

BUHL INVESTIGATION REPORT:

STRENGTHENING NORTHSIDE **COMMUNITIES**

JUNE 2014



PREPARED BY

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank our three data collectors, Keith Brown, Ruth McCarton and Tyrell Scott, for their hard work and dedication to this project. They walked many long, hilly streets to reach stray vacant lots, shared useful knowledge about the Northside with each other, and represented the project well to curious Northside residents who passed by. We also appreciate the Northside Coalition for Fair Housing for allowing us to use their office as our central meeting place. Finally, we'd like to thank Buhl Foundation for their long-term commitment to the Northside, and their interest in taking time for investigation and analysis before action.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the Spring of 2014, GTECH Strategies and Northside volunteers spent several months collecting information on the condition of vacant land in the 19 Northside neighborhoods in the City of Pittsburgh. The result was a comprehensive data set on **5,405 vacant lots** outlining information on the use and physical condition of each site. In order to better understand the location and condition of these lots and to propose strategies for the regeneration of these lots into productive uses that benefit the community, an investigation was launched. The purpose of this report is two fold. The first is to communicate the findings of the investigation with recommendations provided for the reduction of unmaintained vacant spaces with the second purpose of analyzing the suitability of these sites for future greening projects.

A vacant parcel of land is defined as a parcel of land without any existing structure. Vacant land can be a serious detriment to communities, and often times overshadows the positive aspects of a neighborhood by attracting crime, dumping or litter, and public health concerns while simultaneously lowering property values and suppressing community pride. After years of conducting vacant land assessments and researching data collection methodologies, we decided that LocalData, a platform that allows for mobile collection and cloud-based storage and reporting functionalities, will be the chosen tool for this investigation. Overall, LocalData is on the forefront of helping cities and communities make data-driven decisions by capturing and visualizing street-level information in real time. This report is the first report of its kind to use the LocalData platform and all data collected will be made publicly available shortly after its conclusion.

This investigation revealed **2,044 lots** were found to have no active use and were often times unkept or unmaintained. These lots are expensive to maintain in their current condition and to stabilize these spaces will cost **more than \$1 million dollars**. It was also important to catalog those vacant spaces with active uses (side yards, community gardens, playspaces, etc). Due to the distributed nature of vacant lots within the Northside communities, a range of planning and activation strategies

must be implemented. Flower gardens, gateway gardens, parklets and playspaces were identified to show were existing small-scale, passive greening strategies were located and if these projects had proved to be successful, to help identify areas where these types of projects could be installed. Food gardens were mapped to help inform food insecure areas and locations for expansion of community gardens, while wooded lots and side yards were identified to locate areas that either could easily be recategorized to reduce the amount of lots that need attention immediately.

To show the breakdown of the figures behind the use of the 5,405 lots surveyed, a table has been provided in this summary.

| Lot Classification | Number of Parcels | Percent of Total |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| Flower Garden | 54 | 1.0% |
| Food Garden | 37 | .68% |
| Gateway Garden | 4 | .07% |
| Parking Lots | 486 | 9.0% |
| Parklets | 49 | .90% |
| Playspaces | 19 | .35% |
| Rain Gardens | 2 | .03% |
| Side Yards | 602 | 11.1% |
| Temporary/Green Infill | 7 | .13% |
| Unimproved Lots | 2,044 | 37.7% |
| Wooded Lots | 2,101 | 38.8% |

This report provides the foundation for a comprehensive and strategic planning process to reduce the amount of unmaintained and blighted vacant land in Northside neighborhoods using the most up-to-date conditional data available. Currently, Northside community leaders are having a community-wide conversation and working to gather data about the neighborhoods that make up the Northside. This process will help to inform the Quality of Place initiative supported by the Buhl Foundation in the hopes of creating a healthier, unified Northside for all. This investigation will help to inform that process of where additional investments may be needed for converting vacant lots in vibrant assets.

Finally, In an effort to maximize the impact of investments in vacant land, GTECH has developed a model to simultaneously build knowledge, capacity and expertise with individuals in communities as well as enable tangible actions to fuel community revitalization efforts. Thanks to the Buhl Foundation, this model will again be applied in the Northside. ReClaim Northside seeks to engage, equip and empower 10-12 individuals from Northside communities to serve as ambassadors in an education and training program that will provide them with the knowledge and financial resources to engage their own communities, foster their ideas and put them into action using vacant land as a platform for the installation of resident-driven greening projects.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, GTECH began exploring and testing new technologies that streamline and standardize place-based data collection methodologies. More specifically, we piloted and partnered with LocalData, a “democratized data platform used for the standardization of data collection and dissemination of a variety of factors that impact community development decisions”. LocalData provides a streamlined and simplified process for gathering data that informs actions to improve communities. This is something we want to see replicated throughout the region, making data work for us.

Vacant land serves as the ideal platform to foster increased community engagement and encourage resident ownership of the community revitalization process. By transitioning these underutilized spaces into vibrant community assets, we can create opportunities to empower both people and places. In order to create these opportunities, we first must know baseline information about the location and condition of vacant land in Northside communities. Over the course of three months, GTECH Staff and Northside residents collected qualitative and quantitative data on the condition of every vacant lot in the 19 neighborhoods that make up the Northside using the LocalData platform.

It only takes a short walk through nearly any of the Northside’s nineteen neighborhoods to realize the severity of the vacant land issue. However, Northside residents are concerned about the 5,405 vacant lots in their neighborhoods, and are coming together to come up with some solutions. 38% of these vacant lots are unimproved and do nothing for the communities that they are in, often becoming a space for litter, invasive weeds, and undesirable activities. These neglected spaces need to be re-imagined as opportunities for increased community engagement and environmental health.

According to the Northside Community Census, Northside residents prioritize quality of place as a critical area of improvement. Some of the 40,940 people living in the Northside are already involved in greening initiatives on vacant land. This project was an investigation into where

greening initiatives already exist, how each vacant lot is being used, and the detailed conditions of each lot. When collected and communicated clearly, this information is the starting point for Northside residents to plan for the transitions of the many unimproved vacant lots in their neighborhoods into productive and positive community spaces.

While investigation takes time and resources, it's an essential foundation for any thoughtful action. We developed a survey with the support and expertise of LocalData, the Pittsburgh Local Data Collaborative, and University of Pittsburgh's Center for Social and Urban Research in order to collect relevant and useful information about each vacant lot. The power of this survey is that it allows idea generation in the Northside to be based off a current and comprehensive the comprehensive description of the use and condition of each lot rather than the speculative and solely quantitative datasets that are publicly available.

In the long term, this investigation will help to address some of the priorities and concerns revolving around quality of place that were noted by residents in the Northside Community Census, including beautification and cleanup, strengthening business districts, and availability and accessibility of public spaces. Each of these concerns relate directly to the benefits of reclaiming vacant land.

WHO WE ARE

GTECH (Growth Through Energy and Community Health) is a Pittsburgh-based non-profit organization whose mission is to cultivate the unrealized potential of people and places by creating opportunities that improve the economic, social and environmental health of our communities. As an organization, GTECH is dedicated to taking action based on thoughtful investigation and research.

OUR CORE PROGRAM AREAS

ReClaim is a program that works with Pittsburgh residents to transform vacant, blighted land in their neighborhoods into green, vibrant places. The ReClaim team, composed of designers, policy specialists, social innovators, landscape architects and community organizers, works with

community groups to carry out transitional strategies while working towards a sustainable reuse for each vacant lot.

ReEnergize is a program that works to increase the demand for energy efficiency through partnerships, education and advocacy with help from a coalition of local government agencies, energy efficiency professionals, utilities, environmental and neighborhood organizations, and community leaders.

ReFuel is a waste-to-energy program that helps fuel local economies with that which most people would regard as trash, such as used cooking oil and invasive plant species. In doing so, they reduce air and water pollution and help Pittsburghers to rethink waste. Over the past 5 years, ReFuel collected over 21,000 gallons of used cooking oil for recycling into biodiesel.

OUR PARTNERS

LocalData is a cloud-based mapping platform that helps cities and communities make data-driven decisions by capturing and visualizing street-level information in real time. Public sector and non-profit professionals use LocalData to quickly collect and map street-level qualitative and quantitative data, design custom map-based surveys, manage data online and instantly visualize geospatial data without a data expert. Without the persistent support of LocalData, this report would not be possible.

Realizing the possibilities that a platform like LocalData can provide, GTECH launched the Pittsburgh LocalData Collaborative (PLDC) in 2014. With support from the University of Pittsburgh Center for Social and Urban Research (UCSUR), GTECH brought together a diverse group of community organizations, non-profit institutions and municipal entities to ascertain how a streamlined and standardized set of data collection processes can benefit everyone.

It should also be noted that this report would not be possible without the support of the Buhl Foundation, a philanthropic organization that has proposed a 20 year commitment to improving the health of Northside communities. To accomplish

this goal, The Buhl Foundation has engaged Jackson Clark Partners to conduct a comprehensive community census that will assist in the strategic allocation of \$60 million in resources for Northside neighborhoods. The Northside Community Census is striving to provide an opportunity for every Northsider to give their input on what it will take to build a better future for their community. This report will serve as a direct compliment to this work and other planning activities over the course of the next two decades and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

This section of the report will outline the steps taken in building out the surveying and investigative process. Over the course of four months, data collectors spent more than 600 hours in the field systematically collecting important conditional and geospatial information on all of the vacant lots in the Northside. This is our story.

CREATING THE SURVEY

GTECH began the investigation of the Northside's vacant land by developing a survey on the LocalData platform that would collect detailed and practical information about each vacant parcel. In partnership with the Pittsburgh Local Data Collaborative and University of Pittsburgh's Center for Social and Urban Research, GTECH fine-tuned and standardized the content and flow of the survey after thoroughly researching existing land surveys. Tablet computers were set up to run the survey when it was finalized.

In the acknowledgment that all vacant land is not created equal since some vacant spaces have already been transformed into productive use, GTECH created eleven different classifications of vacant lots. These were; unimproved lots, wooded lots, food gardens, flower gardens, gateway gardens, temporary grill infill sites, parklets, playspaces, parking lots, rain gardens and side yards. The creation of these classifications allowed us to identify where community assets already existed and where more work is needed.

LOT CLASSIFICATIONS

This section will provide examples of types of lots in the classifications used in surveying vacant property in the Northside. Classifications were created to assist in the prioritization of lots that need immediate attention. Discovering the lots that are in need of work allows us to allocate resources towards projects that will have the greatest impact.

flower gardens



- Annuals
- Perennials
- Trees
- Flower Beds
- No Signage

Picture location: Spring Garden

food gardens



- Vegetables and Fruits
- Trees
- Raised Beds
- Mounded Rows
- Personal Use
- Community Use

Picture location: Central Northside

gateway gardens



- Annuals
- Perennials
- Trees
- Flower Beds
- Signage
- Location

Picture location: Troy Hill

parking lots



- Gravel Lots
- Paved Lots
- Currently Used
- Currently Unused

Picture location: North Shore

parklets



- Seating
- Gathering Spaces
- Memorials
- Programmable Components
- Size

Picture location: Brighton Heights

playspaces



- Children-focused
- Manufactured Equipment
- Salvaged Equipment
- Currently Used

Picture location: Perry South

rain gardens



- Specific Annuals
- Specific Perennials
- Specific Trees
- Signage
- Design
- Location

Picture location: Central Northside

side yards



- Personal Use
- Maintenance Requirements
- Fencing
- Annuals
- Perennials
- Trees

Picture location: Manchester

temporary green infill



- Location
- Design Elements
- Signage

No Northside Image Available

unimproved lots



- Lack Of Intentional Plantings
- Maintenance

Picture location: Troy Hill

wooded lots



- Large or Mature Growth
- Hillsides
- Flatlands
- Typically Not Buildable

Picture location: Spring Hill

A DEEPER DIVE

A primary goal of this investigation was to identify lots that represent some of the greatest opportunities for future green development. These opportunities manifest in the form of “unimproved lots,” a category created specifically for this report. Unimproved lots are those lots with no current productive use. Many of these lots are former demolition sites

and have been over taken by vegetation and years of poor maintenance. To access these lots for their potential of future redevelopment, several conditions that impact the state of unimproved lots were identified and surveyed. These conditions and the scale they are measured on are identified below.

| Condition | How It Was Measured |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Plant Growth and Maintenance | 1-3 Scale |
| Dumping | 1-3 Scale |
| Litter | 1-3 Scale |
| Tree Canopy | 1-3 Scale and Health Assessment |
| Invasive Species Cover | 1-3 Scale and Plant Type |
| Slope | 1-3 Scale |
| Safety Hazards | Present Yes/No |
| Rubble or Concrete | Present Yes/No and Type |

Table 1.1: Conditions and how they were measured on unimproved lots.

Many of the conditions were measured on a 1-3 grading scale, with 1 representing the best conditions and 3 representing the worst.

EMPOWERING RESIDENTS

With the survey and tablets prepared, the next step was to find people to do the surveying. GTECH recruited three data collectors with the assistance of Northside community groups. Two of these data collectors were from Northside neighborhoods and the third, while not from the Northside, has been consistently involved in the community and is a former Northside business owner. These data collectors were chosen because their familiarity with the local landscape likely inspires more accurate and efficient surveying. Likewise, their familiar faces are more approachable for Northside residents, opening up conversations about vacant land and establishing trust in the process.

The data collectors went through a simple training to learn to use the tablets that hold the survey, become comfortable with the survey, and prepare some talking points to respond to questions from curious

Northsiders. After a few hours of surveying vacant land, the data collectors were comfortable enough to make informed decisions on how to respond to the survey questions.

IN THE FIELD

After training, data collectors began to survey the Northside's vacant land on a regular basis through the spring and summer of 2014. The actual process was simple. Each day, the data collectors met at a central location, chose a place to begin, planned the route they would take, and set a goal for how much area they'd like to cover in the day. In pairs of two, the data collectors split up to cover more ground and walked down every street in the agreed-upon area. When a data collector came upon a lot that appeared to be vacant, they searched the LocalData map for the lot, selected it, and began answering the survey questions displayed on the tablet. The survey questions that appeared depended on the vacant land category initially selected. When data collectors reached the end of the survey, they had the option to take a photo of the selected lot and then submitted their answers, which were automatically uploaded to the LocalData platform.

While the process of surveying vacant land using the LocalData platform is simple and efficient, it takes data collectors who are willing and able to walk down every street in the given area. This task can be monotonous, but is the most accurate way to collect such information. There are, however, a few setbacks to this methodology. With changing seasons, the answers to some of the survey questions may fluctuate. For example, one question asks the surveyor to rate a site for plant growth and maintenance. A site may appear to have very low plant growth in the winter, but may be several feet high in weeds in the summer. In addition, the data collectors found that it was challenging to find the correct parcel on the LocalData map on occasion because the satellite image shown on the map sometimes looked different depending on when and what time of year it was captured. However, these challenges were addressed by giving additional support and training to the data collectors as needed.

ANALYZING RESULTS

After four months of data collection, all information on the categories of vacant land and the condition of unimproved lots was exported from the LocalData website. This information is downloaded in the form of a Common Separated Value (CSV) file and can be uploaded and spatially joined and visually displayed utilizing Geographical Information Software (GIS).

In addition to highlighting specific conditions that have suitable recommendations for reducing the amount of unmaintained and unimproved vacant lots (i.e. the purchasing of side yards, absorbing wooded parcels into greenways, and identifying sites of littering and illegal dumping), we also developed a weighting system for assessing two courses of action for unimproved lots. The first assessment was for stabilization, or the amount of work needed to transform unimproved lots to a state where they can be properly, but easily maintained. The second assessment was for site suitability for future GTECH Ambassador Projects. These projects fit into GTECH's neighborhood scale initiatives that involve training residents in the process of transforming vacant lots into viable community assets.

These two assessments provided critical feedback for providing next step recommendations and programmatic opportunities for transforming blighted vacant land into community assets.

FINDINGS

The collection process identified **5,405 vacant lots**. The two greatest categories were Unimproved Lots and Wooded Lots, coming in at **37.7%** and **38.8%** of all parcels surveyed respectively. These figures also told us that only **3%** of all parcels are currently being utilized as public green spaces. The exact number of vacant lots and their classification has been provided below.

| Lot Classification | Number of Parcels | Percent of Total |
|------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Flower Garden | 54 | 1.0% |
| Food Garden | 37 | .68% |
| Gateway Garden | 4 | .07% |
| Parking Lots | 486 | 9.0% |
| Parklets | 49 | .90% |
| Playspaces | 19 | .35% |
| Rain Gardens | 2 | .03% |
| Side Yards | 602 | 11.1% |
| Temporary/Green Infill | 7 | .13% |
| Unimproved Lots | 2,044 | 37.7% |
| Wooded Lots | 2,101 | 38.8% |

Table 1.2: Lot Classifications and the Totals and Percentages of Each.

Figure 1.1 shows all classifications and their locations. A breakdown of selected recommendations for lots has been provided in the subsequent sections. A breakdown of lot types for each community has been provided. This information is critical to understanding the types of vacancies and the types of projects that neighborhoods can benefit the most from. This section also highlights how certain types and conditions of vacancy can be accompanied by a set of tangible recommendations for improving the condition of vacant sites in Northside communities.



Figure 1.1: All Vacant Lot Classifications



Source: City of Pittsburgh
Data collected using LocalData
Spring 2014

ALLEGHENY CENTER



Allegheny Center is a cultural and destination neighborhood in the Northside. The residential area in the neighborhood is dense but in close proximity to Allegheny Commons Park.



ALLEGHENY WEST



Allegheny West is a smaller neighborhood near many of the cultural and entertainment locations in the Northside. Due to this, many of the vacant spaces in this community are parking lots.





BRIGHTON HEIGHTS

Brighton Heights is one of the most northern communities in the study area. It has a fairly low level of vacancy and a very suburban feel. It is also boarded by wooded lots.



CALIFORNIA-KIRKBRIDE

California-Kirkbride has the highest percentage of unimproved lots. Many houses here have been demolished and there are many blocks with only a handful of houses remaining. However, many of the lots here are consistently maintained.



CENTRAL NORTHSIDE



Central Northside is a neighborhood dense with rowhouses and many other historical buildings. The vacancy here is largely gap vacancy, with building flanking either side of the lot.



CHATEAU



Chateau is primarily comprised of heavy industry and warehouses. Route 65 divides the neighborhood from the rest of the Northside communities. The primary type of vacancy here is parking lots.





EAST ALLEGHENY

East Allegheny is divided by Interstate 279 with a majority of the neighborhoods vacancy apperaring on the east side of the interstate. Many of the vacant lots in this community already have been activated for alternative uses.



FINEVIEW

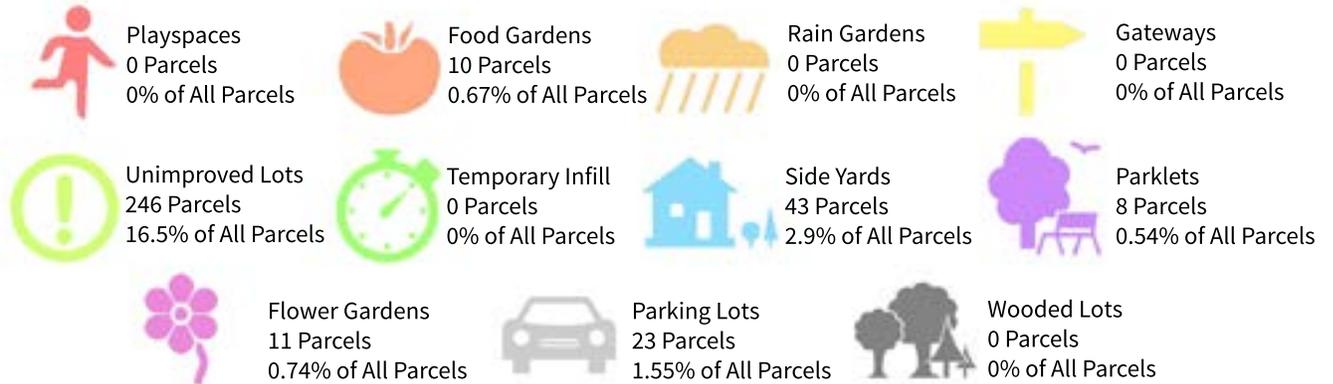
Much of the neighborhood of Fineview is wooded and sloped, especially towards the east side of the community. Due to the geographic nature of the community, there are pockets of vacancy here.



MANCHESTER



Manchester is mostly flat and is home to many historical rowhouses. The north side of Manchester has a considerable amount of unimproved lots.



MARSHALL-SHADELAND



Marshall-Shadeland is a hilly community that is bordered by the Highwood and Uniondale cemeteries. The neighborhood is full of older Victorian and Craft-style houses with a variety of types of vacancy.





NORTHSHORE

The Northshore is home to many sporting and entertainment venues in the Northside. To accommodate for this, there are many parking lots in the community.



NORTHVIEW HEIGHTS

Northview Heights is primarily composed by a large and isolated public housing project. It is surrounded by many wooded lots.



PERRY NORTH



Perry North, also known as Observatory Hill is home to Review Park. It is home to many wooded lots and for its size, has a lower percentage of vacant lots.



PERRY SOUTH



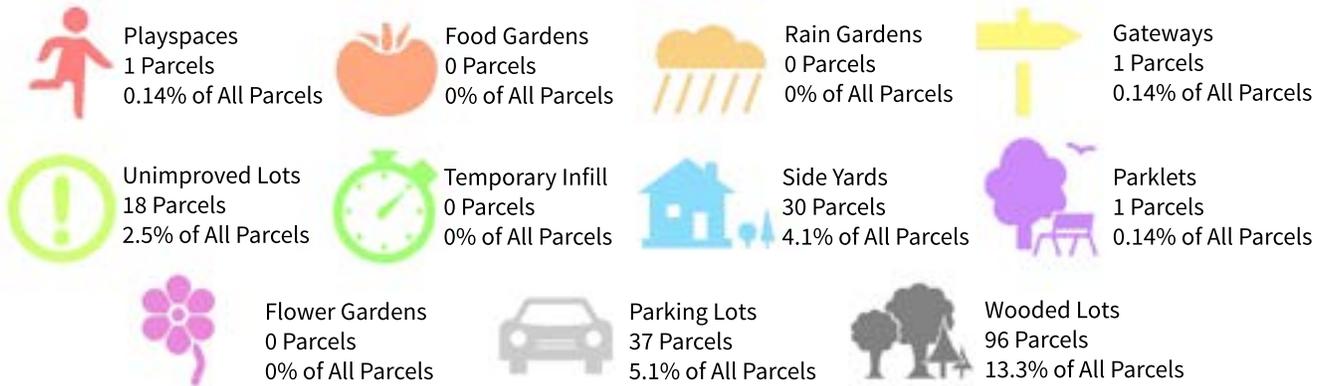
Perry South has some of the most concentrated vacancy in the Northside. In the lower portion of Perry South, the lots are stabilized and moderately maintained. The neighborhood had many different enclaves and characteristics.





SPRING GARDEN

Spring Garden is very wooded and hilly neighborhood. Many of the homes here are smaller with many of the vacant lots being used as side yards and parking lots.



SPRING HILL

The neighborhood of Spring Hill has comparatively limited vacancies. About half of its vacant lots have been adopted as side yards. Many of the lots have been incorporated into the wooded hillsides.



SUMMER HILL



Summer Hill is a very steep and wooded neighborhood. Many of the vacant lots here are forested, and are clustered near the southern portion of the community.



TROY HILL



Troy Hill is similar to its surrounding neighborhoods in terms of the hilly geographic terrain with many of the houses being similar in style and condition. Vacancy here is minimal and many of the lots have been put to productive use.



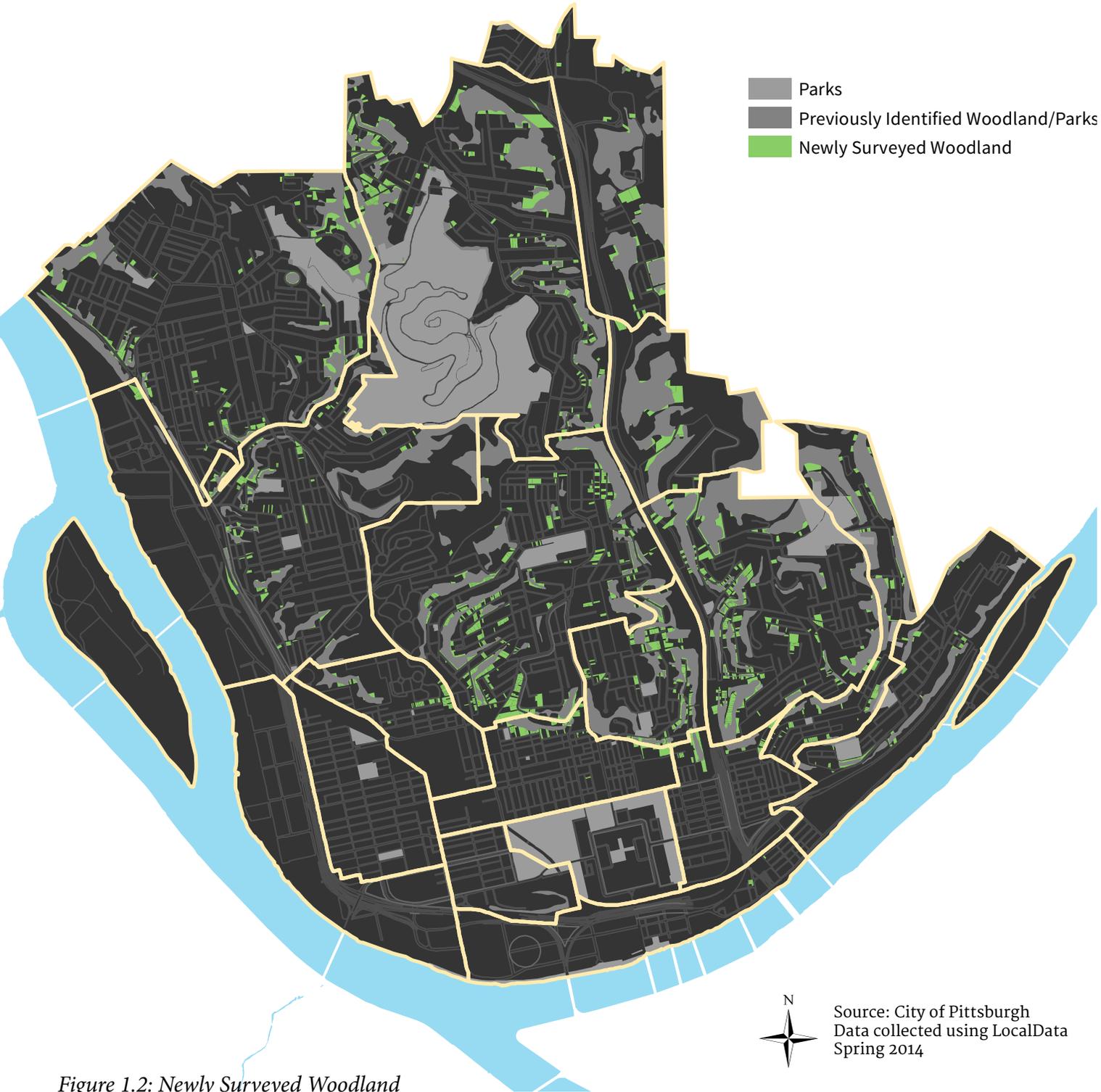


Figure 1.2: Newly Surveyed Woodland

WOODLAND

The largest classification of vacant lots in the Northside was wooded lots. Wooded lots were identified by their proximity to larger forested areas and hillsides. These parcels do not include previously identified park or cemetery space. *Figure 1.2* shows previously existing open spaces (parks and hillsides) in gray, while wooded lots observed through data collection, have been marked with a green fill. Open spaces play a critical role in the creation of healthy communities. Quality greenspace not only serves existing residents, but can also bolster communities by attracting new development and residents.

There are **2,101 wooded parcels** in the Northside, representing **395 acres** of land. While some of these parcels do overlap with some 874 acres of previously identified woodland, many of them are extensions from the information on file from the City of Pittsburgh. These represent 2,101 additional opportunities for the conservation of open space, from which, there are numerous benefits. The first is the benefit of providing an ecological habitat for a variety of wildlife and as serving as corridors and greenways that link these habitats. Open spaces can help to reduce the urban heat island effect and thus, reduce the air temperature made warmer by concrete and asphalt surfaces. Woody hillsides and steep slopes also help to give neighborhoods geographic identities.

One of the most important roles that woodlands and other greenspaces surveyed can serve is the reduction of stormwater runoff. Many of the woodlands surveyed were along steep, nearly unbuildable hillsides. The trees in these lots can prevent soil erosion, absorb rainwater and improve overall drainage.

Finally, the incorporation of these additionally identified woodlands into existing and newly created conservation and greenway plans can greatly enhance a system of green that advances stewardship, equity and our economy (OPENSOURCEPGH, 2013).

Recommended Actions

- *Provide City of Pittsburgh Planning Department with lot information on surveyed woodland*
- *Incorporate adjacent woodland parcels into Greenway Program*
- *Investigate ways to use wooded lots for stormwater mitigation*
- *Work with the City of Pittsburgh and the Public Parks Conservancy to conduct feasibility trail studies*

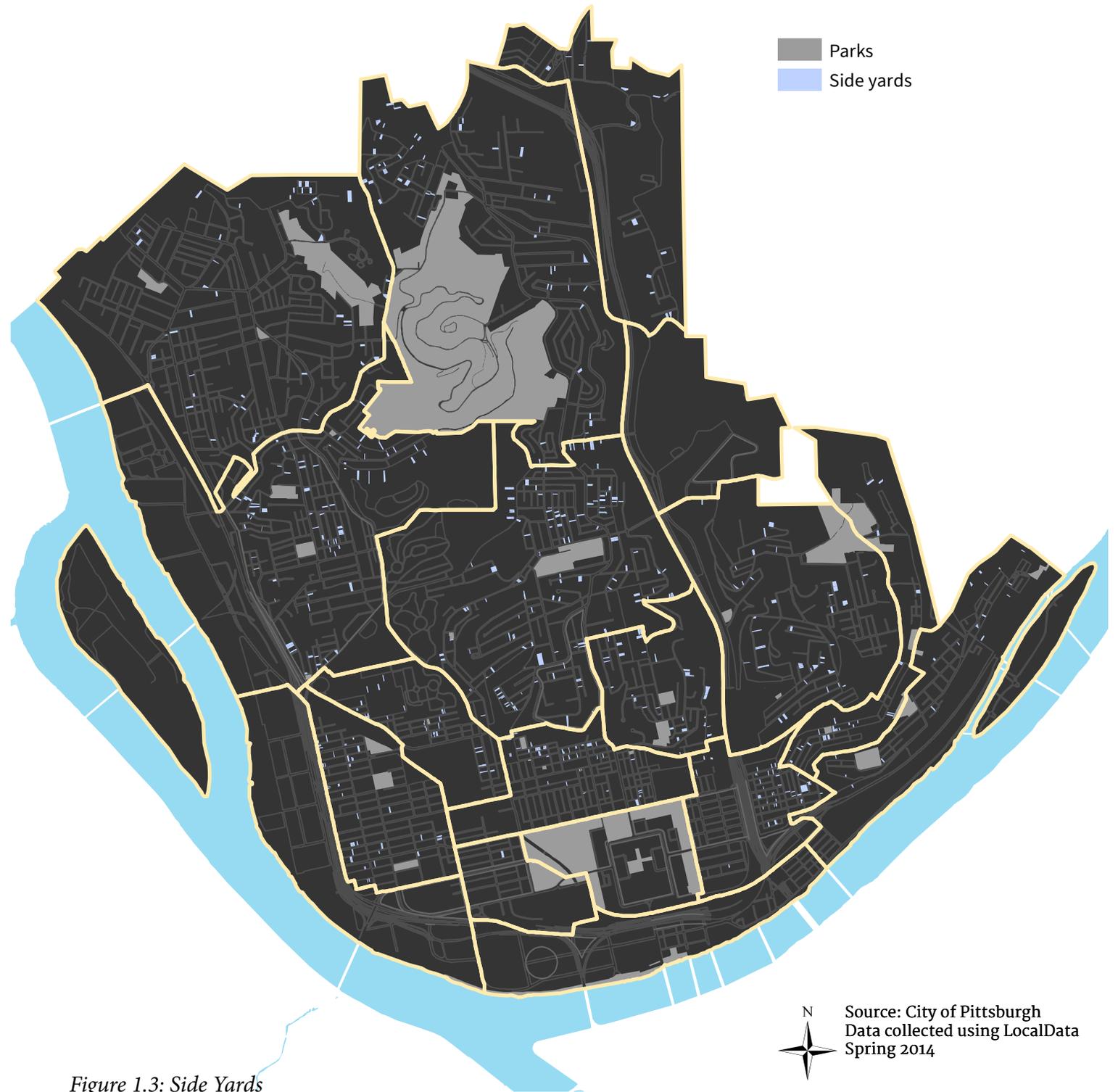


Figure 1.3: Side Yards

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Source: City of Pittsburgh
Data collected using LocalData
Spring 2014

SIDE YARDS

Side yards are one of the easiest solutions to unkept and unmaintained vacant land in Northside neighborhoods. Encouraging responsible property owners to take ownership of vacant parcels adjacent to their own properties can reduce the amount of unmaintained lots. Through the data collection process we observed **602 side yards**. This represents approximately **11 %** of all vacant parcels surveyed **43 acres** of land in the Northside. The lots vary in size and scale, but are relatively dispersed throughout all 19 neighborhoods.

The City of Pittsburgh launched The Side Yard Program was created in 1993 to encourage adjacent property owners to purchase vacant, City-owned or tax-delinquent lots at a subsidized price of \$200. The vacant lot must typically be under 5,000 square feet (The Kennedy Report, 2010). The program is an effective means of recycling vacant land, increasing property values for homeowners as well as improving the overall appearance of a neighborhood (The City of Pittsburgh Property Reserve, 2010).

In order to qualify for the program, the adjacent property owner must have paid all their local taxes, must be current on all water and sewage bills and own an adjacent property that is residential with two or fewer units. The interested buyer must determine if the vacant lot is in the City's inventory or if it is privately owned and tax delinquent. If it is already in the City's Inventory, the buyer pays \$200 and initiates a resale. If the lot is privately owned and tax delinquent, the interested buyer can request the Real Estate Department put it through the Treasurer's Sale process. If no one purchases it at the Treasurer's Sale, the City will place it in its inventory, obtain approval of sale from City Council, quiet the title and sell it to the interested buyer for \$200 (The Kennedy Report, 2010).

For assistance or to learn more about the program, residents can go to www.pcrp.org/programs or call the City of Pittsburgh Real Estate Department at 412-255-2300.

Recommended Actions

- *Increase awareness of The Side Yard Program within neighborhoods with high percentages of vacant land and homeownership*
- *Streamline the application process for The Side Yard Program*
- *Work to speed up the purchasing agreement for lots moving through the program*
- *Verify that lots currently being used as side yards are legally owned*

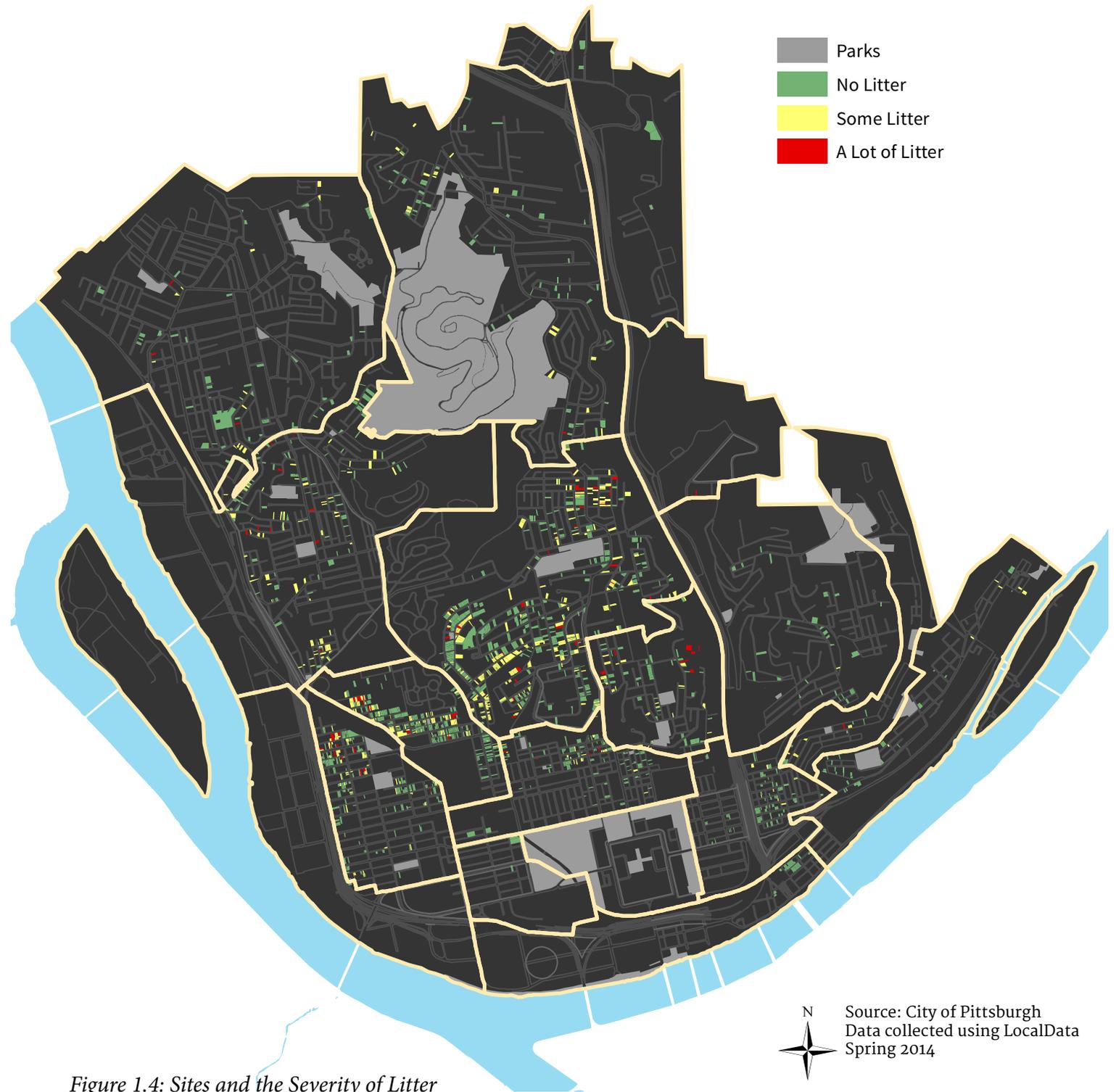


Figure 1.4: Sites and the Severity of Litter

LITTER

Litter is a serious problem for communities. While one or two items on the edge of the sidewalk or tossed on a vacant lot may not seem like a problem, the presence of litter in a community can signal a lack of care for the overall state of a neighborhood. The removal of litter and trash is also extremely costly. A 2009 report by Keep America Beautiful indicated that the cost of litter removal across the United States was estimated at 11.5 billion dollars annually.

Qualitative information on the amount of litter was collected at all 2,044 unimproved lots during the course of the survey work. Lots with no litter received a score of 1. Lots with a minor amount of litter, or enough to fill approximately one grocery bag, were given a 2. Lots with large amounts of litter, or enough to fill at least 1 trash bag, were given a 3. Each lot has been color coded to reflect the amount of trash present on each site in *Figure 1.4*.

Information of lots that litter out of 2,044 total lots was collected, and 1,390 of these lots were found to have no significant amount of litter present. There were **564 lots** that scored as a 2, or had a minor to moderate amount of litter, and **90 lots** that scored a 3, or had a major amount of litter present. A majority of the lots with the highest amount of litter were cluster in a handful of communities. These were Fineview, Perry Hilltop, California-Kirkbride, Manchester and Marshall-Shadeland.

Residents and community leaders can take several steps to reduce the amount of litter found on vacant land, especially in communities with the greatest litter problems. Residents, especially those in the communities with the greatest litter problem. To report the problem individuals can call the city's 311 Response Center or the Pennsylvania Resource Council's "Don't Trash My Turf" hot-line at 412-431-4534. Northside community organizations or local block watches may also choose to partner with organizations that specialize in trash removal, like Citizens Against Litter or Allegheny CleanWays, for volunteer clean up days.

Recommended Actions

- *Assist with the growth of neighborhood or community block watch groups*
- *Encourage residents to report cases of littering to the City's 311 line*
- *Increase enforcement in areas with lots with the highest amount of litter*
- *Provide report information to groups like Allegheny CleanWays*

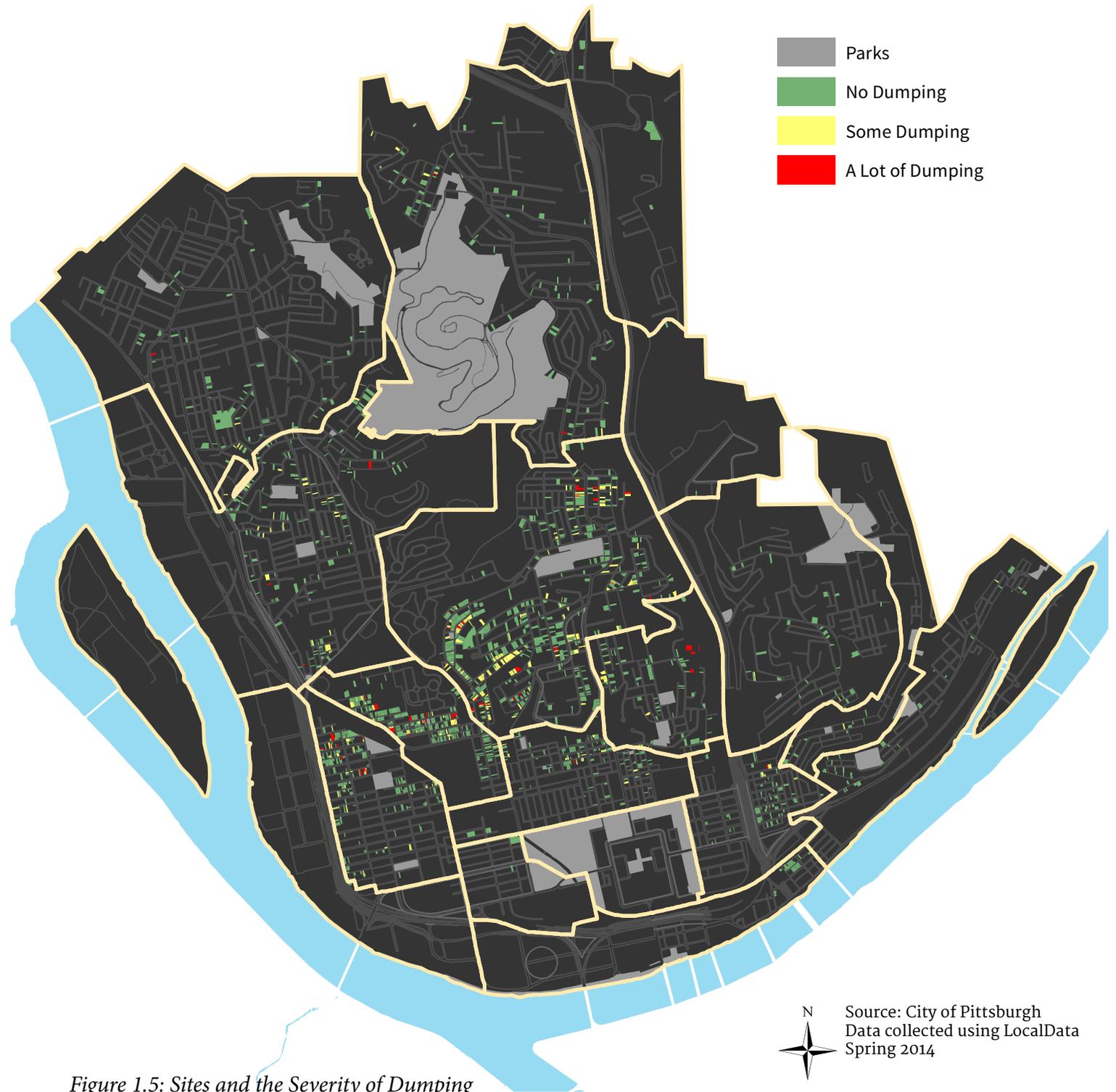


Figure 1.5: Sites and the Severity of Dumping

DUMPING

A 2009 report by Pennsylvania CleanWays found that there were **279 identified dump sites** in the City of Pittsburgh containing **676 tons of trash** (PA CleanWays, 2009). There are health and safety, environmental and economic consequences of illegal dumping. They decrease the property value of surrounding properties and have negative social impact on communities by decreasing the quality of life for residents and increasing the risk of crime (PA CleanWays, 2009). The obscurity of vacant lots as well as their relative abandonment make them an attraction for illegal dumping.

Qualitative information on the amount of dumping on sites was collected from all 2,044 unimproved lots identified during the course of the survey. Dumping was differentiated from litter by the size of trash and the items present. All unimproved lots that had no dumping received a score of 1. Lots with a minor amount of dumping, or enough to fill less than 1 standard pickup truck bed, were given a 2. Lots with large amounts of dumping, or enough to require multiple volunteers and more than 1 standard pickup truck bed to clean, were given a 3. Each lot has been color coded to reflect the amount of trash present on each site in *Figure 1.5*.

Out of 2,044 lots that with collected dumping information, **1,675 lots** had no significant amount of dumping present. There were however **307 lots** that scored as a 2, or had a minor to moderate amount of dumping, and **62 lots** that scored a 3, or had a major amount of dumping present. A majority of the lots with the highest amount of litter were clustered in a handful of communities. These were Fineview, Perry Hilltop, California-Kirkbride, Manchester and Marshall-Shadeland.

The first step residents should take to begin the clean up process of any dumping site is to contact the city's 311 Response Center. The city will then work to notify the Department of Public Works. Community cleanups can also be led by Allegheny CleanWays, an organization that works with local residents, organizations, businesses and governments to remove debris dumped within Allegheny County.

Recommended Actions

- *Assist with the growth of neighborhood or community block watch groups*
- *Encourage residents to report cases of dumping to the City's 311 line*
- *Increase enforcement in areas with lots with the highest amount of dumping*
- *Provide report information to groups like Allegheny CleanWays*

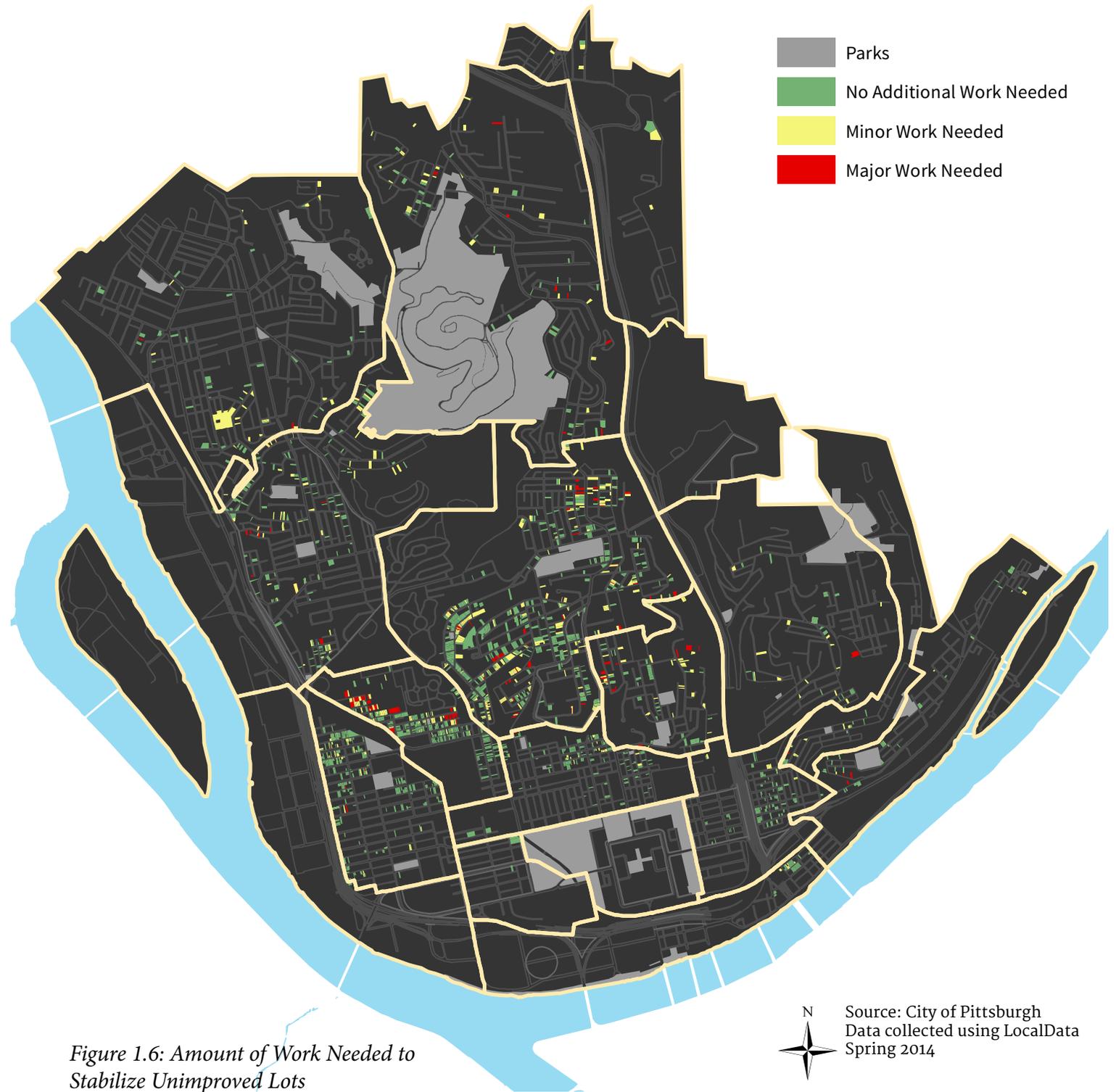


Figure 1.6: Amount of Work Needed to Stabilize Unimproved Lots

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 Source: City of Pittsburgh
 Data collected using LocalData
 Spring 2014

STABILIZATION

This section outlines the challenges in bringing the **2,044 unimproved vacant lots** in Northside Communities back to a stable condition. **For the purpose of this report, lot stabilization is defined as the point at which vacant lots have been improved to a condition where redevelopment is possible and there is no risk of further deterioration.** Returning unimproved lots, especially those highlighted as requiring the greatest amount of work, is a critical step in alleviating stressors placed on communities by higher concentrations of vacant land. Often times, general maintenance (i.e. cutting grass, invasive species removal, general tree care, etc.) is adequate in stabilizing unimproved vacant lots.

During the course of survey work, each unimproved lot was graded on a 1-3 scale on various conditions present on the site. These included things such as plant growth and maintenance needs, the presence of dumping and litter, the condition of the tree canopy, the severity of slope, the amount of invasive plant species and the presence of safety hazards. Each condition was assessed independently on the 1-3 scale, with 1 representing a good condition or when it was at its best and 3 representing a bad condition or when it was at its worst. All of these conditions effect the amount of work needed in order to improve the state of each lot to one that encourages further greening strategies or future development.

In order to aggregate lots in terms of the amount of work required on them, GTECH Strategies created a weighting system using best practices and previous studies. Each condition was weighted based on the level of difficulty that particular condition represented in stabilizing the lot. For instance, slope is weighted higher than litter due to the fact that a steep site would require heavy machinery and hours of manpower, much more so than would be required for a litter clean up, to get the site to a suitable state for future action. Each condition and the weight utilized is shown below.

| Condition | Weight |
|--------------------------|--------|
| Plant Growth/Maintenance | 0.10 |
| Dumping | 0.15 |
| Litter | 0.05 |
| Tree Canopy | 0.20 |
| Invasive Species | 0.20 |
| Slope | 0.25 |
| Safety Hazard | 0.05 |

Table 1.3: Conditions associated with the stabilization of unimproved lots and their weights.

RESULTS

Figure 1.6 shows the breakdown of unimproved lots and the amount of work needed for stabilization after the weighting system was applied. Out of the 2,044 unimproved lots that information was collected from, **1,328 lots** needed no additional stabilization work, meaning that existing maintenance work performed on the lots was sufficient. There were **558 lots** that required minor work and **158 lots** that required major work. Lots that required major work were concentrated in a handful of neighborhoods including, Troy Hill, Fineview, Perry North, Perry South, California-Kirkbride and Marshall-Shadeland.

COSTS

Each lot assessment can be used to help inform the costs and planning for future uses of unimproved vacant land. The information can also be used to help determine annual costs associated with maintenance.

Lots were ranked based on best practice research and GTECH conditional studies, lots with the score of 1 to 1.5, or those lots that are in the best shape, have average maintenance costs of **\$3,509 per acre**. Lots that require minor work, or lots that scored from 1.5 to 2, are estimated to cost **\$14,045 per acre** (Hill District Vacant Property Strategy, 2013). The increase is largely due to the necessary initial clean up costs. Finally, lots that scored above a 2, or lots that need a major amount of work and are

in the worst condition, are estimated to require **\$21,050 per acre**. Again, the increase here is due to the intense need for an initial clean up. Each ranking has been broken down in the table below and an amount for stabilizing each category has been provided based off of acreage.

| Category | Acreage | Lots | Cost |
|------------------------|---------|--------|-------------|
| 1: No Work Required | 86.13 | 1,328 | \$302,230 |
| 2: Minor Work Required | 41.77 | 558 | \$586,670 |
| 3: Major Work Required | 10.95 | 158 | \$230,498 |
| Total | 138.85 | 138.85 | \$1,119,398 |

Table 1.4: Total Acreage and Costs of Maintenance for Stabilization.



Figure 1.7: Unimproved Lots and Publicly Owned Land

NEXT STEPS

The mission of GTECH Strategies is to follow any planning activity with action that encourages residents to create healthier, stronger communities. The first immediate recommendation of this report is its integration into the Sense of Place campaign funded by the Buhl Foundation. That campaign is a opportunity to form individual task forces on many of the issues identified in this report. The next stage for GTECH in the investigation of the condition of vacant land will be the suitability of the next iteration of the Ambassador Program in Northside neighborhoods. This program will utilize the data obtained from the 5,405 lots surveyed during the course of the investigative process to create a road map for the location of resident-inspired greening projects.

ABOUT THE AMBASSADORS

ReClaim Northside seeks 10-12 active community citizens who are dedicated to positive, actionable change and desire to be increasingly present in their community’s development conversations. Participants attend vacant land education sessions on issues ranging from assessment, current legislation, community organizing, the role of government and community entities, green infrastructure and finding funding sources. GTECH will work with city officials, community-based organizations and partners to recruit identified emerging leaders to participate. This model creates a layer of personal connection and ownership to the process, and encourages ambassadors to become impassioned residents with the technical skill and process knowledge to make things happen in their community.

SELECTING A SITE

With a wealth of information on the status of vacant land in Northside communities, we can be strategic in selecting sites that are best suited in terms of condition and ease of project installation for a specific greening strategy. These resource also allows us to see where specific projects

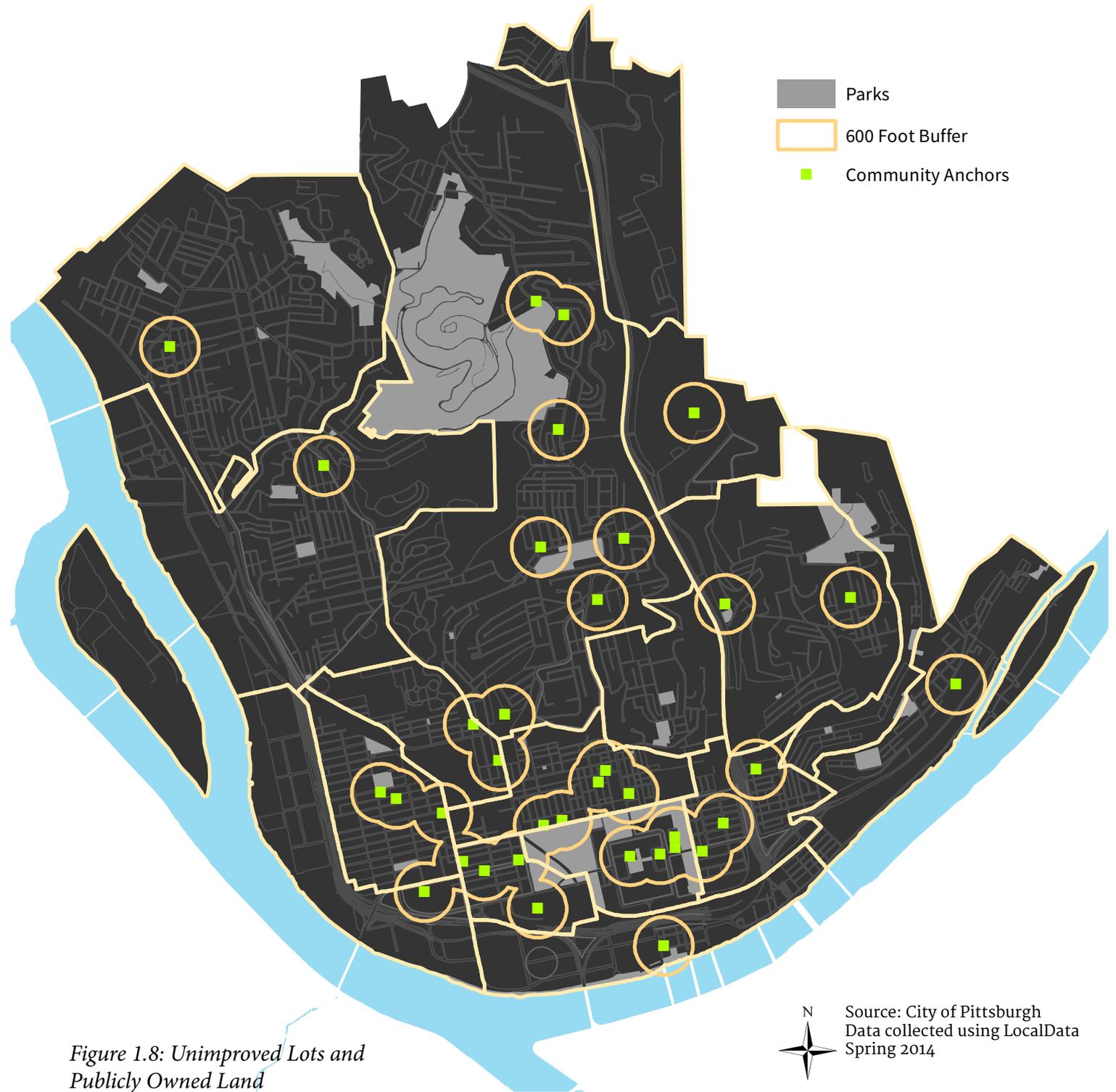


Figure 1.8: Unimproved Lots and Publicly Owned Land

are needed. For example, if one community already has an abundance of food gardens, another type of project, such as a playspace or parklet, may be a more appropriate fit.

The first step in selecting a site suitable for an Ambassador project is knowing the parcels that are owned and publicly available. In the past, GTECH has built strong relationships with the City of Pittsburgh and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), two public land owning bodies. These entities are the preferred property owners to work with, as access to publicly owned land for temporary greening projects is often times easier than obtaining access to privately owned land. In order to begin to determine sites that would be easily accessible, we have mapped unimproved lots, or those lots with the greatest potential for Ambassador projects, and outlined publicly owned land provided by the Allegheny County Department of Assessments and UCSUR. This helps us to determine which unimproved lots are publicly owned and best suited to be selected to go through the site access application process. These lots were identified using Allegheny County property assessment records. Unimproved lots that are publicly owned appear as a green polygon with an orange outline in *Figure 1.7*.

FINDING AN ANCHOR

Churches, schools and community organizations often serve as the bedrock of communities. For the purpose of this report, these have been referred to as community anchors. In acknowledgment of the importance of these institutions, GTECH requires that all Ambassador projects be partnered with a local community anchor for insurance, volunteer and overall capacity purposes. In this investigation, **39 community anchors** have been identified and mapped in *Figure 1.8*. These range from local community-based organizations and community development corporations, to faith-based institutions and human services organizations.

In mapping these community anchors, a 600 foot buffer was created in order to see what sites would be in an appropriate walking distance from the physical location of the anchor. This is important, as we want to make sure it is convenient for patrons and residents associated with each anchor to have access to the Ambassador project they support. It should also be noted that some of the neighborhoods with the highest percentage of vacancy, (Perry South, California-Kirkbride and Manchester) also have many community anchors.

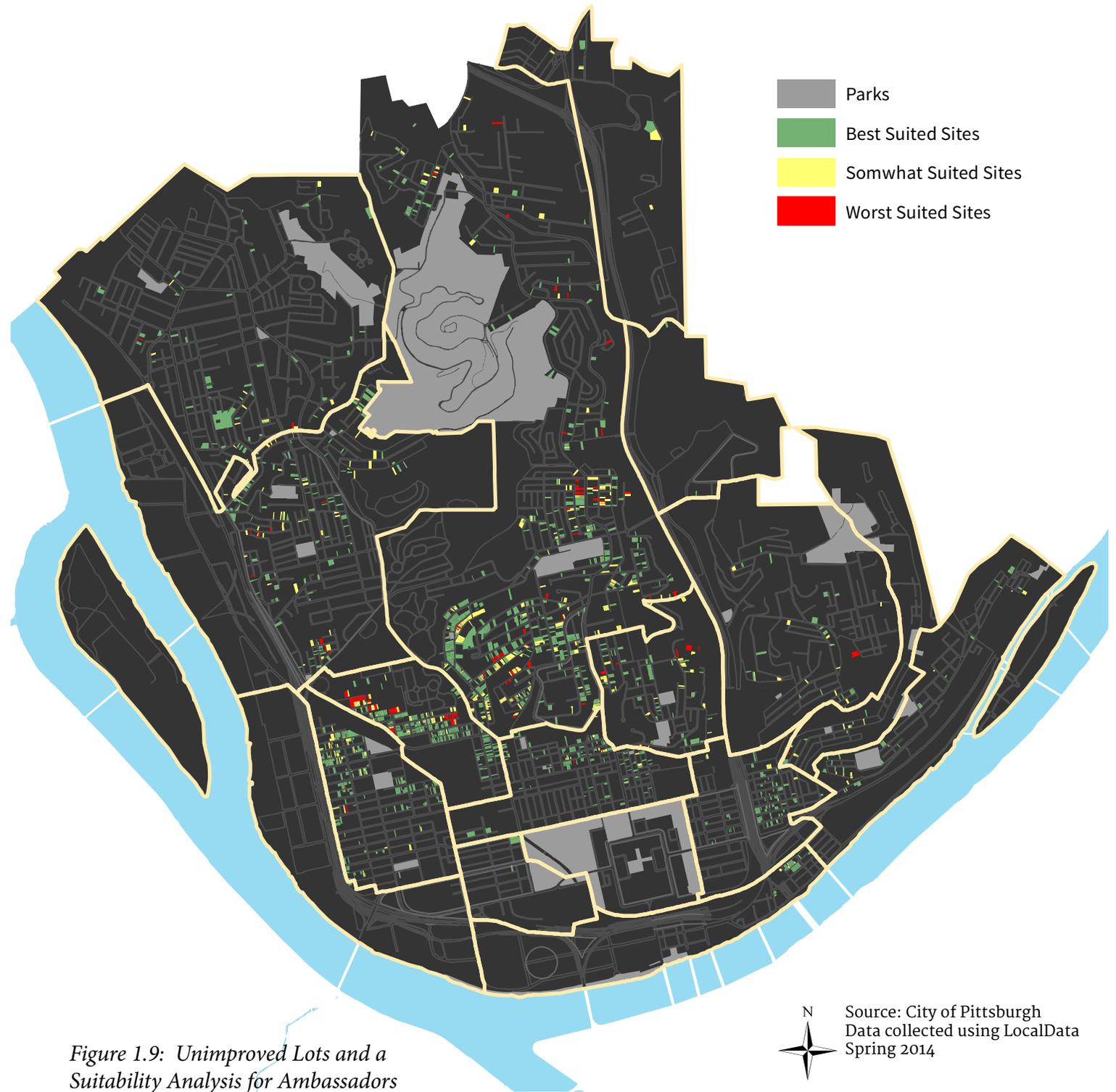


Figure 1.9: Unimproved Lots and a Suitability Analysis for Ambassadors

DETERMINING SUITABILITY

The final step in the investigative process was to use the conditional data collected using the LocalData platform to determine which unimproved lots would be best suited to support new greening projects. We used a weighting system, similar to the methodology for determining the amount of stabilization needed for unimproved lots, for assessing suitability. Again, each condition was measured on a 1-3 scale, with 1 representing a good condition or when it was at its best and 3 representing a bad condition or when it was at its worst. A breakdown of the weights with each condition has been provided below.

| Condition | Weight |
|--------------------------|--------|
| Plant Growth/Maintenance | 0.15 |
| Dumping | 0.20 |
| Litter | 0.05 |
| Tree Canopy | 0.10 |
| Invasive Species | 0.25 |
| Slope | 0.15 |
| Safety Hazard | 0.10 |

Table 1.4: Conditions associated with the suitability of unimproved lots for future Ambassador projects and their weights.

From the stabilization to the suitability assessment, certain weights were adjusted based past GTECH work and how certain conditions make greening projects more difficult. For example, slope was reduced from 0.25 for stabilization to 0.15 for suitability. This is due to the fact that while slope makes the initial prep work and cutback more difficult in stabilizing the lot, it can actually be incorporated as having a functional purpose in an Ambassador project.

RESULTS

Out of the 2,044 unimproved lots surveyed, **1,401 lots** were considered currently suitable for Ambassador projects, **496 lots** were considered not immediately suitable but would could be with a minor amount of work and **147 lots** were considered unsuitable for Ambassador projects.

CONCLUSION

This report surveyed **5,405 vacant parcels**, representing more than **744 acres** of land. When computed, vacant land accounts for **24%** of all parcels in the 19 Northside neighborhoods. This report identifies immediate actions as well as long term strategies for converting vacant land into productive use and reducing the overall inventory blighted properties. By providing detailed data on the condition of these lots in an open-source platform, allows us to begin to include all sectors of the general public in the creation of resident-driven solutions. Resident involvement in the future planning of communities is key in transitioning these underutilized spaces into community assets that benefit both people and place.

The next phase of this investigation will be the launch of a comprehensive ReClaim Northside Ambassador Program. This initiative seeks to engage, equip and empower 10-12 individuals from the Northside to serve as ambassadors who will participate in a targeted education and training program that will provide them with the knowledge and financial resources to engage their own communities, foster their ideas and put them into action on a piece of vacant land. This will launch in the Fall of 2014.

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