

**Blight Recertification for the Area Bounded by 44<sup>th</sup> Street, Belmont Avenue, Girard Avenue, Lancaster Avenue, 47<sup>th</sup> Street and Brown Street**

**Philadelphia City Planning Commission**

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Philadelphia City Planning Commission

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## INTRODUCTION

This report presents an evaluation of blight in a section of West Philadelphia, generally bounded by: Girard Avenue (north); Brown Street (south); 47<sup>th</sup> Street and Lancaster Avenue (east); and 44<sup>th</sup> Street and Belmont Avenue (west). This is the eastern section of the Mill Creek neighborhood.

The primary purpose of this blight recertification is to facilitate acquisition of vacant and underutilized properties for the expansion of a current business in the 4600 block of Lancaster Avenue. The boundaries include other nearby concentrations of vacancy that are subject to future development. This area of West Philadelphia was initially certified as blighted in 1963. The original certification is superseded within the boundaries mentioned in this recertification.



This is a typical vacant lot on the corner of Wyalusing Ave and Merion Ave.



This recertification reviews existing conditions in relation to seven criteria used to determine whether blight exists. The criteria are set forth in the Pennsylvania Urban Redevelopment Law, which stipulates that only one criterion must be met to make a finding of blight. Blighted conditions need not be evident throughout the study area. Individual properties may be free from blight, but that does not make the findings arbitrary, as the area is considered in its entirety.

This report cites specific examples of the conditions satisfying **three** of the blight criteria. The Philadelphia City Planning Commission affirms that blight exists in the area.

## CRITERIA

Pennsylvania Urban Redevelopment Law contains the following criteria for establishing the presence of 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 and socially undesirable land uses**

Evidence of blight is presented by the significant number of vacant lots and structures, a large number of code violations, poorly-designed street intersections narrow streets that do not meet current standards, and property values that are lower than the City norm. These conditions satisfy three criteria for blight certification:

### Unsafe, unsanitary, inadequate or overcrowded conditions

Of 913 parcels, 173 vacant lots and 112 vacant buildings exist. The vacancy is spread throughout the area but is more highly concentrated in the central blocks. Vacant properties provide clear evidence of unsafe and inadequate conditions.

Staff identified these conditions while conducting a land use survey in April 2011. Data from the Philadelphia Water Department, the Office of Property Assessment, and the Office of Licenses and Inspections, confirm this general level of vacancy. In all, about 31 percent of properties in the study area are vacant.



This series of vacant lots has been stripped of the fence that once secured it and has attracted piles of trash.



Vacant buildings and a vacant lot at the corner of Lancaster Ave and 45<sup>th</sup> St. Again, plywood and a fence are all that prevent entry in the vacant buildings and trash has accumulated in the vacant lot.

In 2009, 196 of 913 structures in the area had building code violations. Although this probably represents multiple housing violations on certain properties, not 196 properties out of compliance, it still shows an average of one violation for about every five properties in the study area. Code violations provide documentation of unsafe, unsanitary and inadequate conditions.

#### Faulty Street and Lot Layout

Faulty street layout is demonstrated by narrow streets which are spread across the area in question.

These streets do not meet modern street standards set in Section 14-2104 (5) of the Philadelphia Code which states the following:

- 64 ft. for a primary residential street
- 54 ft. for a secondary residential street
- 50 ft. for a tertiary street
- 36 ft. for a marginal access street

Laird, Hoopes, Ogden, Lex, May, N. 45<sup>th</sup>, N. 46<sup>th</sup>, Poplar, Merion and June Streets range in width from 8 to 26 ft. This is far less than the minimum width for a marginal street, 36 ft. This makes access difficult and constrains the delivery of City services.

The layout of the streets which cross Lancaster Avenue is also faulty. Intersections should align directly across streets to make travel easiest. In the cases of N. 45<sup>th</sup> and N. 46<sup>th</sup> Streets, they jog as far as 228 feet before they begin again on the north side of the Avenue.

#### Economically and socially undesirable land use

The 31% vacancy rate discourages private investment and decreases the value of adjacent property. A loss of residents deprives local business owners of customers,



This stretch of almost exclusively vacant buildings is located on 45<sup>th</sup> Street between Merion and Lancaster Avenues. The plywood doors and windows make accessing the properties easy. This is a public safety concern. This is also an example of street which is not wide enough to meet the Philadelphia Code

which leads to fewer essential goods and services for the residents who are left. City government also collects fewer taxes, making the provision of city services more difficult. Vacant buildings and lots can become attractive nuisances for drug dealers, prostitutes, arsonists and vandals, further driving residents away.

Property values in the area are well below the norm for the city, indicating economically undesirable land use. Housing values have risen since 2000, likely due to the construction of the Lucien Blackwell homes to the south, but they remain below the city average of \$148,000 for residentially zoned transactions. In the blight recertification area the average value is only \$78,000 (source: Office of Property assessment 2008-9).

Despite blighted conditions, there are positive trends and strengths that give hope for renewal. Individuals and organizations are turning vacant land into assets. Strong institutions remain, including the Mill Creek Rec Center, Durham Park, Our Mother of Sorrows Church, and Christian Stronghold Church.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the portion of West Philadelphia bounded by Girard Avenue, Brown Street, 47<sup>th</sup> Street, Lancaster Avenue, 44<sup>th</sup> Street, and Belmont Avenue, 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 and lot layout and (7) economically or socially undesirable land use. Therefore the area is eligible for recertification.

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## **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 area bounded by Girard Avenue, Brown Street, 47<sup>th</sup> Street, Lancaster Avenue, 44<sup>th</sup> Street, and Belmont Avenue 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 18th day of January 2011, the Philadelphia City Planning Commission hereby finds, based upon its staff report dated January 18, 2011 that the area bounded by Girard Avenue, Brown Street, 47<sup>th</sup> Street, Lancaster Avenue, 44<sup>th</sup> Street, and Belmont Avenue exhibits the following characteristics of blight as established by Pennsylvania Urban Redevelopment Law:

- 1) Unsafe, unsanitary, inadequate or overcrowded conditions,
- 5) Faulty street and 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.