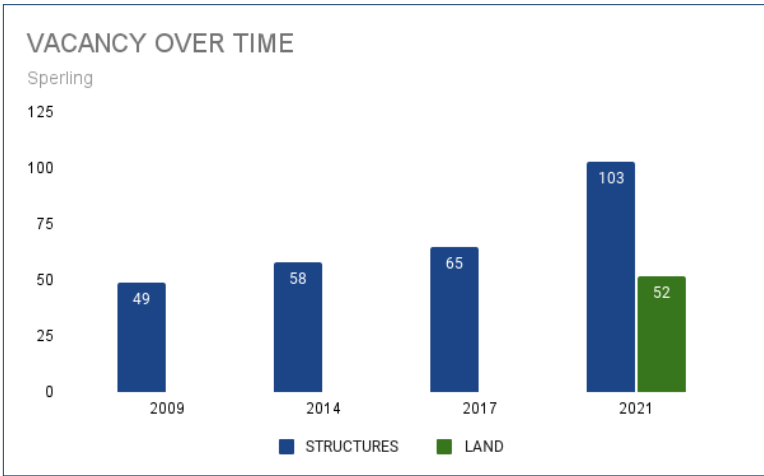
## THREATS, ISSUES, CONCERNS

- Inconsistent ticketing practices
- Reported issues are often ignored and then grow larger
- Can't sell house as there is no market
- Steps running down to Rebecca is used as a low visibility getaway for criminals
- Many abandoned houses within the neighborhood but also many on the border used for criminal activity
- Stolen packages/ abandoned cars
- The streets are now heavily used by non-residents as short cuts
- Some residents feel isolated
- Lots of dumping on vacant lots and houses
- Gentrification and poor renovations by flippers
- Gun violence and resulting trauma
- Garbage debris becomes litter

## NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS

- More patrol and less harassment by police
- Image of the neighborhood
- Vacant houses
- Property owners are not taking care of homes (esp. lead)
- Neighborhood safety
- Wilksburg has lots of people who cannot get jobs (due to criminal records, etc.); they deserve to be safe too
- Help for people who cannot keep up their houses
- Need money and resources to take down problem trees
- Hillside erosion
- Create a program to help property owners with land issues like trees, retaining walls, structural issues, etc.
- Improve power infrastructure
- Find a community liaison at Western PA School for the Deaf
- Code Enforcement and Council responsiveness
- Raccoon and pest control is needed

ANALYSIS



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Many of the residents that participated in the Sperling community conversation were concerned about the inconsistency of their neighborhood. Several participants were residents of Montview St - an area that sits geographically above much of Wilksburg - they are afforded a bit more privacy as a smaller enclave of neighbors. While this offers a bit of privacy and is enjoyed by close knit neighbors, it also offers an opportunity for less desirable activities to pass through.

Many residents noted witnessing drug activity and seeing individuals flee on foot to the steps that lead down to Rebecca Avenue. This brought up a discussion of having additional drug rehab support within the borough.

Additional concerns were brought up related to the hillsides, given the topographic difference in this neighborhood. There have been some noted erosion concerns which may have the potential to cause additional harm to utilities and personal property. Additional concerns for consistency of public services, such as excessive patrolling and ticketing but insufficient street sweeping and trash collection. Despite the concerns, the residents were interested in supporting those who have made Sperling their home and a desire to see additional support and services for the existing residents - to build on to what is good in the neighborhood and to be more open to those who may choose to settle there in the future.

PRIORITIES

- Consistency of Code Enforcement and street sweeping
- Focus on addressing smaller problems before they become too big to fix
- Support for residents who want to sell their homes/ positive marketing for the neighborhood
- Encourage positive police relationships
- Focus on supporting what is already in the neighborhood

SPECIFIC PROJECT IDEAS: Sperling

- 409, 413 Montview: dangerous to neighbors, demolition required.
- Bricks and metal from two houses on Montview are falling on the neighbors' properties.
- Citizens Bank building on Wood.
- Walnut does not receive the same level of street maintenance as other streets.
- Infill opportunities for additional play areas.
- Informal gathering space for residents that is simple and easy to maintain.
- More public trash cans and recycling bins.

# PRINCETON PARK



## OVERVIEW

Princeton Park lies on the borough's southernmost border with Edgewood Borough directly neighboring it. The neighborhood spans 142 acres, and has a total of 558 properties belonging to 503 individual owners. A mostly residential neighborhood, Princeton Park has a large assortment of housing stock with only a small zoning allotment for commercial property. The zoning for this neighborhood allows for mixed-use residential, single family residential, multi-family residential, and auto-oriented commercial.

## NEIGHBORHOOD CONVERSATIONS

Community Forge hosted two community conversations on August 19th and 26th and outreach was done both with WCDC staff and resident volunteers from across the neighborhood. This meeting did not have a virtual option; in total 9 residents participated, with 1 of them attending both sessions.

## BRIEF HISTORY



Princeton Park, like its neighbor Sperling, was originally an area valued for its rich coal deposits and was owned by Hampton Coal Company. Mining continued in the area up until the early 20th century when it shifted to being developed into residential housing. The southern portion of the neighborhood, in stark contrast, was dedicated farmland and pasture for local farmers. These farms eventually relocated when WTAE-TV purchased the property in 1957 and began broadcasting from Wilkinsburg a year later. There are still hints to the area's agricultural past with one of its streets called Pasture Way, as it was the original path farmers would take to the pasture.

# NEIGHBORHOOD SCAN

## STRENGTHS

- Location because Princeton Park is close to the parkway
- Stable homeownership
- Low vacancy rate compared to other neighborhoods
- Strong access to public transportation
- Decent, passable sidewalks
- Nice housing stock but need many lots of rehabs
- Princeton Blvd is a good dog walking street, but there is no playground

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Lots of opportunity for development for housing
- Vacant lot reuse
- Many houses can be rehabbed
- Many houses need to be demolished



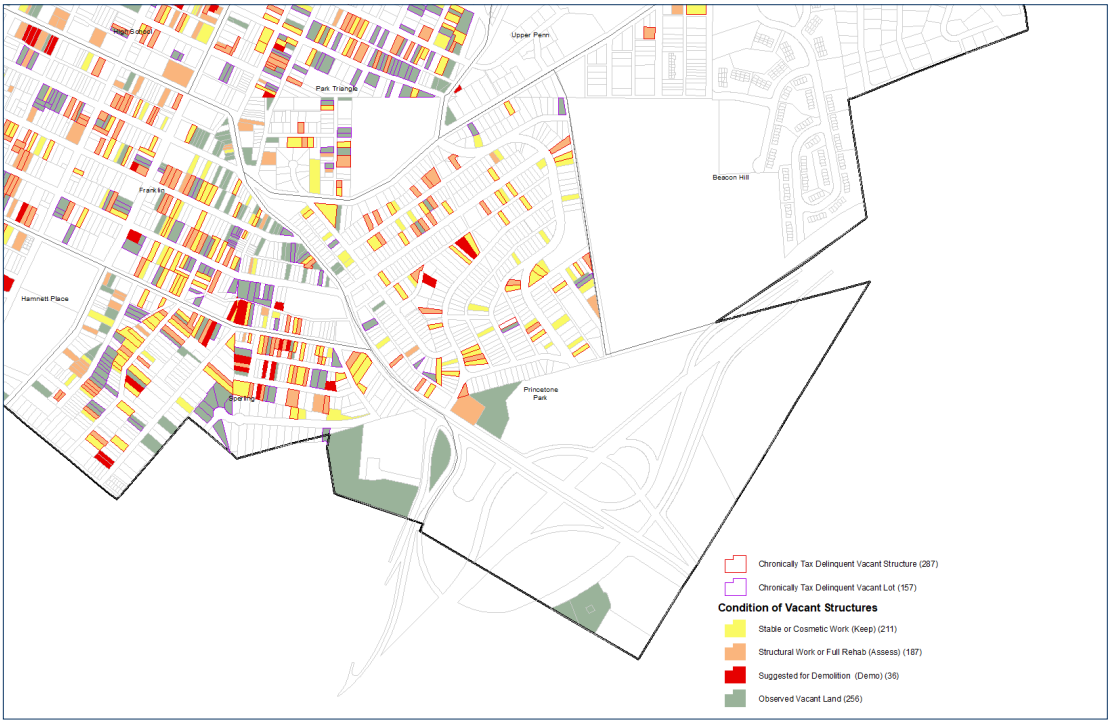
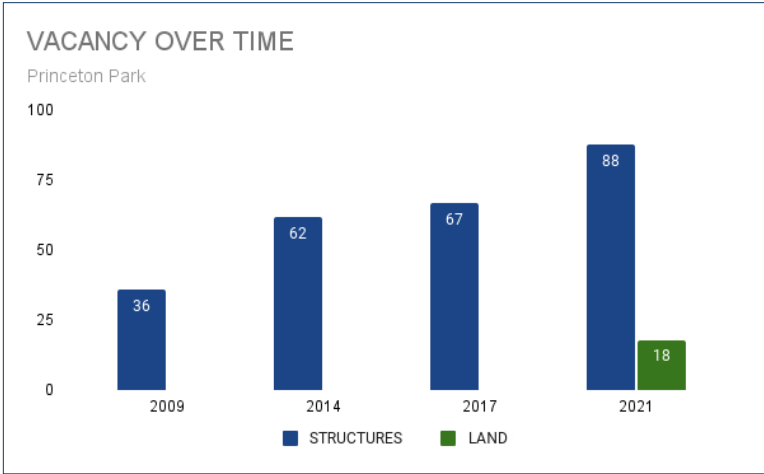
## THREATS, ISSUES, CONCERNS

- Neighbors are not as neighborly as they could be
- Existing Block Club may lack strength
- Speeding along Marlboro Avenue
- Serious drug activity
- Outsiders coming in to disturb the peace and creating some crime
- Danger from vacant properties and no plan to address the problem

## NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS

- Organize Block Watch Club again
- Need more and better street lighting and maintenance
- Bring neighbors together and engage them through block clubs, watch clubs, events, door knocking and canvassing
- Playgrounds
- Open the UPMC Graham Ballfield for community use
- Improve walkability and safety crossing main arteries

ANALYSIS



KEY TAKEAWAYS

A smaller group turned out for the Princeton Park conversation. As a result, much of the dialogue was filled with more specific questions about how Wilkinsburg got to its current state and what some of the barriers are to more impactful change and improvement. There was some conversation related to an interest in seeing more adjacent vacant lots becoming official sideyard properties in order to minimize the effects of high weeds and other symptoms of unmaintained land. Once again, there was a growing concern about the consistency and effectiveness of code enforcement, with many residents noting things within their neighborhood that would effectively violate borough property maintenance standards.

PRIORITIES

- Support for renters who wish to transition to home ownership
- Identifying additional resources for owner-occupied rehabilitation of abandoned homes (203K loans, for example)
- Find ways to reduce the cost and barriers of demolition and acquisition
- Demolition of critical properties
- Prioritizing resident needs and minority businesses
- Vacant lots to be sold as sideyards

SPECIFIC PROJECT IDEAS: Princeton Park

- 1459 Marlboro needs to be demolished.
- 1312 Franklin
- Chelsea Street: suitable location for playground or parklet.

# LAKETON EAST HILLS BLACKRIDGE



## OVERVIEW

Laketon lies on the northern side of the borough's footprint with the Pittsburgh neighborhood of East Hills to the northwest and the Township of Penn Hills to the northeast. The neighborhood spans 203 acres, and has a total of 794 properties belonging to 743 individual owners. A mostly residential neighborhood, Laketon has a large assortment of housing stock but also boasts a small commercial district as well. The zoning for this neighborhood allows for industrial, multi-family residential, and larger lot single family residential.

## NEIGHBORHOOD CONVERSATIONS



The Wilkinsburg School district hosted two community conversations on August 31st and September 7th with outreach done both with CDC staff and resident volunteers from across the neighborhood. This meeting did not have a virtual option; in total 12 residents participated, with 5 of them attending both sessions.

## BRIEF HISTORY

These eastern neighborhoods of Wilkinsburg find their origins like many other parts of early Wilkinsburg as mining and farmland areas. In fact, almost all of the East Hills portion of Wilkinsburg was owned by Jacob Weinman, one of the early council presidents whose holdings began to be parceled out for development as the coal dried up. As more residential development rolled in, Dream City, Wilkinsburg's first (and only) amusement park opened its doors. Dream City was a destination location for the region until its competitor, Kennywood, quickly overtook it in prominence forcing the location to close in 1916. With more families came the need for more schools and Turner Elementary was founded in 1927 to teach the children of Wilkinsburg, and is still in use today, being recently remodeled in 2020.

# NEIGHBORHOOD SCAN

## STRENGTHS

- Clean and quiet
- Lots of retirees
- Neighbors look out for each other
- Helpful neighbors
- Pride in neighborhood
- Some rehab and occupancy occurring

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Some homes are able to be rehabbed
- Lots of areas for community gardens
- Demo site of Laketon and Turner could be a good location for a garden



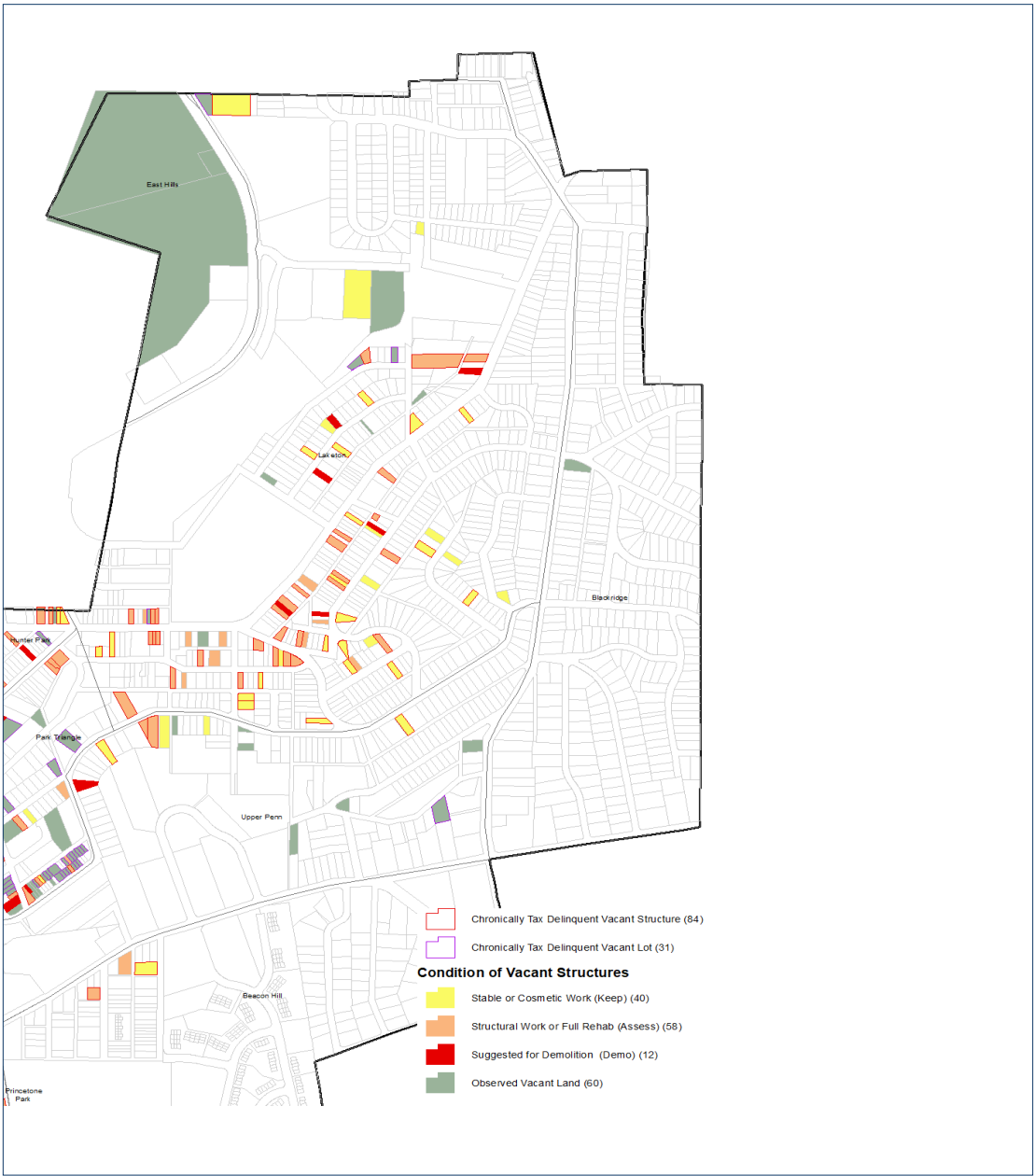
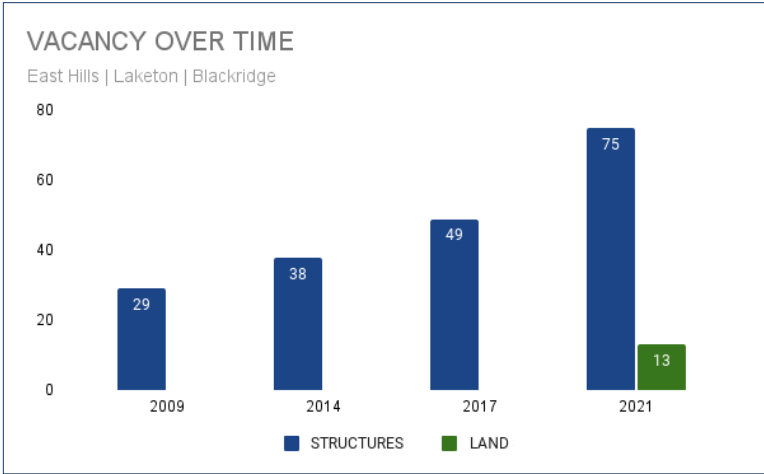
## THREATS, ISSUES, CONCERNS

- Crime: Vandalism/drug trafficking
- Increased vacancy
- Village Dr specifically has seen more vacancy
- Borough needs a better process for determination of demolition list and addressing that list

## NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS

- High vacancy
- Overgrowth of vacant properties
- Wildlife out of control
- Lack of borough support
- High taxes
- Trash and litter
- Some areas receive services over others do not
- Speeding, hit and run accidents, better road infrastructure:
  - improved signs, rail, enforcement
- Graham Boulevard needs to be a priority: tear out brick, address water run-off, smooth out dips in the pavement
- Need better speeding and traffic control on McNary Boulevard and Graham Boulevard

ANALYSIS



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Overall, the East Hills and Blackridge neighborhoods have largely remained stable with the few vacancies found in 2009 disappearing by 2020, however the Laketon neighborhood story is quite different. Since 2009, Laketons vacancy has nearly tripled in the last decade to its current total of 71 vacant properties. Laketon has seen a larger jump in vacancy than any other neighborhood within Wilkinsburg. The spread of vacancy appears to largely be located in the southwestern portion of the neighborhood, however, it appears to be spreading to other sections of the community. There are still several streets which have seen some rehab projects but overall Laketon has rapidly degraded over the years.

Residents of Laketon have been vocal on their concerns over problem properties within their community. Many have been proactive to contact the borough about problem properties but have received little assistance in addressing their concerns. This has left a feeling of isolation by residents, who feel the borough has in some ways abandoned them to their fate.

Roughly half of the vacant structures found in Laketon are stable, some only needing minor repairs or cosmetic upgrades to make them attractive for both renters and homeowners. The other half need significant work to get them back up to being habitable for new occupants. One of the rising concerns in the neighborhood is that some of the vacants are being used by squatters. Residents are both concerned not just for their health and safety but also those of the squatters who are living in homes that are unsafe for human habitation.

PRIORITIES

- Landscape maintenance support to address overgrowth in areas with existing residents
- Road improvements to improve the drive but also to slow down traffic and make residential areas feel safer and more comfortable
- Consistency in public services - west of Graham Blvd feels different than north or east
- Address property damage/vandalism of occupied properties
- Some vacant structures have shifting foundations - should be prioritized for demolition and safety of adjacent residents
- Improve Code Enforcement response

**SPECIFIC PROJECT IDEAS: Laketon, East Hills, Blackridge**

- Village Drive has degraded with more vacancy over the years: 2120 (Demo), 2121, 2134, 2149.
- 2005 and 2011 Chalfant are vacant; 2011 needs to be demolished and could possibly be acquired as a sideyard.
- Graham needs to be redone.
- Kendon and Doyle: has a vacant lot that could be a community space.
- 2016 Chalfant: purchased for \$1 but owners owes \$60,000.
- Property on Avon Place, off of Graham, needs work, is overgrown.
- Sloan has high vacancy.
- Slow traffic on McNary.
- Samson and Douglas: could be a vacant lot reuse project.
- Need help with costs of demolition near 2011 Chalfont.
- 2309 Laketon needs rehabilitation.
- Some properties on McNary are falling.

# WEST OF THE BUSWAY

Regent Square, Peebles Square, Kelly West, Greater Park Place, Whitney Park



**OVERVIEW**

The communities that make up the larger area known as “west of the busway” are Kelly West, Regent Square, Whitney Park, Greater Park Place, and Peebles Square. Due to their close proximity with the City of Pittsburgh they are often mistaken as part of the city itself. Regent Square in particular shares borders with four different municipalities, Edgewood, Swissvale, Pittsburgh, and Wilkinsburg, and even walking a block or two can take you through each of these communities’ footprints. The entire area makes up around 217 acres in size and is densely populated with 1,335 properties owned by 1,031 different owners. Zoning for this area includes a good mix of residential and commercial overlays which allows for a good mix of uses.

**NEIGHBORHOOD CONVERSATION**

St Stephen’s Episcopal Church hosted a community conversation on September 14th with outreach done by WCDC staff across the neighborhood. This meeting did not have a virtual option; in total 9 residents participated in the single meeting.

**BRIEF HISTORY**

The neighborhoods west of the busway are some of the earliest settled communities in Wilkinsburg with a history reaching back to the late 19th century. Much of the land was owned by Moses Hampton, owner of Hampton Coal, back when much of Wilkinsburg was mining country. After Moses’s death in 1876, the lands were parceled to become residences, many of which still stand today. The area is rich in Wilkinsburg history with one of the boroughs earliest schools, Kelly School, calling this area home. In 1915 the tracks which make up the busway were raised making it easier to enter the borough’s business district. This caused a boom in development and attracted many businesses to call the area home. Beyond just local history, this community has played a role in larger events as well. Frank Conrad, one of radio’s earliest pioneers, lived and worked in the Greater Park Place neighborhood for much of his life. Many of the advancements in radio we now benefit from today were created right in the inventors home on Penn Ave.



# NEIGHBORHOOD SCAN

## STRENGTHS

- Mix of the neighborhood
- Walkability
- Coffee shops
- Close to parks, co-op, Madeline’s and others

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Need to identify properties that would be a good fit for Community Land Trust to preserve affordable housing; start with elderly residents without plans for transition of their properties
- Education and networking to be better connected



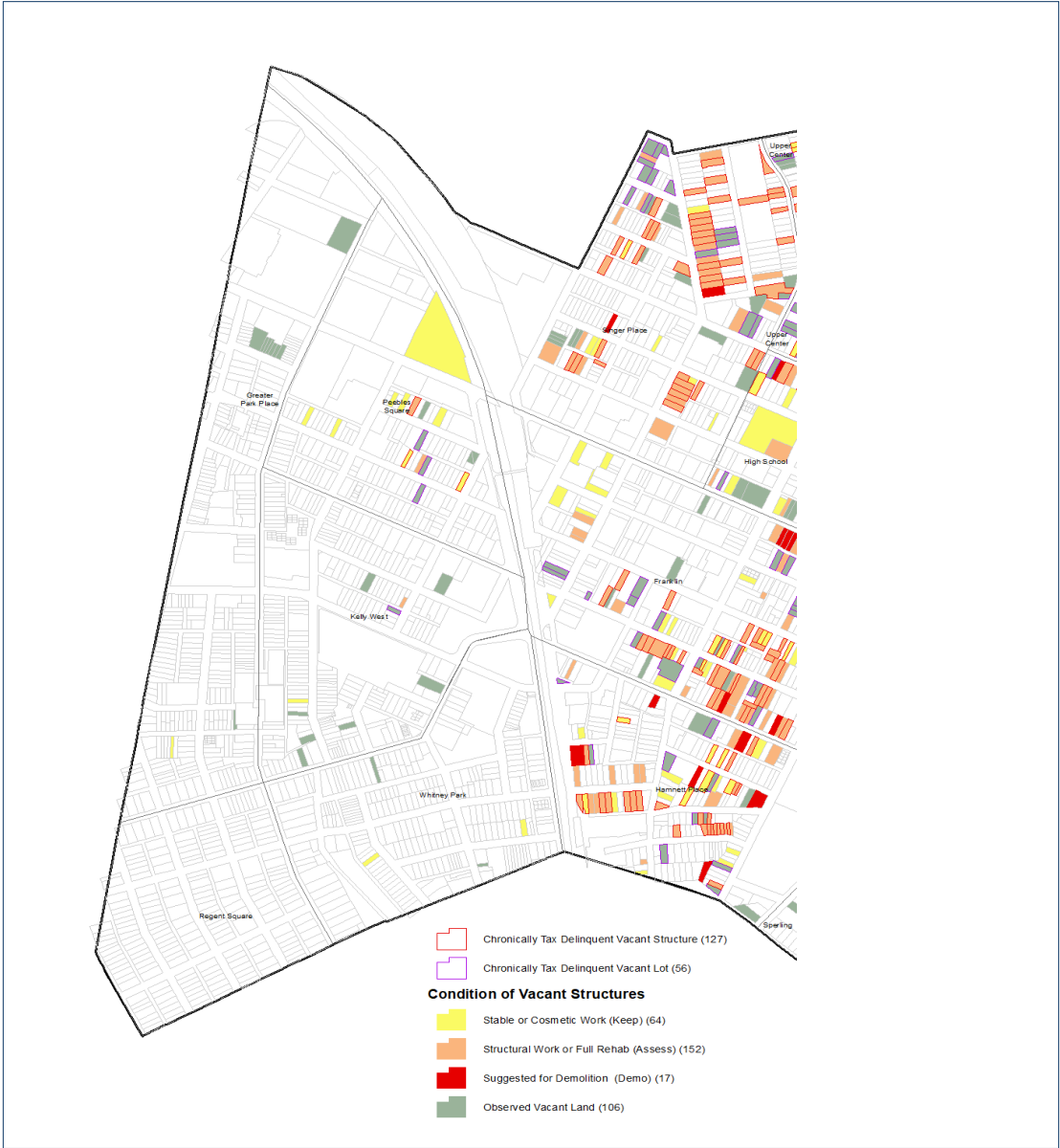
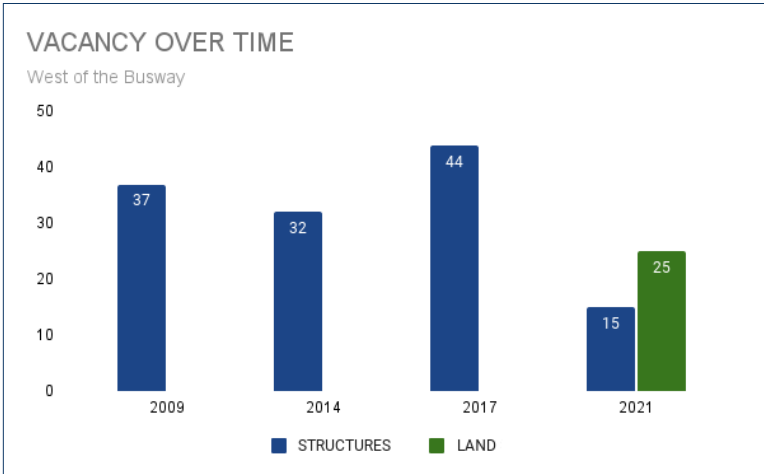
## THREATS, ISSUES, CONCERNS

- Gentrification
- Residents feel disconnected from the other neighborhoods
- Many residents live here and think it is the city of Pittsburgh
- Home values are increasing too quickly, affordability
- Area on Trenton Avenue would like to have more vibrant and useful businesses
- Some business owners in this area want it to “pass as Pittsburgh”
- Need to make sure that we are not encouraging racial and socioeconomic segregation in our new land use approaches
- Many streets are cut in half, and this impedes connectivity to other parts of the neighborhood
- Many street crossings are difficult
- Better borough relations to affect change with residents

## NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS

- Land re-use ideas for vacant lands (gardens and others)
- Need to determine why the twelve houses in these neighborhoods are vacant
- Green Street Park is nice to have, but it is not maintained; uncertain of who owns and is responsible

ANALYSIS



KEY TAKEAWAYS

The communities that lie to the west of the busway are strong market communities. Property values are higher, with more sales occurring more regularly and vacancy is limited to just a few. There is a low rate of chronic tax delinquency and a general interest in development opportunities. According to the participants in the community conversation, there are already hints of that momentum to push beyond the busway into the heart of Wilkinsburg, leaving everyone with some concern as it relates to equitable access to housing, residents being priced out, and undesirable development trends that may disturb the character of the Borough.

There is also an acknowledgment that much of the success of these 5 neighborhoods - Peebles Square, Kelly West, Greater Park Place, Whitney Park and Regent Square - is due to their proximity to the boundary shared with the City of Pittsburgh. Many of the residents acknowledged that they are often assumed to be City residents rather than the Borough.

PRIORITIES

- Find resources that will mitigate the displacement of existing residents as development continues to move into the Borough
- Encourage affordable housing and commercial to minimize the effects of gentrification on existing residents
- Consider additional tools like a community land trust to help retain land control and affordability

# HAMNETT PLACE



## OVERVIEW

Hamnett Place lies in the south-central portion of the borough's footprint with the Edgewood borough directly to its south. The neighborhood spans 44.58 acres, and has a total of 257 properties belonging to 216 individual owners. While a mostly residential neighborhood, Hamnett Pace has become home to several important assets of the Wilkesburg community such as the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation (PHLF). PHLF has been involved within the community since 2004 and has had success restoring and saving several historic buildings that fill Hamnett Place. They along with the communities help identified key projects that could both preserve the area's rich historical feeling while actively serving a new purpose. An example of this would be the Crescent Apartments which were restored to serve the community as affordable housing options for residents in need.

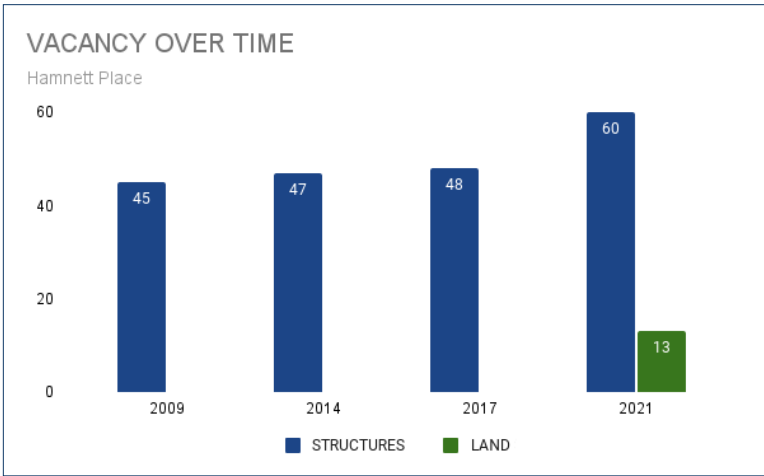
## NEIGHBORHOOD CONVERSATION

The WCDC offices hosted a community conversation on September 21st with outreach done by WCDC staff across the neighborhood. This meeting did not have a virtual option; in total 9 residents participated in the single meeting.

## BRIEF HISTORY

The area which would become Hamnett Place was first settled in the mid 1800s by John Hamnett, a prominent leatherman, and his family on several large tracts of land. A few decades later, his daughter, Margaret, married a local lumberman, James Wilson who then built the Wilson House which was renovated in 2011 by PHLF. The neighborhood was home to several drug stores, beauty salons, and grocers during its early period along with the Home for Aged Protestant Women, one of the area's first retirement homes. Hamnett Place was also the site for an unfortunate train accident in 1911 which led to the death of 4 residents and the maiming of a 5th. This incited residents to demand the raising of the train tracks to their current height to avoid any more tragedies.

ANALYSIS



PRIORITIES

- Need for prevention programs with financial incentive to repair
- Want to prioritize concerns of existing residents
- Need for demolition of several properties
- Whitney Ave development

SPECIFIC PROJECT IDEAS: Hamnett Place

- 831 Rebecca: under renovation by owner, Mo Morgan.
- 606 Mill: full rehab; has roof leaks, wide open on side with broken windows and basement door; has been gutted for metal scrap.
- 515 Coal: under active renovation; very close to occupancy.
- 513 Coal: owned by 515 owner.
- 850 Rebecca: full rehab; currently for sale for \$75,000.
- 722 Whitney: full rehab; has roof leaks, open back door.
- 821 Walnut: demolished.
- 503 Coal: under conservatorship. *Concern: there is no mechanism to impact a conservatorship to renovate or demolish?*
- Row houses on Ramsey: has many vacancies that are hazardous; overgrown trees; raccoons.
- 941 & 943 Ramsey near Coal.

# UPPER PENN/ BEACON HILL



## OVERVIEW

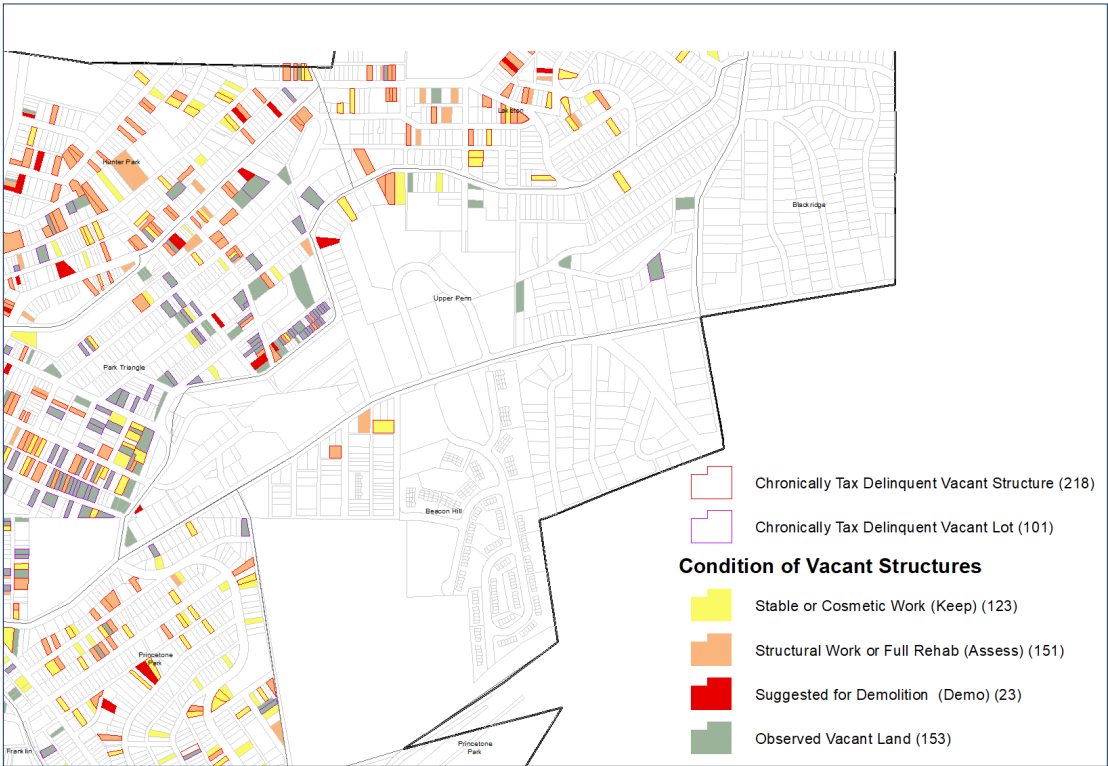
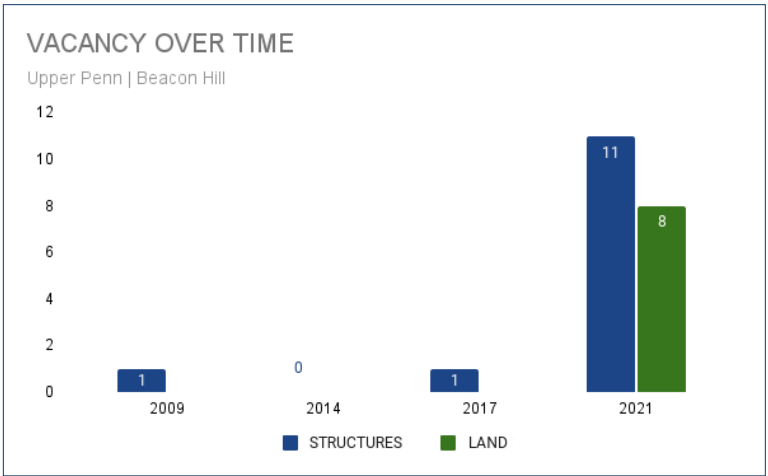
Upper Penn and Beacon Hill are two communities with two very different stories. Beacon Hill is a much newer development with much of its land being developed in the 1980's after developers purchased the land from a prominent cemetery next door. Those developers built a newer housing complex with townhomes, apartments, and condos in a suburban setting. However, on the neighborhood's eastern border stands Wilkinsburg's oldest home, erected in the 1800s as an inn for travelers. Upper Penn, to the north, had largely been around for almost a century by the time Beacon Hill had begun to see its development and is home to some of Wilkinsburg's oldest homes. The neighborhood has seen some new developments over the years such as the Ambassador and Carriage House apartments, which are some of the largest buildings in the borough.

## NEIGHBORHOOD CONVERSATION

The final community conversation was hosted at the WCDC office and had only a few attendees. This is not surprising given the limited vacant properties in these two neighborhoods combined.



ANALYSIS



KEY TAKEAWAYS

There is a need to advocate more for Wilkinsburg residents’ needs and interests. There is a lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities as well as an inconsistent understanding of what to expect from borough officials and staff. While there has been some positive development in the area, there is still a need for additional technical assistance as rehabbing property is difficult between the complex acquisition processes and cost for renovation; extended timelines may be needed for financial reasons, but often result in delays resulting form vandalism or neglect.

A general fondness for events that bring like-minded residents together might include more workshops or interactive activities, such as the Vacant Home Tour, though it’s unclear how effective those area as a tool to combat vacancy and blight versus simply raising awareness. Additional tools to simplify acquisition would be welcome as the limitations for VPRP and Sheriff’s Sale can create unnecessary burdens for residents interested in investing more strongly in the community.

PRIORITIES

- Technical Assistance for acquiring & rehabbing properties
- 1434 Penn Ave vacant
- Pull list of homes with unpaid back taxes from MBM
- 2400 properties tax delinquent out of over 7000 parcels
- Map tax delinquency
- Wilkinsburg Christian Housing - (Autumn Butler) Willing to work with folks on repairs, financial coaching and estate planning
- Need to improve curb appeal in major thoroughfares - maybe focus on stabilizing first?
- Concerned about security for kids



One of the goals of this planning effort is to shift the mindset of local government officials, community organizations, and residents to view these vacant properties as opportunities for change and to recognize the need for a long-term commitment toward solutions. While many residents see empty homes as potential assets in neighborhood stabilization and revitalization that can be renovated and reoccupied, there are very real barriers to making this happen. The following recommendations include programmatic activities that should be conducted at multiple scales, including resident, nonprofit organization, private development, local government, and county levels.

**PREVENTION STRATEGIES**

*Support for current residents can stop additional abandonment and prevent further deterioration*

- Financial incentives and resources for repair
- Educational opportunities regarding home ownership, home repair, refinancing, and more
- Financial counseling including estate planning
- Neighborhood programs to support maintenance needs of neighbors (grass cutting, snow removal)



**REMEDiation STRATEGIES**

*Through the rehabilitation of salvageable structures and the activation of land, projects can serve as catalysts for additional investment.*

- Facade programs
- Vacant lot activation and reuse
- Sideyard sales
- Zoning adjustments to allow for new uses



**REDEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES**

*Large project investments can help catalyze additional interest and provide additional amenities to the existing community.*

- Large capitol projects - what and where?
- Strategic demolition - decision criteria
- New construction - what kind?



**PRESERVATION STRATEGIES**

*Protecting and leveraging existing historical and locally meaningful assets can help retain and promote the local context and identity.*

- Mothball of vacant structures
- Deconstruction prior to demolition
- Historic designations



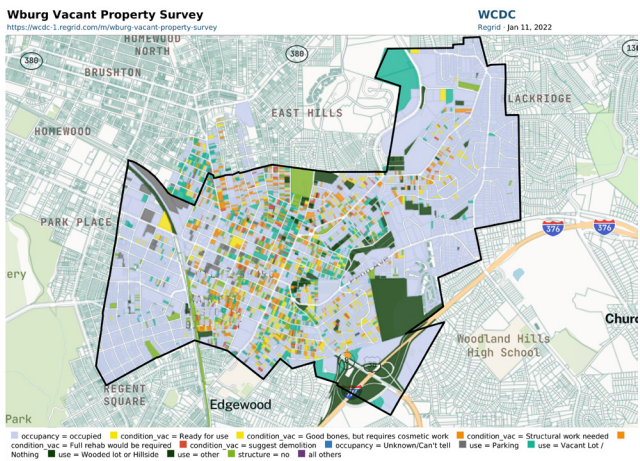
Strategies have been categorized by how they address the current vacant property challenge, in addition to the four categories above in which residents can take a part, there is also a significant need for administrative and system-level changes.

ADMINISTRATIVE STRATEGIES

Identify a Borough - Resident Liaison

The borough currently owns over 200 properties, many of which remain vacant. Keeping an updated list of all properties that are eligible for purchase would be helpful in getting new tenants to acquire them. This would remove the burden placed on the borough for maintenance and could help drive development, both from within and outside the community. Many interested residents are unsure of who owns a vacant property that they are willing to rehab or reuse as well as whether or not a property is available for acquisition. Combining this strategy with a point of contact for vacant properties would remove roadblocks and incentivize spending in the borough. Several national cities have established a *Blight Charter* to clearly establish guiding principles and goals for addressing vacant property within their local context.

Keep Vacant Property Inventory Current



In order to take a proactive approach to the vacant property issue, it is critical to have real-time useful data points to help guide decisions and future investments. A parcel-based property inventory is one way to provide context on the scale and patterns of abandonment as well as the redevelopment and stewardship of properties within the borough. Collecting this in a digital format aids in communicating the information quickly and uniformly over time. Maintaining a current inventory can be challenging since the status of properties is ever-changing as rehabilitation, redevelopment, demolition, and changes in ownership happen every day. It is recommended that an inventory be updated at least every two to three years to help provide the most accurate information possible.

Through the use of the Regrid mobile app and trained volunteers, the borough could easily update the inventory in just a few weeks. How and where this information is shared, however, should be considered in order to maximize transparency while not encouraging speculation from outside interests. Though property condition is assessed visually and the assessment information of each property is public information, it can cause more harm than good to make this information visually accessible without restrictions.

Update Tax Abatement and Compromise Programs

While the tax abatement and compromise programs offer useful and often necessary relief from past and future tax burdens, the process is difficult. In order to encourage the use of these tools more frequently by residents, improvements should be made to update these programs and provide clarity. Many residents that were engaged through this planning process were unaware that these tools existed. A few residents who had used them shared the struggles they ran into when doing so. Recommendations to improve these programs include:

- Assign a single point of contact to help answer questions and provide regularly scheduled educational and training workshops to help promote and encourage use.
- Align acceptable allowances with current regulations. There is a current circular contradiction in the tax compromise process that requires proof of funds to renovate the property, but most people will be unable to get a loan until the property has been fully evaluated and construction drawings made. However, no changes can be made to the property without being named on the deed, which cannot happen until approved for tax compromise. Proof of funds to simply get to a level of stabilization would be acceptable for the program requirements, but this is not specified in the documentation.
- Ensure information is shared with the applicant. Another issue that has been brought up is with the communication between MBM Collections (the borough’s tax collector), the borough, and the applicant. Once the MBM attorney gets the petition approved at the county, that information is supposed to be shared with the applicant via the borough, but this rarely happens currently.
- Share information about other liens on the property. At this time, little information related to any other liens (e.g. county, state, water) attached to a property, which may end up as the end user’s responsibility, are shared with the applicant. While this may not be required of the borough, if the goal is to encourage and expand the use of these programs, it is critical information that may sway residents.

Review Zoning for Potential Updates

Due to the variety in structure typology throughout the borough and very distinctive zones of development, it is understandable that no standard will ever be uniformly applied. In some cases, exceptions may be warranted. It is worth reviewing zoning classifications and bounds to see if it makes sense to allow for additional uses or lessen restrictive guidelines that could encourage more development to occur. Though it is not realistic to do this very often, it should be prioritized at least once a decade or after any noticeable shift as indicated by the data (e.g. census, sales, building permit applications).





### *Improve Demolition Policies*

While demolition practices have progressed over the years, it is important to hold the practice accountable against future harm to both person and property. Policies related to the proper disposal of materials and what is allowed to remain on site in what will become a vacant lot, can be more restrictive to encourage healthier soil quality and percolation.

## **PREVENTION STRATEGIES**



### *Rental Registration Emphasis*

The community conversations often focused on frustrations and concerns related to rental properties for several reasons. The primary one being that the prevalence of rental units indicates a transient population (i.e. people who do not necessarily share the inherent pride of place and social responsibility for its upkeep and improvement). Additionally, landlords do not seem to be generally engaged in the conversations and many noted they felt the quality of rental offerings was poor.

The borough has codified tenant registration as a means to track owners of residential or commercial rental properties as well as the tenants themselves. This originated in 2011 and should be updated annually at a cost of \$10/unit, whether occupied or not. Rental registration is a local regulation that requires landlords to register with the city and provide the city with essential information. The purpose of registration is to enable the municipality to find property owners in case of emergencies or code violations, and to make sure the owner understands his obligations under local ordinances.

Many residents are unaware that such a registration list exists, and the WCDC was unable to get much more detail. Despite the documentation that suggests this information is submitted to the borough secretary, it appears that the information goes directly through code enforcement. It is unclear how successful this effort is in staying up to date with rental information or with collecting penalties, representing possible loss of income to the borough.

A renewed focus on this effort through marketing, education, or mailing campaigns may be beneficial. This could ensure key local legal requirements for landlords are clear and that owners will be held accountable to that knowledge.

### *Tree Inventory and Canopy Assessment*

A common theme that emerged from many of the heavily residential neighborhoods included concerns regarding tree canopy and health. In particular, pending damage due to falling branches and trunks as a result of large storm events as well as a lack of maintenance for those growing on private, abandoned properties. It may be beneficial to quantify this risk that results in unplanned costs to occupied properties and to the borough in the case of an emergency demolition situation as a result of a fallen tree.



Wilkinsburg has a Shade Tree Commission, which has conducted informal tree inventories and assessments in the past, that could provide additional benefit to the borough by specifically identifying the number of trees on both public and private property that have the potential to cause future harm to a person or property. From there, a maintenance plan could be developed to care for the trees. Funding could be secured to support homeowners who are struggling with tree-related care. The borough may be able to identify funding to address tree care on abandoned properties, just as they may have to occasionally perform emergency demolitions or secure vacant structures for the health and safety of residents.

### *Resident Resources*

With vacancy being so prevalent across the borough, bringing on a full-time staff member to help assist interested parties with acquiring vacant properties. Many properties require an expert knowledge on not only how to navigate the process of ownership, but also the programs which help make it financially feasible. Having a full-time staff member would help streamline the process of switching ownership and mitigating the chances for long-term vacancies occurring. Financial counseling, estate planning, program navigation, networking, access to service providers, regular workshops, and general technical assistance are all useful activities to have in rotation throughout the seasonal calendar in order to generate interest and application of knowledge to practice.



### *Community Tool Sheds*

Community tool sheds can be an effective way of helping residents maintain their own property and those of the community at a low cost. The concept of the shed is that neighbors and organizations donate tools to be shared across the community as needed. This benefits all residents as they do not have to purchase a full complement of tools for specific tasks allowing for better care of their property and encouraging investment.



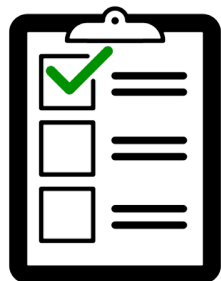


### **Block Clubs**

There are several block clubs that are in varying states of formality especially due to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These block clubs could be seeded with small, but dependable, funding to encourage community organizing activities to help disseminate materials, conduct neighborhood cleanups and stewardship activities, and to strengthen existing networks that can be called upon in need. Additional training could be facilitated to help strengthen and increase the capacity of these neighborhood groups through the provision of educational resources, supplies, and even funding, while encouraging strong social networks and customized action plans. Funding could be tied to the achievement of proposed goals related to community events or other activities as outlined at annually scheduled times. Some key areas for additional training may include:

- Creating and Maintaining Coalitions and Partnerships
- Assessing Community Needs and Resources
- Analyzing Problems and Goals
- Developing a Framework or Model of Change
- Developing Strategic and Action Plans
- Building Leadership
- Developing an Intervention
- Increasing Participation and Membership
- Enhancing Cultural Competence
- Advocating for Change
- Influencing Policy Development
- Evaluating the Initiative
- Implementing a Social Marketing Campaign
- Writing a Grant Application for Funding
- Improving Organizational Management and Development
- Sustaining the Project or Initiative

A customized self-assessment could be conducted to determine areas to strengthen and consultants or partners could be brought on board to help facilitate the work.



### **Code Enforcement Blitz**

A code enforcement blitz is a designated effort by municipalities to engage, educate, and remediate code offenses throughout their footprint. The borough could target different sections of the community throughout the year in order to hold property owners accountable to code, helping fight against potential blight. During these blitzes, abandoned cars would be removed, litter sites ticketed, and

property owners cited for any major code violations that affect the overall quality of life seen within a community.

A regularly scheduled event like this can serve many purposes. It can help demonstrate to residents the serious nature and importance of code enforcement and help educate landlords, tenants, and owner occupants on rules and expectations for property maintenance. A coordinated sweep of neighborhoods may occur in a very concentrated and thorough way, perhaps coordinated with the update of the property inventory, to take a deep look at the community parcel by parcel. While this effort requires intensive time and capacity, it may help establish the serious nature of these issues and encourage everyone to work together in coordination with the local government to outline and meet expectations of a healthy and strong community.

### **Wills Program**

When someone dies, their property and belongings have to go somewhere. If there is no will, Pennsylvania law will decide who gets everything. The law does not care who you were closest with during your life. Even if you have a brother you have not spoken to for years, the law will still insist that he inherit instead of a cousin or friend you were closer to.



While some property owners simply abandon their houses and land, there are many who pass away without leaving a will, and have not determined who will inherit their property. In these instances, those who would normally inherit must start a lengthy and expensive process to acquire said property. For some, that cost is too much and they simply walk away, leading to the property entering a convoluted legal status when it could have been occupied or sold. However, with a will, there is more control. A will can document the choice of who gets what, who manages your property after you die, and, in some cases, how your property gets used.

In order to stop this situation from getting worse, the borough could work with residents to ensure that their wills are up-to-date by either contracting out services for legal help or working with non-profits who provide direct support. This can ensure properties are able to move seamlessly from owner to owner minimizing the risk of land sitting vacant in legal limbo.

## REMEDATION STRATEGIES

### *Financial Support*

In communities like Wilkinsburg, where approximately 25% of residents earn wages below the poverty line, resources are stretched and regular maintenance and improvements are often deferred in favor of more immediate needs. While this can result in even further deterioration, it also seems like an unavoidable outcome for residents struggling through the day-to-day. Through the provision of financial support, either in the form of microgrants, matched funds, or even low-interest loans, residents may be able to bridge tough times to help retain the value of their homes and businesses, which should be one of their greatest assets.

During the community conversations, residents often expressed an interest in finding financial support, not simply for their own properties, but also to enable them to take on a more active approach to acquiring and rehabilitating vacant properties. **Support for dedicated Wilkinsburg residents and stakeholders should be prioritized as a local remediation strategy as it both preserves the culture of the community while increasing the personal responsibility for the well-being and future of their home.**

Ideas for uses of additional funds include: application fees, legal assistance, construction costs, additional testing, or professional services as well as basic home repair, landscape updates, and clearing lots.

### *Sideyard Campaign*

Many cities around the country have adopted programs that allow residents to adopt vacant lots next to their property in order to reduce blight and help reward good homeowners. For a good example on how the program works look no further than Pittsburgh, which has seen great success with their sideyard program.

The City of Pittsburgh offers residents an opportunity to purchase adjacent vacant lots under a few key conditions. First, interested residents must be up-to-date with their taxes, water, and sewer. Second, the property must be directly adjacent to the interested party's property. Third, the land must be owned by the municipality and in cases where it is, residents can ask for it to be seized if it is tax delinquent. The last requirement is that applicants pay a fee and enter a bid, which in total can cost between \$450 to \$500. The borough owns 103 vacant lots at this time, with the ability to seize others, if needed.

### *Partnerships Greenspace Organizations*

There are several nonprofit greenspace organizations that operate within or just outside of the borough. By engaging these partners, Wilkinsburg may benefit from the expertise of several fields without having to establish new programs or organizations to accommodate the work. Wilkinsburg anchor organizations may be interested in partnering, contracting, or sponsoring project ideas that combine local context knowledge with subject matter expertise. This joint experience can help improve the likeliness of long-term success while minimizing any possible confusion of conflicting ideas.

## REDEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

### *Establish Regular Coordination of Proposed Funding and Projects*

Various partners throughout Wilkinsburg are making the effort to reinvest in the community through new housing projects, business development initiatives, and acquisition and rehabilitation in key areas. Often, this work is financed through philanthropic support. It has been noted by several of these partners that there is a lack of coordination in these efforts. By establishing a regularly occurring meeting to review proposed plans and applications, there may be opportunities for strengthening proposals and increasing collaboration to share the responsibility and accomplish more. Whether virtual or in person, or even through the creation of a static portal, partners will be able to share what they hope to accomplish and how groups can coordinate since many partners will often be eligible for the same funding sources, creating competing applications that can cause confusion. This is also an opportunity to request letters of support or find some alignment with other ongoing plans.

### *Targeted Demolition Strategy*

Resources for demolition are limited and communities must often prioritize and target their demolition activities to maximize impact. A strategic focus must be established by the borough with clear and transparent criteria. Some communities may target large concentrations of properties for demolition with the intent of clearing the way for future development. An alternate approach, which may be more beneficial, is one that would focus on working to stabilize healthier areas to retain the existing population, which aligns well with feedback from many concerned residents that participated in the community conversations. This may affect cost per demolition due to the additional precaution of active adjacent properties versus those surrounded by equally blighted and vacant properties. The borough could

use the updated inventory to determine a prioritized schedule and work proactively to support the existing residents, focusing on the quality of demolitions over the quantity, especially given the lack of planning in place for future use of vacant lots left behind.

## **PRESERVATION STRATEGIES**

### ***Historic Preservation***

Wilkinsburg is home to many structures with clear cultural and historic importance that help define the borough's character. In order to preserve that character, it is important to protect the structures that have been important to the evolution of the borough. Seeking protected, or designated, status of historically important buildings helps to preserve the character and quality of the community over time, give property owners more confidence in the long-term stability of the neighborhood, promote pride and appreciation of the character and history of the community, and help property owners begin to see themselves not only as owners but stewards of history. Wilkinsburg has several structures designated as historically significant. It may be worthwhile for the Wilkinsburg Historical Society to take a fresh look at what structures remain and determine whether it would be beneficial to preserve others within their community and protect them from harm moving forward.

### ***Deconstruction***

Simply put, deconstruction is the systematic disassembly (i.e. unbuilding) of a structure by hand in order to salvage the maximum economic and environmental value of materials through reuse and recycling. It is the process of taking a building apart in the reverse order of construction to skillfully remove valuable building materials and save rich architectural history. Homes and other structures can be deconstructed partially or completely, resulting in tax benefits to the donor.

Deconstruction represents a cost-effective method of waste and material recovery. It provides a much needed alternative to harmful methods of building consumption, resource waste, and careless disposal. Unlike landfills and incineration processes, the practice of reclaiming, recovering, and reusing building materials is ecologically sustainable and environmentally sound. Currently, the borough does not have a deconstruction policy, but it could establish one and encourage the practice in partnership with a local organization, such as Construction Junction. Deconstruction is not simply an ecological or economically beneficial concept; it is also an opportunity to preserve some of the character of a community by safeguarding

unique architectural and construction details and materials that may no longer be available in today's building supply market. There is often a level of craftsmanship in older buildings that is unmatched (at least without significant cost) today. If a program can be established to encourage deconstruction while salvaging materials that can be made available for Wilkinsburg residents working on rehab efforts, it would be a true triple bottom line effort.

### ***Mothball Strategy***

For properties the borough wants to keep intact throughout its timeline of vacancy in hopes they can be renovated in the future, developing a comprehensive mothballing strategy is critical. This could be a strategy that is mandated borough-wide for any resident who will not have any intentions of occupying the property for a period of time. A marketing, training, and outreach campaign could take place to help educate property owners on how to cultivate their existing investment for the long-term. Materials and training could be provided by a local partner to assist homeowners in this effort, which may also promote a conversation regarding future intentions toward vacated properties that may help partnership be more proactive in finding alternate uses or stewards before properties are abandoned.

Alternatively, these actions may be undertaken by the borough's department of public works or through partnership with locally engaged contractors based on recommendations from code enforcement to proactively address vacated structures before they become too deteriorated. The borough is currently limited in their capacity to address vacant structures, especially if they have been abandoned or are being managed by absentee owners.

However, it is not outside their responsibilities to conduct activities on private property to ensure the health and safety of its constituents. There is some precedent within Wilkinsburg to build from, including the annual board up and landscape efforts conducted during the Transform the Triangle clean up event, which has morphed into an understanding with the borough.

A typical checklist of efforts may include: 1) removing pests, 2) securing entrances, 3) stabilizing any structural issues, 4) notifying emergency services of the properties status, 5) disconnecting utilities, 6) ensuring proper ventilation, 7) ensuring no moisture is getting in (e.g. roof, gutters), 8) establishing a maintenance timeline, and 9) documenting the property.

# CONCLUSION



The work of the Strong Neighborhoods initiative resulted in several action items and plans. “Strong Neighborhoods is really about increasing community engagement around the vacant property issue,” committee chair, Pam Panchak, explained. “No one knows their neighborhood like the people who live there.”



In an effort to ensure that those plans can begin to be implemented, the WCDC was awarded \$250,000 to support the Wilksburg Vacant Property Recovery Initiative. These funds were secured from the Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement (PHARE) Fund.

Beginning in 2022, the WCDC will assist residents through ongoing educational and networking opportunities as well as through the direct provision of resources to support estate planning, home repair, vacant property acquisition, and more. *Learn more at [www.wilksburgcdc.org](http://www.wilksburgcdc.org).*