

Blight Recertification for Point Breeze and Grays Ferry



Philadelphia City Planning Commission
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CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

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INTRODUCTION

This report is an evaluation of blight in the South Philadelphia neighborhoods of Point Breeze and Grays Ferry. The two neighborhoods are contiguous: Point Breeze is located to the east of S. 25th Street and Grays Ferry is situated to the west of S. 25th Street. Surrounding neighborhoods include South-of-South (“SOSNA”) to the north, Hawthorne to the north and east, and Southbrook Park to the south. A map of the study area appears on the cover of this report (the map includes schools in blue and recreation sites in green).

The specific boundaries of the study area are as follows:

- on the east: Broad Street;
- on the south: Moore, 25th, Morris, 29th and Tasker Streets, 31st Street, Fernon Drive, 32nd Street, Tasker Street, 34th Street and Reed Street (including 1800 S. 16th Street);
- on the west: the Schuylkill River; and
- on the north: Peltz Street (extended), Grays Ferry Avenue and Washington Avenue.

Grays Ferry was originally certified as blighted in 1968 (at that time it was part of the Southwest Central Redevelopment Area). Point Breeze was certified in three phases between 1971 and 2001. The vacant Drexel School building at 1800 S. 16th Street was certified in 2004. 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.

This blight recertification is the first step in the redevelopment process and there are several reasons why a blight analysis is needed. In Point Breeze there are many publicly-owned vacant properties that can be made available for rehabilitation or infill development. Community plans for Point Breeze contain recommendations for various opportunity sites, and urban renewal assistance may be needed in some cases. Point Breeze is a candidate for federal Neighborhood Stabilization Program funds which could potentially be used for infrastructure improvements and acquisitions for housing and economic development.

In Grays Ferry, there are areas of concentrated vacancy which should be included in the Grays Ferry Urban Renewal Area and Plan. Ultimately the vacant properties could be assembled and made available for development of new housing. However before any of these actions can take place, it is important to review and update the finding of blight using information that is more current; and that is the purpose of this report.

Point Breeze and Grays Ferry are characterized by two and three storey row houses in a street layout which is an extension of colonial Philadelphia’s street grid. Most of the area was originally developed during the second half of the nineteenth century. Urbanization included the introduction of freight rail access to and through the area and the development of industrial corridors along Washington Avenue and S. 25th Street. The neighborhood has always housed a population of middle class and working class families. Like many other older sections of Philadelphia, Point Breeze and Grays Ferry 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.

Today, the continuing presence of major utilities and industries such as Philadelphia Electric Company, Tri-Gen, and DuPont Chemical are evidence of the area's industrial past. The Schuylkill Expressway (I-76) crosses the western edge of the targeted area with an interchange near 34th Street & Grays Ferry Avenue, and the two neighborhoods are less than a mile from Center City. Despite these locational advantages, Point Breeze and Grays Ferry contain many vacant homes, vacant lots, and abandoned businesses.

CRITERIA

This report will describe existing conditions of Point Breeze and Grays Ferry in relation to seven criteria 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 under study. The fact that individual properties are free from blight does not make the finding of blight arbitrary, according to the law, because comprehensive planning requires that areas be considered in their entirety and not in their non-severable parts.

Pennsylvania Urban Redevelopment Law establishes the following criteria for evaluating blight in a particular area:

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

Among the seven criteria, this report presents evidence for numbers 1 and 7. Blight does exist in the area.

ANALYSIS

The Planning Commission staff compiled data from the Department of Licenses and Inspections and the Board of Revision of Taxes. PCPC staff also studied the neighborhoods in the field and collected photographic evidence of blight.

1. Unsafe, Unsanitary, Inadequate or Overcrowded Conditions

Evidence of this criterion is presented in several categories: vacant and trash-strewn lots, vacant buildings, trash strewn properties, code violations and deteriorating infrastructure.

Vacant lots: there are 15,976 parcels of land in the study area, consisting of buildings and lots. Of these, 1,991 are vacant lots. Vacant lots comprise 12.5% of all parcels in the area. The vacant lots are distributed throughout the study area and include sites ranging in size from 274 square feet (a twentieth of an acre) to 308,765 square feet (about seven acres). The quantity and distribution of vacant lots are evidence of unsafe and inadequate conditions. A map of vacant lots appears on page 3. Data for total parcels and vacant lots are taken from the University of Pennsylvania Neighborhood Information System (NIS) which uses data from the Philadelphia Board of Revision of Taxes.

Many of the 1,991 vacant lots in Point Breeze and Grays Ferry are strewn with trash or overgrown with weeds. Other properties are not classified as vacant but are littered with trash and debris. These conditions of neglect encourage short-dumping and are evidence of unsafe, unsanitary and inadequate conditions.

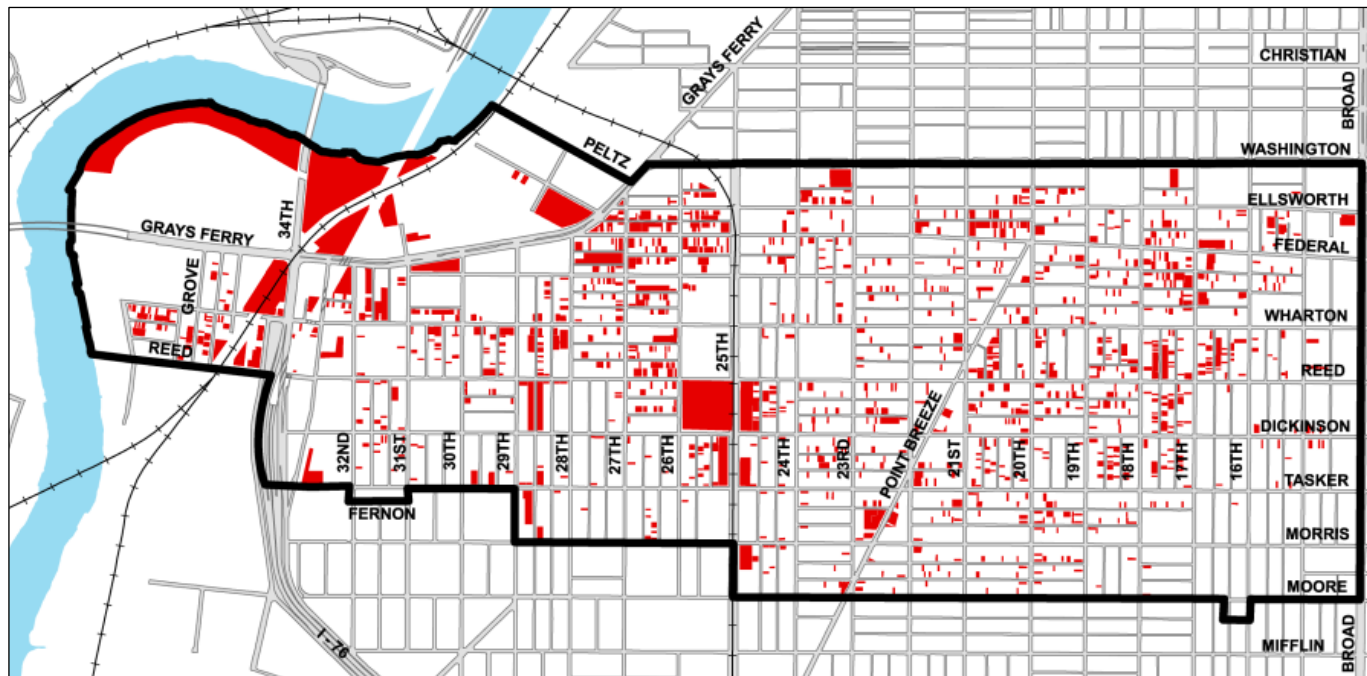
Vacant buildings: while available data sources do not provide an up-to-date list of vacant buildings, staff inspection indicates that many vacant buildings exist in the two neighborhoods. Some of the vacant buildings can be seen in the photos in this report. If data were available, the total number of vacant buildings would be added to the aforementioned 1,991 vacant lots to generate a total number of vacant properties in Point Breeze and Grays Ferry.

Code Violations: many properties in the study area exhibit signs of neglect and deferred maintenance. There are 5,175 properties in violation of the City Code in the census tracts under study (source: University of Pennsylvania NIS and Department of Licenses and Inspections, 2005). This is evidence of unsafe and inadequate conditions.

Deteriorating infrastructure: the condition of the railroad viaduct at 25th St. is a major safety concern. Approximately 95 years old, the elevated freight railroad extends for eight blocks through the study area. Many small sections of concrete have fallen off the elevated structure, placing pedestrians and motorists at peril. The falling debris was the subject of a news article in a local South Philadelphia newspaper. This ongoing safety problem, which is happening all along the railroad structure, is documented in two photos on page 7.

2. Economically or Socially Undesirable Land Use

Economically undesirable land use exists in the study area. Code violations, vacant properties, low property values and deteriorating infrastructure provide evidence that this criterion is



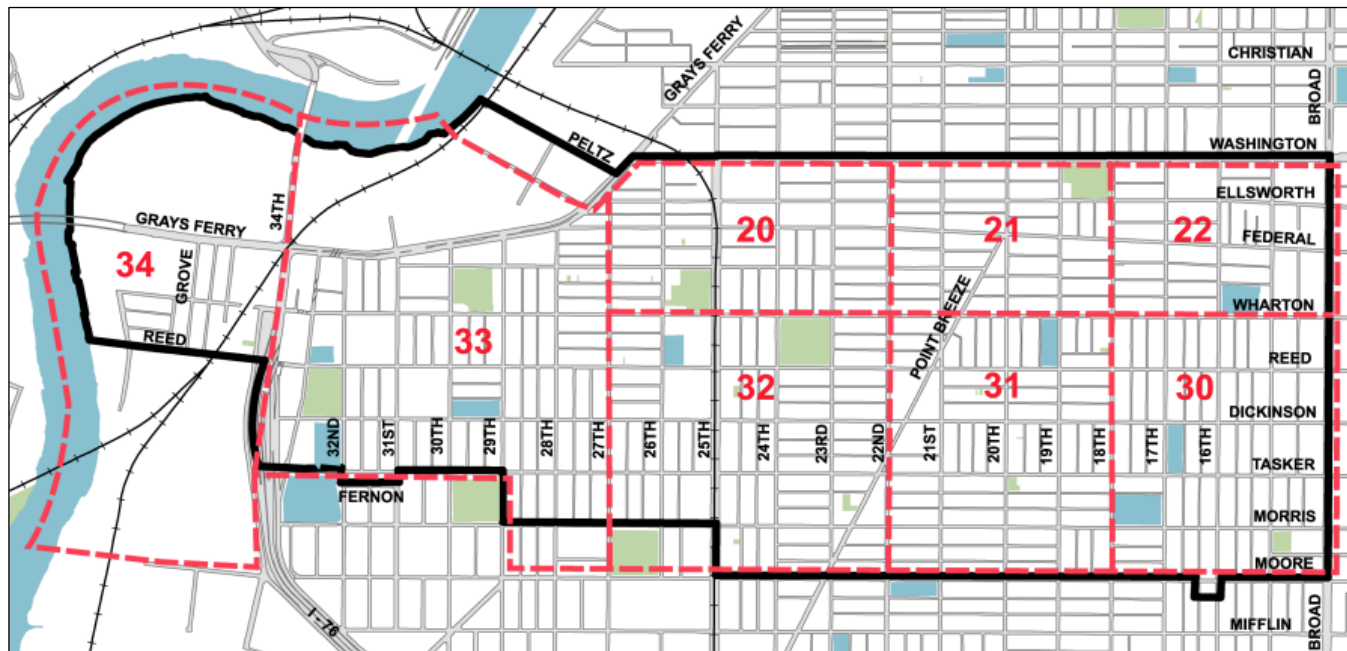
Vacant lots are shown in red (source: Philadelphia Board of Revision of Taxes)

being met in Point Breeze and Grays Ferry. The 5,175 code violations indicate that the level of economic investment in local property is substandard. The 1,991 vacant land parcels represent economically undesirable land use because they downgrade the overall physical environment of the neighborhood, reduce the area's vitality and property values, and increase the potential for vandalism, arson, and other crimes. Abandoned properties also deprive the neighborhood, the City and region of revenue from income taxes and real estate taxes.

The Point Breeze and Grays Ferry study area has significantly lower property values when compared to the City, and this is additional evidence of economically undesirable land use. In some of the census tracts, median residential sale prices are as low as one fifth of the city median price (\$20,500 for Tract 34 in

2007 compared to the city median of \$120,500). The census tract with the highest median sales price was still only 68% or roughly two thirds of the city median for that year (\$82,000 for Census tract 22 in 2007). See the table on page 5 for sale price data and other indicators of blight, by Census tract. The Point Breeze and Grays Ferry study area corresponds to Tracts 20 to 22 and 30 to 34; see a map of Census tracts, below.

Deteriorating infrastructure is another indicator of economically undesirable land use. With debris falling from the aging rail structure, the adjacent area is more hazardous and therefore less desirable as a place to live, work and invest in property.



Census tracts (in red dotted lines) are shown in relation to the study area

Blight Indicators by Census Tract:

Tract	Total Parcels 2007	Vacant Lots 2007	Code Violations 2005	Median Sale Price 2007
20	1418	312	576	39750
21	1276	167	503	70000
22	1547	196	502	82000
30	3070	195	826	78950
31	2825	333	1055	33750
32	2696	320	886	35000
33	3055	446	792	55000
34	89	22	35	20500
Total	15976	1991	5175	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. Data for tract 34 includes Block Group 34001 only.

CONCLUSION

In the Point Breeze and Grays Ferry study area, existing conditions are consistent with two (2) of the criteria necessary to produce a finding of blight under Pennsylvania Redevelopment law. Those criteria are: (1) unsafe, unsanitary, inadequate or overcrowded conditions, and (2) economically or socially undesirable land use. This analysis has demonstrated that these two criteria for establishing the presence of blight are satisfied and the area is eligible for recertification.

Photographic Documentation of Blight



Vacant lot at SW corner 24th & Ellsworth Streets



Vacant lots at 24th & Manton Streets



Vacant lot at SW corner Point Breeze Ave.
& Fernon St.



Vacant lots on Harmon St.
south of Wharton St.



Vacant lot on Dorrance St.
south of Wharton St.



Vacant homes on Garnet St.
south of Wharton St.



Vacant home at 2431 Manton St.



Vacant buildings at SW corner
Point Breeze Ave. & Morris St.



Damaged sections of railroad structure on 25th St. near Federal St.

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 Point Breeze and Grays Ferry study area bounded by Broad, Moore, 25th, Morris, 29th and Tasker Streets, 31st Street, Fernon Drive, 32nd Street, Tasker Street, 34th Street, Reed Street, the Schuylkill River, Peltz Street (extended), Grays Ferry Avenue and Washington Avenue (including 1800 S. 16th Street) 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 15th day of September 2009, the Philadelphia City Planning Commission hereby finds, based upon its staff report dated September 15, 2009 that the Point Breeze and Grays Ferry area bounded by Broad, Moore, 25th, Morris, 29th and Tasker Streets, 31st Street, Fernon Drive, 32nd Street, Tasker Street, 34th Street, Reed Street, the Schuylkill River, Peltz Street (extended), Grays Ferry Avenue and Washington Avenue (including 1800 S. 16th Street) exhibits the following characteristics of blight as established by Pennsylvania Urban Redevelopment Law:

- Unsafe, unsanitary, inadequate or overcrowded conditions,
- Economically or socially undesirable land use

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