



Image: Partial heat map of available Land Bank properties

Land Bank Developments

Unlocking Potential: Reforming the Philadelphia Land Bank

Introduction

Philadelphia families face a growing shortage of affordable housing, even as many neighborhoods contain vacant lots and underused properties, some of which are owned by the Philadelphia Land Bank. Land banks, or public entities or nonprofit organizations that acquire land to repurpose for productive uses, exist in many localities, including Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit, Newark, and Wilmington. As of February 2024, 19 states and Puerto Rico have passed state-enabled land bank legislation¹. Each locality meets the needs of its community while creating opportunities to revitalize vacant parcels. At its inception in 2013, the Philadelphia Land Bank owned over 8,000 parcels, but fewer than 12% have been granted for redevelopment².

Philadelphia Land Bank

As of 2023, 40% of Philadelphia households are cost-burdened, spending more than 30% of their income on rent or mortgage payments³. Philadelphia is facing a shortage of affordable housing while thousands of vacant parcels remain available for redevelopment. The Philadelphia Land Bank was created to organize and redevelop these lots, but it has been a slow and drawn-out process for those interested in pursuing Land Bank parcels. While the Land Bank's intent for revitalization is crucial for the City's long-term success, it has fallen short of its potential.

Sourcing

Investors and developers often lack a clear understanding of how to acquire properties from the Land Bank, even with the tools it provides. Available properties can be explored using the Land Bank's online property search tool, which features an interactive map showing current owners (e.g. Philadelphia Land Bank, Department of Public Property, etc.), zoning districts, and council districts. The website also provides details on application qualifications and requirements, helping interested parties prepare for the Land Bank's review process. The City also issues development Request for Proposals (RFPs) which allow developers to submit plans for specific sites, but at the time of this writing, only two such RFPs are open⁴. Properties are also offered through competitive sales during which they are sold to the highest bidder. While these processes may appear straightforward, prospective developers must have a solid understanding of development, budgeting, funding, construction, and program, all while ensuring compliance with guidelines from the City of Philadelphia.

Approval Process

Many developers view the Land Bank's approval process as slow, consuming resources and delaying development as a product of operational inefficiencies. It can take up to two years before construction begins, limiting the creation of new affordable housing and leaving neighborhoods with vacant, underutilized land rather than needed homes. The Land Bank's current process not only slows affordable

housing development but also creates barriers for developers. By making parcels accessible and streamlining approvals, the Land Bank could accelerate community revitalization and encourage greater participation from local and minority developers, boosting economic opportunities while addressing housing needs.

Proposed Changes

The Land Bank requires meaningful reforms to better support redevelopment in Philadelphia. One key improvement would be to allow site access for civil engineering and geotechnical investigations prior to ownership, which could be facilitated through access agreements. Similarly, prospective investors should be able to apply for zoning prior to acquiring a site to accelerate the development process. Additional measures could include extending City Council support to Land Bank properties that require minor or administrative variances while streamlining zoning hearing dates for Land Bank sites to reduce the current six-month wait for the Zoning Board of Adjustment. Collectively, these changes could shorten development timelines and help increase the supply of affordable housing in Philadelphia.

Summary

Ultimately, the Philadelphia Land Bank represents a strategic opportunity to address the City's affordable housing shortage and revitalize underused land. While the Land Bank has amassed thousands of parcels since its creation, slow approval processes and limited accessibility have delayed its impact. By streamlining approvals, providing earlier access for zoning and site investigations, and expanding support to developers, including local and minority investors, the Land Bank could more efficiently transform vacant lots into homes and strengthen neighborhoods. Implementing these reforms would not only accelerate the creation of affordable housing but also encourage economic development, making the Land Bank a more effective tool for Philadelphia's long-term growth and community revitalization.

Citations

1. "National Land Bank Map." Center for Community Progress, September 15, 2025. <https://communityprogress.org/resources/land-banks/national-land-bank-map/>.
2. Blumgart, Jake. "City Council Grills Land Bank on Selling Only 1,017 Vacant Properties in over a Decade." Inquirer.com, April 16, 2025. <https://www.inquirer.com/real-estate/commercial/land-bank-philadelphia-parker-housing-20250416.html>.
3. Understanding the state of affordable housing in Philadelphia using ACS Data - Econsult Solutions, Inc.. Accessed September 20, 2025. <https://econsultsolutions.com/understanding-the-state-of-affordable-housing-in-philadelphia-using-acs-data/>.
4. "Home." Philadelphia Land Bank, April 9, 2025. <https://phillylandbank.org/>.