A Plan to Reduce Vacant Lots and Buildings in the City of St. Louis

Mayor Lyda Krewson
Acknowledgements

Local government alone cannot adequately solve all the challenges we face with vacant and abandoned properties. Development of the programs and strategies in this plan happened with a great deal of support from local community partners, state and federal agencies, and committed St. Louis residents. Thank you to everyone who has contributed to making our neighborhoods stronger, and for continuing to support our future efforts to reduce vacancy and blight across the City.

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Vacancy in St. Louis

Vacant, abandoned, and blighted properties have been a serious challenge for St. Louis dating back decades. Since our peak population in 1950, the City has suffered a steep population decline of over 60 percent, leaving vast stretches of vacant buildings and lots where homes and businesses once thrived.

In 1971, to combat the increasing challenge of abandoned properties, the City of St. Louis established the first landbank in the United States, the Land Reutilization Authority (LRA). LRA is a City agency with the mission of receiving and holding vacant and abandoned tax-foreclosed properties until new private owners can purchase the properties and return them to productive use.

Of the 129,000 total properties in the City of St. Louis, approximately 25,000 are considered vacant and abandoned. The majority of vacant properties in the City — 13,200 — are privately owned. The LRA owns nearly 11,500 properties — 3,400 vacant buildings, and 8,100 vacant lots.

A combination of overgrown vacant lots and empty crumbling buildings, these 25,000 vacant properties blight our neighborhoods, decrease the values of nearby occupied properties, and pose serious health and public safety risks for our friends, families, and children. Vacant and abandoned properties also strain City resources. Nothing good happens in a vacant building.

### Property in the City of St. Louis

- Occupied: 81%
- Vacant: 19%

### Ownership of Vacant Property

- Privately-Owned: 53%
- Publicly-Owned: 47%

### Type of Vacant Property

- Lots: 71%
- Buildings: 29%
Since coming to office, vacancy reduction has been a top priority for my administration. One of our first objectives was calculating the financial burden that vacancy and abandonment have on City operations. We found that the fiscal toll of vacancy on the City’s operating budget in 2017 was estimated at nearly $66 million. After better understanding the maintenance and public safety costs associated with 25,000 vacant properties, it was clear we needed a new vision.

Beginning July 2017, I asked City departments to organize their vacancy and blight reduction operations around five principles, and this plan will outline how we’re addressing each one:

• Data ‣ Insight ‣ Action
• Reduce the Number of Properties in LRA’s Inventory
• Increase Code Enforcement for Irresponsible Property Owners
• Allocate More Funding for Demolitions
• Develop Alternative Stabilization, Demolition, and Maintenance Practices
Over the last 12 months, this administration has used data to gain insight into the true impact vacancy and blight on St. Louis. We have also been busy implementing and piloting many of the vacancy reduction strategies in this plan.

The success of our programs will be evaluated over the next year, and we’ll adapt existing efforts and add programs as new ideas and best practices emerge.

The following vacancy reduction plan outlines initiatives that will foster safer neighborhoods, rehab and reoccupy buildings with new residents and businesses, and revitalize communities. This will drive the growth of our City’s tax base, public schools, and the taxing districts which fund our regional cultural institutions and City services.

This is just the beginning. I am encouraged that through the partnerships we’ve established over the last year, our work will improve the lives of St. Louisans and revitalize neighborhoods across the entire city.
Data-driven decision making is key to successfully targeting and reducing the number of vacant and abandoned properties. Coordinating data and information across City departments allows our administration to accurately measure and track the City’s progress toward reduction goals. Better data also ensures more efficient, effective, and equitable service delivery for residents. We’ve developed a series of initiatives, staff positions, and collaborations to improve data accessibility, its utility, and overall quality.

**Vacancy Strategy Senior Project Manager**
Historically the LRA has been constrained by limited staffing. Compared to land banks around the country managing similar property inventories, LRA has less than one-third the staffing level of other communities. This has made it nearly impossible to add duties to LRA’s portfolio. To provide more professional capacity within LRA, we’ve recently hired a Vacancy Strategy Senior Project Manager. The project manager will lead citywide vacancy initiatives and coordinate work across City departments and community organizations.

**Vacancy Advisory Committee**
Establishing a strong relationship between public and private sector stakeholders is a crucial step towards reducing the number of vacant and abandoned buildings in St. Louis. For the past several months, a steering committee made up of community stakeholders, City departments, and the Mayor’s Office, convened by the St. Louis Association of Community Organizations (SLACO) and facilitated by the Saint Louis University (SLU) Law Clinic, has met with the goal of establishing a joint Vacancy Advisory Committee (VAC). The goals of the VAC are to coordinate vacancy reduction initiatives between City departments and community stakeholders, increase communication among all stakeholders, and create a shared vision with quantifiable goals to support vacancy reduction. With the support of the Missouri Foundation for Health and Missouri Department of Conservation, the VAC will be facilitated by the Community Builders Network.

**VacancyStat**
In coordination with the Vacancy Advisory Committee (VAC), our administration has established VacancyStat meetings as a way for City departments to manage vacancy- and blight-related programs, review collective performance, and coordinate internal operations across departments. Led by the Vacancy Strategy Project Manager, VacancyStat is designed as an opportunity for City department directors to identify new partnerships, coordinate existing programs, and improve the overall quality of vacancy-related service delivery.

**CityStat**
There’s a clear correlation between the occurrence of crime and concentrated vacancy rates. This is why we established the City’s first monthly CityStat meetings. Led by our Director of Operations, Citystat brings all of the City’s operating departments together with the Chief of Police and each of the six St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department (SLMPD) district captains to discuss where City departments can coordinate work to reduce blight in areas with concentrated criminal activity.

**Leveraging Technology in the Field**
To improve service delivery and the overall quality of code enforcement data, the City’s Building Commissioner is creating a new web-based workflow management system, moving the City away from the current paper-based system. Building inspectors will also be provided tablets which can be used to more efficiently track all code enforcement, inspection, and permitting activities while in the field.
Vacancy Data Portal Development
Transparent and accurate data is critical to reducing concentrated vacancy. The City currently has 53,000 individual data records for vacant buildings and lots spread across various department databases including the Building Division, City Assessor, Planning and Urban Design Agency, and LRA. A single property can be represented in multiple databases, and there are numerous instances in which the data for the same property doesn’t match. Inaccurate and out-of-date data make it difficult for departments to do their jobs, and can cause us to provide incorrect information to residents and developers. In collaboration with OpenSTL, Laura Ginn from the Green City Coalition, volunteer coders from Daugherty Business Solutions, and many other community partners, the City’s Information Technology Service Agency (ITSA) will establish a publicly accessible comprehensive vacancy data portal, released Summer 2018, that will help us address vacancy and blight, available at stlvacancy.com.
Reduce the Number of Properties in LRA’s Inventory

The Missouri Legislature passed legislation creating the City’s Land Reutilization Authority in 1971 to act as the owner of last resort for properties that were lost in tax foreclosure, abandoned, or, in select cases, donated by private owners who could no longer responsibly care for their properties. Some of these properties have been in LRA’s inventory for decades. As an example of this challenge, nearly 46 percent of the LRA’s inventory has never received a purchase offer from a private buyer. Since 2007, 6,148 properties were added to LRA’s inventory. Over the same period, 4,688 properties were sold to private owners. The LRA’s inventory is nearly 11,500 properties today.

The City’s Collector of Revenue begins the process of tax foreclosure for properties after property taxes have gone unpaid for three years. It often takes four to five years before delinquent properties are actually sold. We know that tax delinquency is one of the first signs that property owners are either facing financial difficulty, or have abandoned the property altogether. Once abandoned, these buildings are frequently vandalized and begin deteriorating well before the four to five years it takes for them to be sold in tax foreclosure. Foreclosed properties in the best structural condition with highest resale values are almost always purchased at the tax sale by private buyers. Any properties that do not sell to private buyers are automatically transferred to LRA by default. By the time LRA receives ownership of these buildings, they have generally been abandoned, vandalized, and have fallen into disrepair. In 2017, LRA received 298 properties through tax foreclosure. These properties represent some of the most difficult buildings to rehab and market in St. Louis.

Despite these challenges, LRA sold 551 properties in calendar year 2017: 201 buildings and 350 vacant lots. LRA’s goal for 2018 is to increase the number to 600 properties sold. In order to be more aggressive in reducing its inventory, I’ve asked the LRA and other City agencies to prioritize a number of new programs and initiatives.

Finest 15
A partnership between LRA and the St. Louis Association of Community Organizations (SLACO), Finest 15 is designed to market and sell LRA-owned residential buildings with the highest potential for rehabilitation in neighborhoods across the city. A SLACO sub-committee works with LRA to select the neighborhood’s 15 most viable properties, then markets the buildings for redevelopment with sale prices ranging from $1000-$4000. The estimated cost of rehab for each home in the program averages $10,000. The program saw immediate success this past year with nine of the first 15 homes under contract.
Mow to Own Program
The Mow to Own program was originally established to allow residential property owners living next door to LRA vacant lots to acquire the property for a $125 administration fee and the commitment to responsibly maintain the vacant lot for two years. LRA recently expanded the program to include more lots within its inventory and to allow commercial property owners to acquire adjacent LRA properties. Since LRA began this program in 2016, 173 properties have been successfully transferred to private ownership.

Place-Based RFPs
Improvements in the national real estate market and the general trend of younger people choosing to live in urban areas has contributed to a spike in new residents moving to St. Louis. For the first time in a number of years, there has been renewed interest in moving into city neighborhoods both north and south. Academy and Gravois Park are examples of neighborhoods that in past years, despite strong character and potential, rarely topped lists of prospective homebuyers or new residents. The strengths of nearby commercial corridors and steady neighborhood revitalization is helping to drive this growing interest. LRA properties should be leveraged as assets to further attract community redevelopment and provide affordable opportunities for new residential rehab to meet increasing demand.

The St. Louis Development Corporation and LRA are reviewing the landbank’s inventory in neighborhoods across the City, and LRA is consulting with community stakeholders to draft Requests for Proposals (RFPs) for place-based redevelopments to prioritize the rehabilitation of LRA properties in these growing neighborhoods. We will begin publishing and marketing these RFPs this summer. This is our opportunity to partner with neighborhood stakeholders to build upon nearby strengths and assets.

Preference for Vacancy Reduction in CDA Funding
The Community Development Agency (CDA) provides federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding to developers and local organizations that support community development and neighborhood revitalization through the creation of new housing opportunities for low- and moderate-income residents. CDA prioritizes funding applications that seek to purchase and rehab properties within LRA’s inventory.

Clear Title Task Force
Ensuring that LRA has clear and insurable tax titles for properties entering its inventory is a critical first step toward securing reinvestment in vacant properties and our neighborhoods. Title problems make it difficult for LRA to sell properties to new private owners and prevents potential buyers from receiving bank financing for necessary rehabs. This results in LRA maintaining a large inventory of crumbling vacant buildings without viable commercial value. To address this challenge, the Mayor’s Office, in collaboration with the City’s Collector of Revenue and a dedicated group of local volunteer lawyers and title professionals, established the Clear Title Taskforce to research strategies that will improve the insurability of LRA’s tax titles. Beginning in 2018, the taskforce convened to discuss strategies to improve the City’s current tax foreclosure process, recommend potential amendments to Missouri’s tax foreclosure statutes, and suggest local policies designed to minimize the perceived risks of providing tax title insurance for LRA’s inventory.

Partial Tax Payments
The City’s goal is to have all property privately owned and properly maintained. The best strategy for reducing the number of vacant buildings and lots owned by LRA is to prevent properties from becoming City-owned. A majority of LRA properties enter the inventory as a result of tax foreclosure. To assist property owners who may have difficulty paying their property-tax bill, Collector of Revenue Gregory F.X. Daly now allows property owners to pay their tax bills in installments through payment plans.

LRA Website Redesign
Over the past few months, LRA has made significant progress in updating its website to make it easier for current residents and potential new residents to learn about properties in its inventory. Continued work is underway to further improve usability, data accuracy, and transparency. The updated website will include a streamlined purchase application, allow the submission of online purchase offers, and provide interactive property visualization.
Every property in the City of St. Louis has an owner, and every private property owner shares the same responsibility for property maintenance. There are 13,200 privately owned vacant properties across the city: 9,400 vacant lots and 3,800 vacant buildings. Unfortunately, many of these privately owned properties are not well maintained, have been abandoned, and will eventually end up in LRA’s inventory. As a result, the burden of cutting grass, boarding up exposed windows and doors, and securing crumbling buildings falls to City government. Unresolved code violations result in unsafe conditions for neighbors and surrounding businesses. These conditions can also lead to crime in and around the building.

**Vacant Building Registry**
Vacant buildings with exterior building code violations are subject to City Ordinance No. 70752, which provides that property owners be charged a $200 registration fee every six months until the property is brought into compliance with the building code. Recent amendments to the ordinance ensure that all vacant property owners with exterior code violations are subject to the ordinance. The ordinance allows the collection of these fees to be added to the property’s annual tax bill if fees go unpaid. The fees act as a maintenance lien which prevent any future sale of the property until all fees are paid.

**Neighborhood Vacancy Initiative**
The Neighborhood Vacancy Initiative is a collaboration between the Mayor’s Office, Legal Services of Eastern Missouri, St. Louis Development Corporation (SLDC), and the Bar Association of Metropolitan St. Louis (BAMSL). Based upon Kansas City’s successful “adopt-a-neighborhood” initiative, our partnership will provide legal services to neighborhood associations, non-profit organizations, and community groups to address quality of life issues caused by problem properties. Often, the City’s system of code enforcement violations and nominal municipal court fees are not enough to compel problem property owners to maintain properties and comply with the City’s building maintenance code. The Neighborhood Vacancy Initiative is designed to assist the City, neighborhoods and adjoining property owners in taking legal action against property owners in the 22nd Judicial Circuit Court, where compliance can be far more successful.
Unfortunately, some properties are just too far gone to renovate. As a result, these vacant and abandoned buildings pose a significant public safety hazard to nearby residents. The Building Division has a current estimate of nearly 4,000 vacant buildings across the City that are condemned and require demolition. An average building demolition costs the City $10,000. Last year’s 2017-2018 budget allocated $1.5 million toward citywide demolitions. In this upcoming 2018-2019 budget, we have allocated $3.6 million for building demolitions because removing dangerous vacant buildings from our neighborhoods has to be one of our top priorities.

**$3.6 Million Toward Demolition in 2018-2019**

$3.6 million is the largest amount of demolition funding that the City has seen in years, but it is still not enough to address every building that needs to come down in St. Louis. The City must take down buildings that pose serious risks to public safety in our neighborhoods. The City’s Building Division has the authority to demolish privately owned buildings that are in the worst condition and require emergency demolition to preserve the public’s safety. The Building Division and LRA will prioritize the demolition of dangerous structures by beginning in areas near schools, parks, and other community gathering spaces.

**Urban Greening Program**

Over the next five years, the City, along with the Metropolitan Sewer District, Missouri Department of Conservation, and a collaborative of community-based organizations called the Green City Coalition (GCC), is leading the $13.5M Urban Greening Project (UGP). Once completed, UGP will result in the demolition of more than 1,000 dangerous vacant buildings within the Bissell Watershed in north St. Louis, and create attractive, well-maintained greenspace to provide neighborhood residents better access to nature and quality parks. The new green space will also act as green infrastructure that will control the stormwater absorption and basement flooding that have plagued residents for years. Through consultation with residents and community leaders, 200 buildings have already been scheduled for demolition. Greenspace development for the first series of demolitions will continue through Fall 2018.

**Private Funding for Demolitions**

Building demolition is expensive, and there are an estimated 4,000 buildings, public and private, that qualify as condemned and should be demolished. City government alone cannot tackle this $40 million challenge. In exploring solutions to this problem, we looked toward Detroit’s successful and collaborative blight removal program as a model. When Detroit began investing in its comprehensive plan to address blight, the city leveraged over $100 million of private philanthropy and public funding. Similarly, over the next year the Mayor’s Office, in partnership with Invest STL will explore the establishment of a charitable fund at St. Louis Community Foundation to encourage private donors and philanthropic organizations to support the City’s efforts to reduce blight and remove dangerous buildings from our neighborhoods. Sponsored by the St. Louis Community Foundation, Invest STL is a regional initiative that aligns investment, technical assistance, and community organizations to build healthy neighborhoods that are thriving, resilient, and livable for everyone.

**City Budget Allocations for Demolitions and Building Board-Ups**

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>FY17</th>
<th>FY18</th>
<th>FY19*</th>
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<td>FY Budget Allocation</td>
<td>Special Budget Allocation</td>
<td>Prop P</td>
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*Reflects Mayor Krewson’s proposed budget for FY19*
Addressing vacancy is complex work. Reducing the 25,000 vacant and abandoned properties will require modernizing our current programs and looking toward national best practices. St. Louis is not the only city dealing with these issues. Seeking best practices allows us to move more quickly. The following programs have worked in other cities:

Green City Coalition
The City has formed a partnership with the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) called the Green City Coalition with the mission to create ecologically rich green spaces that promote healthy and vibrant communities through a deeper connection with nature. MDC funding will pay for staff positions to lead the project and build a network working within neighborhoods to convert vacant land into community green spaces, bikeways, greenways and traditional public parks. The project was developed as part of the Urban Vitality & Ecology Initiative, a partnership between the Mayor’s Office of Sustainability, the Missouri Department of Conservation, and the Missouri Botanical Garden to connect city residents to nature in ways that maximize social, economic and environmental benefits. Washington University is leading a study to explore creating a neighborhood land trust to become the future owner and manager of these new community green spaces.

Fighting for Prop NS Funding
The historic buildings and homes that line the City’s streets are underappreciated assets for the future growth of St. Louis. Our unique architecture provides St. Louis a competitive edge when attracting new residents because of our authentic urban design and affordability. However, every time the City is forced to demolish a vacant building, we lose a little piece of our history and part of our competitive edge. Many cities have found success in establishing stabilization programs to help decrease the amount of necessary demolitions. This is why the City is fighting to restore the $40 million “Prop NS” bond initiative widely supported by City voters in April 2017. If successful, Prop NS will provide the LRA $40 million to properly weatherize and stabilize buildings in its inventory to prevent building deterioration from weather exposure due to faulty gutters, leaking roofs, and broken windows. Stabilizing and weatherizing the buildings in LRA’s inventory reduces the need for demolitions and helps maintain these assets for future buyers interested in rehab.

Deconstruction Pilot Program
There are a number of methods cities can use to remove vacant and abandoned buildings. Many have found deconstruction to be an ideal solution for removing vacant buildings, reducing the amount of waste sent to landfills, and creating new economic opportunities for residents. Deconstruction is a sustainable building demolition process that uses hand tools to carefully disassemble structures so that more of the valuable building materials can be salvaged and sold for new uses or future construction projects. In collaboration with the Delta Institute, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Green City Coalition, and Refab St. Louis, we will launch the Deconstruction Program Pilot in the Summer of 2018 using buildings within the LRA inventory. The pilot will offer professional deconstruction training for licensed St. Louis demolition contractors and interested City residents as a means of providing new employment opportunities, skills and job training.

Private Contracts for Vacant Lot Maintenance
The City’s Forestry Division estimated that it spent over $5 million last year to maintain thousands of vacant lots across the City. Given the scale of our vacancy challenge, $5 million isn’t enough to properly maintain these properties. In response, the City began a pilot program two years ago allowing private contractors to handle some of the weed and grass maintenance around vacant and abandoned buildings. This pilot program allowed Forestry crews to focus on cutting vacant lots faster and more consistently, while the private
crews took on the more time-consuming work of cutting grass and weeds around buildings. We’ve seen great success with the pilot, so in 2018 we’ll be expanding this work to new neighborhoods across the city to help Forestry crews stay ahead of maintenance demands in Spring and Summer.

Modernized Demolition Practices
Unfortunately, we know that some buildings have been neglected for so long that the City has no choice but to have them demolished. While we are losing a building, we’re also improving public safety. However, demolitions, if not done well, can send harmful dust particulates, such as lead or asbestos into the air. Demolition debris, if not completely removed, can also contaminate soil at the demolition site and surrounding properties. To ensure that when the City demolishes a building we’re both improving the lives of neighbors and protecting the environment, the Building Division, through a technical assistance grant from the EPA, is working with the Delta Institute to review & evaluate current demolition practices. Once the evaluation is complete, Delta will make policy recommendations for the Building Division to adopt later this summer.

Vacant Lot Toolkit
With financial assistance from the EPA and the Missouri Department of Conservation, the City’s Planning and Urban Design Agency is developing a Vacant Lot Greenspace Conversion Toolkit to support the City’s goal of transforming vacant, blighted lots into flower gardens, edible food forests, and attractive green infrastructure to help manage excess stormwater and prevent community flooding. The toolkit will be a resource for publicly and privately owned lots throughout the city.

LRA Garden Lease Program
The Garden Lease Program allows residents to lease LRA lots for $1 a year for up to five years. The Garden Lease Program encourages the creation of vegetable and flower gardens, brings neighbors and communities together, and reduces the number of vacant lots that can be used for illegal dumping or other crimes. More than 300 LRA lots are leased right now throughout the City. Since 1994 when the Garden Lease Program began, thousands of vacant lots have been converted to creative uses that have helped beautify the City.

Clean Sweep
Clean Sweep is a growing public-private partnership lead by Better Family Life, KWAME Building Group, Inc., Regional Business Council, the City of St. Louis, St. Louis Development Corporation, the Land Reutilization Authority, and many other community partners to coordinate resources to demolition LRA-owned buildings and hold neighborhood clean-up activities in identified neighborhoods. The neighborhoods identified this year include Hamilton Heights, Wells-Goodfellow, Jeff Vander Lou, Penrose, Kingsbury, and Walnut Park. These activities will not only supplement our growing demolition of vacant buildings, but further highlight and reinforce a true sense of community through action in these neighborhoods.

City officials and community and business partners kicked off Clean Sweep 2018 in the Hamilton Heights/ Wells-Goodfellow area on May 19, 2018.

Volunteers and private partners picked up debris, cut down dead trees and demolished abandoned buildings at the first Clean Sweep 2018 event.
The City’s approach to addressing vacancy will evolve over time. We have a number of initiatives on the horizon that we’re thinking about in collaboration with community stakeholders.

**Greenlining Fund**

The effects that historic redlining and restrictive housing covenants had on the level of disinvestment in areas of north St. Louis are well known. The housing and credit crisis of 2008-2012 also greatly reduced home values and home sales across the City. Today, prospective homebuyers, particularly African-Americans in north St. Louis, have a hard time qualifying for mortgages because banks can’t find similar homes with comparable sales prices in the neighborhood. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where banks won’t lend the amount of money buyers need to fix up a home or buy one that is already renovated. This causes prospective buyers to stop trying to buy properties in these neighborhoods. This cycle perpetuates the increase of vacant buildings and occupied homes that fall into disrepair. Home values across large pockets of north city are still very low, and homebuyers and homeowners alike still struggle to qualify for traditional loans to buy and fix up properties.

Establishing a “Greenlining Fund” with the support of local banks and Community Development Finance Institution partners would allow a qualified buyer to borrow on the real value of their home instead of the currently depressed appraised value. The mortgage application works through a participating bank like any other real estate transaction. Once the home receives an appraisal, the bank splits the loan into two low fixed-rate mortgages. The first mortgage would be for a majority of the appraised value. The second mortgage comes from the “Greenlining” fund and covers the amount above the appraised value that the bank traditionally would not have financed without this program. With the assistance of a “Greenlining” fund we can support more residents buying homes and rehabbing vacant buildings in the neighborhoods that have historically struggled to attract real estate development.

**Citywide Demolition Assessment**

Data will be the foundation for how we tackle the City’s vacancy challenges. A comprehensive citywide building assessment will be our roadmap for identifying a plan for each vacant building across the City. The assessment will determine if a building is too far gone and requires demolition, or if we should invest in stabilization efforts.