

Nicetown Blight Recertification



**Philadelphia City Planning Commission
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CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

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INTRODUCTION

This report evaluates blight conditions in the North Philadelphia neighborhood of Nicetown. The entire neighborhood is not included in this report; the “upper” portion of Nicetown was blight certified in 2003. The Nicetown Redevelopment Area includes nearly 180 acres. Nicetown was originally certified as blighted in 1958. The blight recertification boundaries used in this report cover the same areas that were certified previously, and no new territory is being added to the certified area. The specific boundaries of the study area are:

- Broad Street to the east;
- Hunting Park Avenue, Luzerne Street and Germantown Avenue to the south;
- Pulaski Avenue, the Tabor Branch Railroad and Windrim Avenue to the west;
- and Wingohocking Street to the north.

Blight certification is the first step in the redevelopment process. A blight recertification is needed for Nicetown for several reasons. One is to update the original findings of the now 61 year old original blight certification and analyze if blight still exists in the study area. Secondly blight (re)certification allows for the use of certain redevelopment powers and monies.



The study boundaries.

In Nicetown there are many publicly-owned vacant properties that could be made available for redevelopment if the few remaining adjacent private properties could be acquired and assembled. Community plans for Nicetown, including the *Germantown and Nicetown Transit-Oriented Plan*, recommend assemblage of vacant land for new commercial and residential opportunities particularly along Germantown Avenue. Nicetown is also a candidate for federal Neighborhood Stabilization Program funds which can be used for demolition, housing development, weatherization, and purchasing and renovating foreclosed houses. However, before any of these actions can take place, it is important to review and update the 1958 blight certification using current information; and that is the purpose of this report.

HISTORY

Nicetown likely gets its moniker from the surname of an early family. Nicetown is located approximately four and half miles from Center City. Germantown Avenue forms the spine of the neighborhood. Half of the neighborhood follows the “northwest grid” of Germantown Avenue while the other the “Center City grid.” The older section of Nicetown follows the northwest grid and was developed in the late 19th century. The remainder of the neighborhood was developed in the 1920s and 1930s. These houses often have porches and small front yards compared to the oldest Nicetown homes which are built to the street line. The entire Nicetown community is typified by rowhouses. Even the newer infill, dating from the 1960s and constructed on formally industrial properties, are rowhomes. Prior to the speculative rowhouse development which dominates Nicetown’s landscape today, the area was farmland and woods.



A photo of the 4400 Block of Germantown Avenue from the 1965 Nicetown Urban Renewal Technical Report.

Commercial areas in Nicetown are concentrated along Broad Street and Germantown Avenue. The neighborhood has always housed a population of middle class and working class families. Like many other older sections of Philadelphia, Nicetown started experienced significant neighborhood decline after World War II due to the loss of manufacturing jobs, loss of population, the age of the building stock, and resulting abandonment and disinvestment. The construction of the Roosevelt Boulevard Expressway in the 1950s also contributed greatly to the decline of Nicetown as nearly 200 families were displaced for the construction of a four to six lane highway that cut a gash through the neighborhood.

Even prior to the construction of the Roosevelt Expressway, Nicetown has been divided from neighboring communities by railroads and major streets. Passenger and freight railroad divide Nicetown from Germantown to the northwest and Nicetown is divided from the Tioga, Hunting Park and Logan communities by Broad Street and Hunting Park Avenue to the east and south. The Roosevelt Expressway, mixed grid pattern and railroads make traveling around Nicetown difficult as many streets dead-end, dogleg and change direction.

CRITERIA

There are seven criteria for blight designation set forth in the Pennsylvania Redevelopment Law which stipulates that only one of the criteria must be met in order for an area to be deemed blighted. The law also states that blighted conditions need not be evident throughout the area study. According to the law, the fact that individual properties are free from blight does not make the finding of blight arbitrary as it is required that the study area be considered in its entirety. The criteria are:

1. Unsafe, unsanitary, inadequate or overcrowded conditions
2. Inadequate planning
3. Excessive land coverage
4. Lack of proper light, air and open space
5. Faulty street and lot layout
6. Defective design and arrangement of buildings
7. Economically or socially undesirable land use

The following analysis finds that Nicetown is blighted using criteria 1, 5 and 7.

ANALYSIS

Data from the Department of Licenses and Inspections, Philadelphia Water Department and the Board of Revision of Taxes were used to inform the findings. On-site evaluations and field surveys furthered the conclusion that Nicetown meets the Pennsylvania Redevelopment Law criteria for blight.

Criterion #1: Unsafe, Unsanitary, Inadequate or Overcrowded Conditions

Evidence of this criterion is evidenced by vacant and neglected lots and buildings, and code violations.

Vacancy

There are 1,735 parcels of land in the study area, consisting of buildings and lots. Of these, 492 are vacant. Vacant lots and structures comprise 28% of all parcels in the area. The vacant lots are distributed throughout the study area and include sites ranging in size from small residential properties to over two and a half acres under the Roosevelt Expressway. The quantity and distribution of vacant lots and structures are evidence of unsafe and inadequate conditions. Data for total parcels and vacant lots were compiled using 2009 data from the Bureau of Revision of Taxes and the Philadelphia Water Department.



Vacant houses on the 4300 Block of North 16th Street.

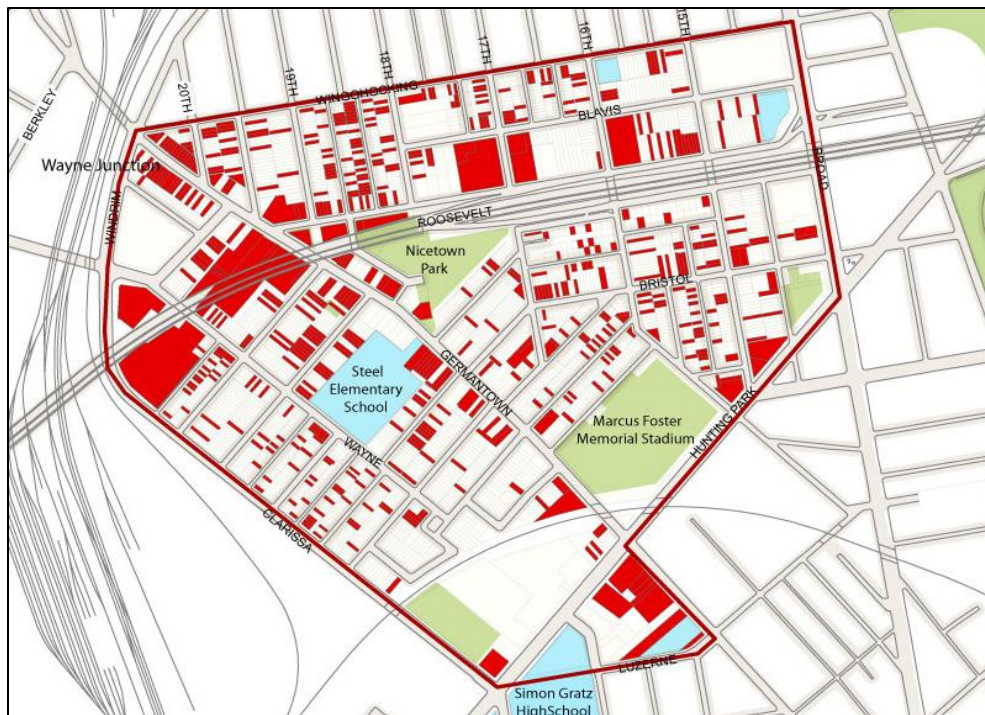
Many of the vacant properties in Nicetown are in very poor condition: unsecured, appear structurally compromised and have a number of open building code violations. These conditions of neglect encourage vandalism, squatting and other illicit activities which are evidence of unsafe, unsanitary and inadequate conditions. Vacant lots tend to be well maintained — mowed, kept clear of debris and fenced — by the Nicetown Community Development Corporation. However, there are few lots (often small and between houses) that are overgrown and trash strewn.



An unmaintained lot on the 4400 block of North Cleveland Street.

Code Violations

As evidenced by field visits to Nicetown, many properties in the study area exhibit signs of neglect and deferred maintenance. There were 609 building code violations issued within the study area in 2005 (the most recent year that date is available from the Department of Licenses and Inspections). This is confirmation of unsafe and inadequate building conditions.



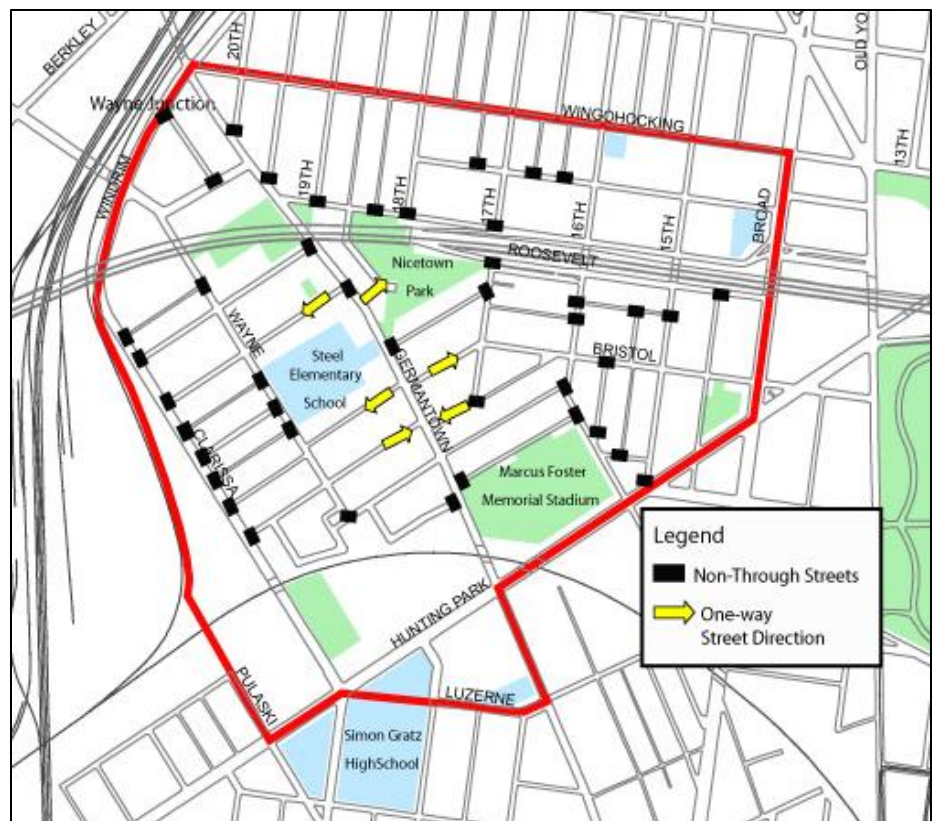
There are 492 vacant lots and structures in the Nicetown Blight Recertification study area. This map shows all vacant properties as reported by the BRT and PWD using 2009 data.

Criterion #5: Faulty street and lot layout

Although the 1958 Nicetown Blight Certification found Nicetown blighted under all seven of the criteria, it is clear from the 1965 Nicetown Redevelopment Plan that criterion 5 was the primary reason for the urban renewal activities undertaken. As stated in the technical report of the Nicetown Redevelopment Area Plan, “With little regard for the neighborhood, the highway engineers ran the expressway directly through the heart of the area. The Expressway is today the single greatest blighting influence in Nicetown.” The Plan also felt that too much through traffic was using Germantown Avenue which needed to be redirected out of the neighborhood.

As recognized in 1965 and today, little can be done about the blighting influence of the Roosevelt Expressway or the isolation that Nicetown experiences by being surrounded by other major infrastructure like railroad, Hunting Park Avenue and Broad Street. These boundaries cannot be removed, but only mitigated by improving maintenance, safer pedestrian crossings and reclaiming dead-space under the Roosevelt Expressway. Additionally, these infrastructure boundaries and Nicetown’s mix of grid patterns result in numerous dead-end streets. Nicetown is a difficult neighborhood to traverse.

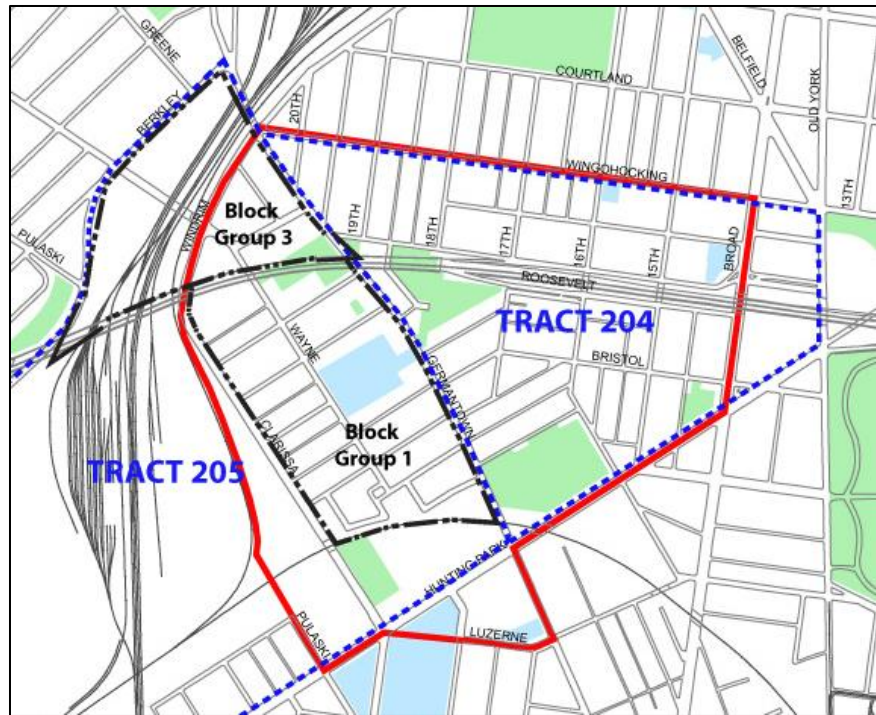
The 1965 Redevelopment Area plan compounded these circulation issues by directing traffic off of Germantown Avenue. At that time planners felt that Nicetown’s residential character was being disrupted by too much through traffic cutting through the neighborhood either to “non-community serving commercial” on Germantown Avenue and Broad Street or to farther destinations. In order to eliminate and redirect this through traffic, 18th and 19th Streets were made into “t-intersections” at Cayuga Street (the 18th Street streetbed is now part of Nicetown Park) and street directions were changed to make crossing Germantown Avenue, and the Nicetown neighborhood, more difficult. Commercial zoning was also changed along Germantown to residential.



A map showing some of the circulation issues facing Nicetown today.

Criterion #7: Economically or Socially Undesirable Land Use

Code violations, vacant properties and low property values are evidence of that this criterion is met in the Nicetown Blight Recertification Study Area. The 609 building code violations indicate that the level of economic investment in local property is substandard. The 492 vacant properties are an economically undesirable land use as they negatively impact the physical environment of the neighborhood, reduce property values and increase the potential for short dumping, squatting, arson and other crimes. Abandoned properties also deprive the neighborhood, the City and region of revenue from income taxes and real estate taxes.



Census tracts outlined in blue and block groups outlined in black are shown in relation to the red study area boundary.

The Nicetown study area has significantly lower property values when compared to the City, and this is additional evidence of economically undesirable land use. The Nicetown Blight Recertification Study area does not correspond well with census tracts or block groups. However, the two census tracts that best correspond to the study area, have residential sales prices that are less than one-third of the City median of price of \$95,000 (\$27,250 for tract 204 and \$30,000 in tract 205). This data is from 2007 as reported by the Bureau of Revision of Taxes. In the chart below, where more detailed block group information is available it is used over census tract data.

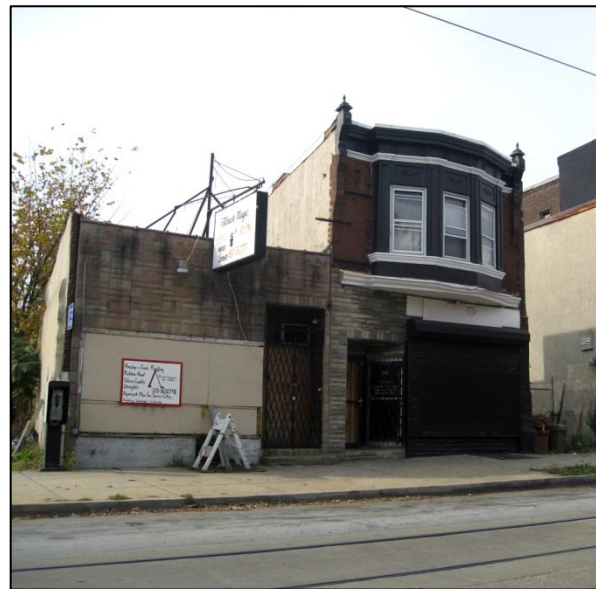
BLIGHT INDICATORS BY TRACT AND BLOCK GROUP				
	Total Parcels 2007	Vacant Lots 2007	Code Violations 2005	Median Sale Price 2007
Tract 204	1,455	109	485	\$27,250
Tract 205	-	-	-	\$30,000
Block Group 3	96	39	32	-
Block Group 1	784	67	173	20500
Total	1,735	215	690	n/a

Source: University of Pennsylvania Neighborhood Information System using data from the Philadelphia Board of Revision of Taxes and the Department of Licenses & Inspections.

CONCLUSION

In the Nicetown Blight Recertification study area, existing conditions are consistent with three of the criteria necessary to produce a finding of blight under Pennsylvania Redevelopment law. Those criteria are: (1) unsafe, unsanitary, inadequate or overcrowded conditions, (5) faulty street or lot layout and (7) economically or socially undesirable land use. This report has demonstrated that these three criteria for establishing the presence of blight are satisfied and the area is eligible for recertification.

ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS



Examples of Commercial Vacancy

Clockwise from upper left:

Germantown Ave. and Juniata St.

4300 Block Germantown Avenue

4400 Block of Germantown Avenue – vacant lots fronting Germantown in foreground and the rears of vacant houses on Wingohocking Street in the background

ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS



Roosevelt Expressway

Left: Over two and half acre of vacant land lies under the highway behind houses between Germantown and Wayne Avenues.

Right: Where 18th Street dead-ends at Cayuga Street once passed under the Expressway.



Examples of Residential Vacancy

Clockwise from upper left:

Rear of a vacant house on the 4400 Block of Cleveland Street.

Porches of vacant houses on the 1800 block of Cayuga Street.

1600 Block of St. Paul Street – part of a local historic district.

RESOLUTION

WHEREAS, Pennsylvania Urban Redevelopment Law Act of May 24, 1945 (P.L.991) as amended, authorizes The Philadelphia City Planning Commission to certify as blighted specific areas which may then in whole or in part, be made the subject of redevelopment proposals formulated by the Redevelopment Authority in accordance with said Act, and

WHEREAS, after substantial review and study, the City Planning Commission staff has presented a report concluding that the Nicetown study area bounded by Wingohocking Street; Broad Street; Hunting Park Avenue; Germantown Avenue; Luzerne Street(extended); Hunting Park Avenue; Pulaski Street; the and the Tabor Branch railroad-right-of-way exhibits characteristics of blight as defined by the Act, and

WHEREAS, the Planning Commission concurs with the findings and conclusions set forth in said staff report,

NOW THEREFORE, on this 17th day of November 2009, the Philadelphia City Planning Commission hereby finds, based upon its staff report dated November 17, 2009 that the Nicetown area bounded by Wingohocking Street; Broad Street; Hunting Park Avenue; Germantown Avenue; Luzerne Street (extended); Hunting Park Avenue; Pulaski Street; the and the Tabor Branch railroad-right-of-way exhibits the following characteristics of blight as established by Pennsylvania Urban Redevelopment Law:

- 1) Unsafe, unsanitary, inadequate or overcrowded conditions,
- 5) Faulty street or lot layout,
- 7) Economically or socially undesirable land use

and hereby recertifies the above described area as blighted under the terms and provisions of the said Act.