reclaimclairton

VACANT LAND ASSESSMENT REPORT

INVESTIGATION AND STRATEGIES TO REDUCE BLIGHT IN CLAIRTON

gtech

2017

PREPARED BY
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank our Resident Data Collectors for their hard work and dedication to this project. They walked the length of Clairton to reach stray vacant lots, shared their knowledge of the neighborhood, and were excellent representatives for the project to their Clairton neighbors.

We also appreciate the Community Economic Development Corporation of Clairton for allowing us to use their building as our central meeting place, and the City of Clairton for their assistance and cooperation.

Finally, we'd like to thank Economic Development South and the Jefferson Regional Foundation for their commitment to Clairton and their interest in the health of the community.

GTECH DEFINITIONS

Ambassador: Residents who have undergone or are currently enrolled in GTECH's Neighborhood Scale Initiative (NSI) programming, a place-based training program that provides residents with the educational and financial resources needed to engage their own communities and put their ideas into action on vacant land.

Blight: Signals of community neglect, such as broken windows, overgrowth, litter and dumping.

Community Health: The current state of the overall well-being of a community, through social, economic and environmental perspectives. The study of this state results in the process of achieving safe, verdant, resilient and livable communities.

Greening Strategies: Plans or policies that improve the quality of life, community interactions, recreational opportunities, and emphasize environmentally responsible land management.

Environmental Justice: The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

Invasive Species: Plants or animals that are not native to the environment they are in and that spread rapidly to disrupt the native ecosystem.

Lot Stabilization: The point at which a vacant lot has been brought to a condition where redevelopment is possible and there is no risk of further deterioration.

Unimproved Vacant Lots: Vacant lots that are devoid of any structures with no active use. These lots are generally unkempt and blighted.

Vacant Land: Parcels of land void of any structure that can or cannot be developed such as parks, greenways, community gardens, cemeteries, playgrounds, side lot/side yard, and unimproved lots.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Vacant lots represent underutilized resources that have the potential to contribute to the social, economic and environmental well-being of communities. When left unmanaged, however, vacant lots strain municipal budgets, reduce property values and diminish the overall quality of life for residents. These empty and blighted spaces are key opportunities to not only engage residents in the community development process, but also educate them on a variety of environmental challenges through the implementation of resident-driven, small-scale greenspace projects.

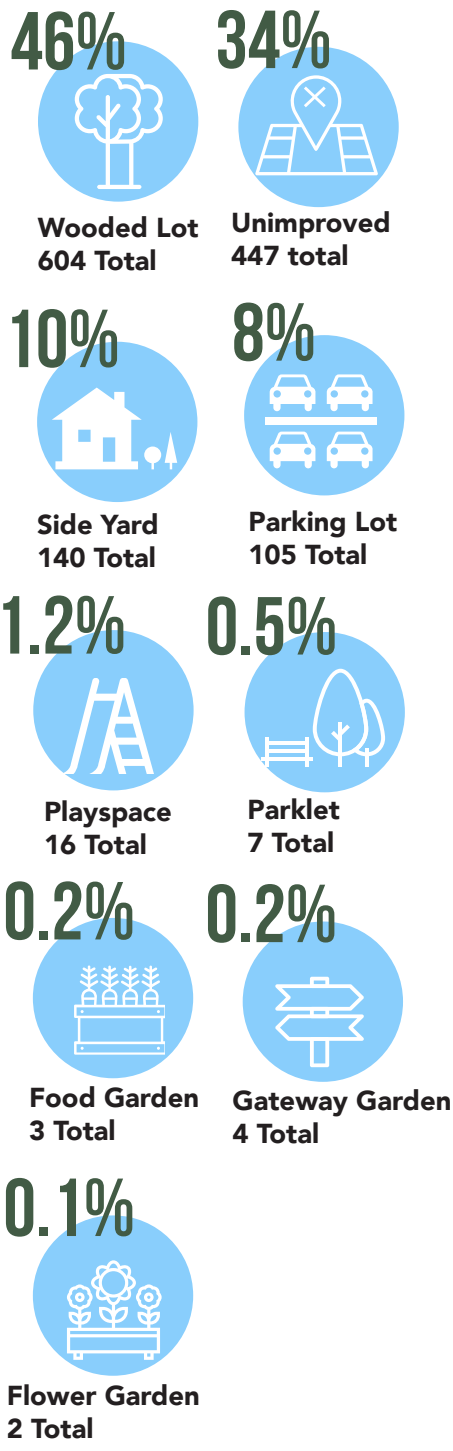
The City of Clairton hosts a disproportionate amount of vacant land when compared to the Allegheny County average. A significant portion of this vacant land is unimproved or serves no current practical function and represents a significant barrier to community progress. In 2016, GTECH was requested by the Jefferson Regional Foundation to conduct a comprehensive inventory and analysis of all vacant land in Clairton to give community stakeholders greater insight into the scale and composition of vacant land in the city. The result was a comprehensive data set on 1,326 vacant lots, key insights into 447 "unimproved" vacant lots, the identification of potential barriers to reclamation, and recommendations for the transformation of these spaces.

The health of a community improves when physical spaces of a community are imagined, created, and implemented through the direct participation of the residents living there. An understanding of the location and condition of vacant land generates opportunities to activate, incoporporate, and preserve more land for the benefit of residents, ultimately improving the management of those assets. In the case of unimproved lots, this knowledge provides us the opportunity to transition underutilizied land into vibrant community spaces.

This report provides a variety of recommendations, from small-scale, temporary projects to substantial investments, educational programming and more. With this report in hand, we can begin to reimagine, reclaim, and revitalize blighted vacant land into lasting community assets for the residents of Clairton.

PERCENT OF TOTAL VACANT LAND

for each vacant lot classification



INTRODUCTION

The Greater Mon Valley

City of Clairton

A Block in Clairton

Vacancy, blight and environmental injustice are pervasive, systemic problems in this region. As industry declined in Southwestern Pennsylvania, communities were left with fewer resources to address an increasing number of issues. These communities suffered from a significant population decline over the last half century, which has directly impacted their tax base and ability to provide services and amenities to their constituents. The impact of these factors has included a wave of disinvestment and abandonment, commonly referred to as blight. Blight itself contributed to further disinvestment, crime, the deterioration of community pride, and numerous other issues that reduce the well-being for residents[1].

When addressing the complex issue of vacancy, communities often lack continuous capacity, leadership, or knowledge of how to bring about meaningful change. Additionally, residents may not have knowledge of the available resources for immediately practical green strategies that could help them take ownership of the blight reclamation process.

With approximately 1,326 vacant lots (approximately 25% of 5,134 total properties) and many buildings slated for demolition, the City of Clairton is just one of many communities across Southwestern Pennsylvania hampered by an abundance of vacant land. It can be difficult to reclaim this land for many reasons. On the municipal level, limited funding, outdated policies, and a lack of accurate and real-time information on vacant lots hinder efforts to create and implement a comprehensive strategy to address vacant land issues. On the level of the individual resident, efforts to reclaim land in their neighborhood is limited by legal access to vacant lots, cost, insufficient knowledge of greenspace project implementation and a lack of awareness about available resources.

The first step in creating a strategy to address the problems associated with vacant land and formulate recommendations is to gather and interpret baseline information about the location and condition of vacant land in the community. With that background established, we are able to make out the nature and scale of the issue and identify the opportunities presented, as well as where those opportunities intersect with the needs and desires of the community. We are then

able to reimagine the liability of vacant land as a platform for action and create opportunities for residents to transition under-utilized spaces into vibrant community assets, thereby, enriching both the people and place of Clairton.

Ultimately, this research and investigation has provided us with a land use road map that will help to address priorities and concerns regarding quality of place and the availability and accessibility of public spaces. The information collected will provide specific insight into opportunities to improve the economic, social, and environmental health of the community through reclaiming vacant land.

Who We Are

GTECH (Growth Through Energy + Community Health) is a Pittsburgh based non-profit 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 by transforming land-use liabilities into community assets based on thoughtful investigation and research.

ReClaim Clairton

ReClaim Clairton is a Neighborhood Scale Initiative (NSI) that seeks to engage, equip, and empower 10-12 residents from Clairton (ReClaim Ambassadors) to participate in a place-based training program that provides them with the educational and financial tools needed to engage their own communities in greenspace projects using vacant land as their platform. These small-scale greening projects often take the form of food gardens, community gathering areas, recreational spaces, and green infrastructure installations. The GTECH team, composed of designers, policy specialists, social innovators, landscape architects, and community organizers, offers technical support to ambassadors as they work towards a sustainable reuse for each vacant lot. The overall goal of this initiative is to enable tangible, resident-driven transformation of vacant/blighted places.

THE AMBASSADOR MODEL

GTECH depends on the self-selection of residents to recruit our Ambassadors.

Ambassadors learn side by side, building a network of trust and immediate action.

Implement tangible projects across the community signaling care, unity, and momentum.

Celebration and support through programming.

METHODOLOGY

Our methodology is a core component of our programming. We facilitate a systems-based approach to **investigate** critical issues, take **action** where action is possible, **connect** people to resources and opportunities, and **sustain** progress through innovative and collaborative partnerships. Our four-pronged approach has been refined through our nearly 10 years of experience in program development, planning, community engagement, capacity building, and on-the-ground implementation. This section of the report will outline the steps taken in GTECH's investigation process in Clairton.

The investigative element in GTECH's methodology serves as a road map for all further action, including later components of ReClaim Clairton. The comprehensive data set that we generated in this phase is critical for creating vacant lot remediation strategies, operationalizing those strategies, and, as a living data set, is serviceable for future projects by us, our partners, or anyone doing community development work in Clairton.

Survey Design

The survey used for collecting information on the classification and condition of vacant land was developed in partnership with the Pittsburgh LocalData Collaborative and University of Pittsburgh's Center for Social and Urban Research. This team worked to standardize and adjust the questions and flow of the survey in order to best collect and organize important conditional and geospatial information. This design has been utilized by GTECH in previous assessments, and has had it's content and ordering adjusted based on our experience in those previous iterations.

Data was collected using an open-sourced, cloud-based platform called Site Control by Loveland Technologies, which allowed us to collect and present information about property in clear, actionable ways. This form of data collection entailed "ground-truthing" which requires direct observation of the location and state of vacant land throughout the community and an assessment of the social networks in close proximity that inform how existing community networks can be engaged in the stewardship and improvement of vacant land.

Community Engagement and Collection

GTECH adopted a participatory research style for this investigation. We began our investigation with the employment and training of two resident data collectors as well as one experienced non-resident data collector. These data collectors were trained in survey methods and in the tech tools used to collect and organize information. By using this research style, we invite community members to have an opportunity to influence our data-collection process and general strategies at an early stage.

The research is enriched by the resident researchers' perspective and experience of the neighborhoods surveyed. The resident researchers benefit from the opportunity to build skills and contribute to a knowledge-building process that will benefit their community.

We favored a ground-truthing approach to our survey that required researchers to survey the neighborhood on foot, block-by-block. This method is an alternative to using pre-existing inventories or remote survey methods. This approach allows us to create a more comprehensive data set for our work, and provides for a chance to engage by-standing neighbors in a dialogue on the problems and challenges associated with blight and vacancy.

It should be noted that data collected is based off of the best judgement of GTECH staff and resident data collectors. For the safety of our resident data collectors, we urged them to limit their ground-truthing efforts to what was observable from public right-of-ways. This data was checked against the Allegheny County's data on parcels with no building value in Clairton, and the discrepancies between the two were investigated remotely by GTECH staff using current satellite imagery.

In our data collection, we analyzed land use and land condition, and organized each lot into categories based on the nature of their current use. Each lot also had its conditions (plant growth, litter, tree cover, slope, etc.) measured on an ordinal scale, with the lowest ranking attributed to the least severe condition and the highest ranking applied to the most severe. In the following section we cover the various types of lot classifications and uses, then analyze the distribution of those classifications before taking a closer look at the category of 'unimproved lots.'

GROUND-TRUTHING STEP-BY-STEP

- Log into the Loveland Technologies application on the tablets provided.
- Determine location using the application and select a parcel to survey.
- Respond to conditional questions specific to the category of lot (i.e. unimproved, wooded, etc.).
- Take a photgraph using the application of the surveyed property.
- Submit completed survey.

All Lot Classifications

A vacant lot is any parcel of land without a permanent structure. Under this general category, there is a high degree of variation in quality, current usage, and strategies for stabilization. This means that some vacant lots are empty, neglected, and overgrown while other vacant lots are actively used greenspaces. They fall across the spectrum of liability to asset.

While it is of foremost importance to identify the blighted lots that represent the greatest opportunities for impact in green development, this assessment also identifies where community assets already exist and can be expanded. In order to make these distinctions more easily recognized, GTECH has developed the following classifications for vacant land parcels: unimproved lots, wooded lots, food gardens, flower gardens, gateway gardens, parklets, play spaces, parking lots, rain gardens and side yards. The rest of this section will provide examples and descriptions of each classification.

Unimproved Lot

- Lack of Intentional Plantings
- Unmaintained
- Over-growth
- Litter and Dumping

Wooded Lot

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

Flower Gardens

- Intentional Plantings
- Flower Beds
- No Signage

Food Gardens

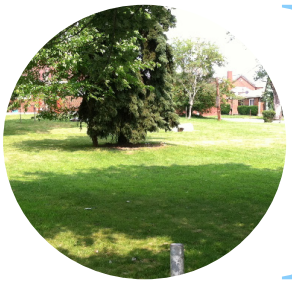
- Vegetables and Fruits
- Raised Beds
- Mounded Rows
- Personal/Community Use

Gateway Gardens

- Intentional Plantings
- Flower Beds
- Signage
- Prominent Location

Parking Lots

- Gravel/Paved Lots

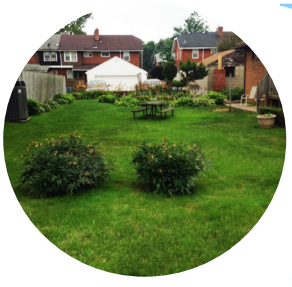


Parklets

- Seating
- Public Space
- Intentional Plantings

Playspaces

- Currently Used
- Children-focused Components



Sideyard

- Personal Use
- Intentional Plantings
- Evidence of Maintenance

ALLEGHENY COUNTY

9.2%
Vacant Land

47,835
Total Vacant Parcels

CITY OF CLAIRTON

38.1%
Vacant Land

1,326
Total Vacant Parcels

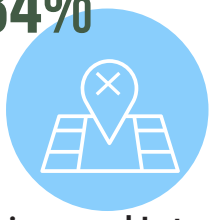
ANALYSIS

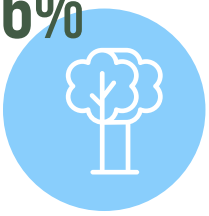
Distribution of Parcels by Classification

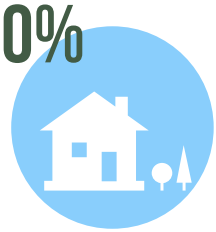
The collection process identified 1,326 vacant lots, making up over 600 acres of land that covers about 38.1% of the total land area in Clairton. The two most represented lot classifications in our final data set were Unimproved Lots and Wooded Lots, 34% and 46% of all parcels surveyed respectively. The exact number of vacant lots within each classification is provided below, with the percentage of the total vacant land parcels that it accounts for. The following section will highlight the three most prevalent classifications for further analysis paired with action-oriented recommendations for the transition of vacant lots into valuable resources.

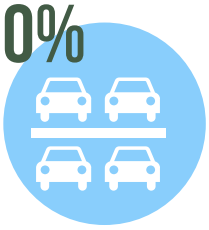
PERCENT OF TOTAL VACANT LAND

for each Vacant Lot Classification

34%

Unimproved Lots
447 total

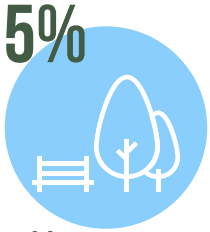
46%

Wooded Lots
604 Total

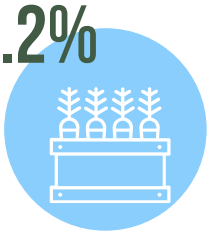
10%

Side Yards
140 Total

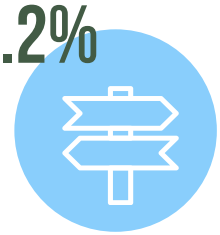
8.0%

Parking Lots
105 Total

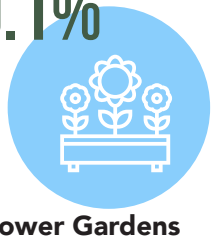
1.2%

Playspaces
16 Total

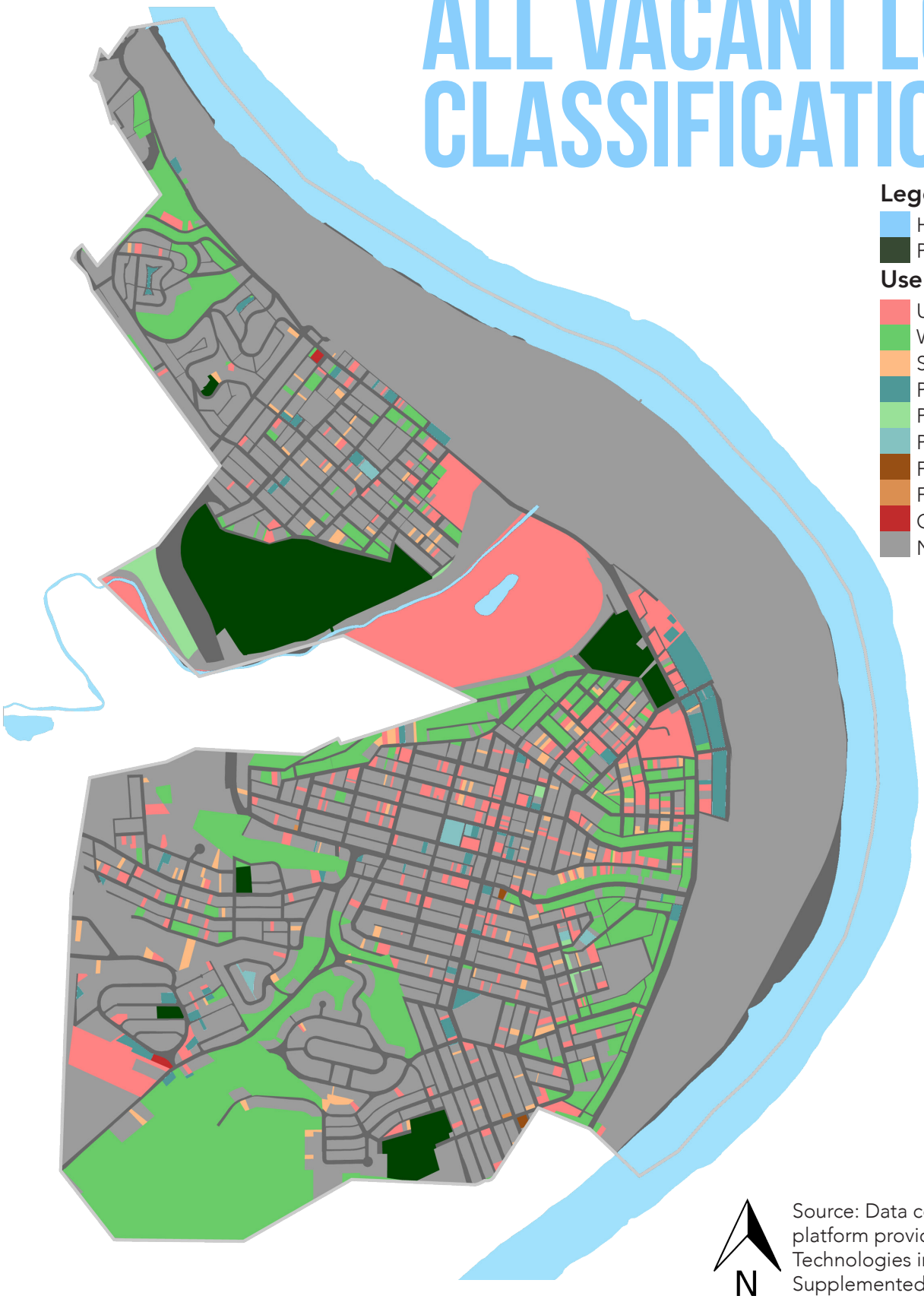
0.5%

Parklets
7 Total

0.2%

Food Gardens
3 Total

0.2%

Gateway Gardens
4 Total

0.1%

Flower Gardens
2 Total

ALL VACANT LOT CLASSIFICATIONS



Source: Data collected using platform provided by Loveland Technologies in June 2016. Supplemented with 2016 Allegheny County Real Estate Assessment Data.

Map 1: All Vacant Lot Classifications

WOODED LOTS

Map 2: Locations of Wooded Lots

Source: Data collected in using platform provided by Loveland Technologies in June 2016. Supplemented with 2016 Allegheny County Real Estate Assessment Data and 2017 Pennsylvania Spatial Data Access: Greenways.

Wooded Lots

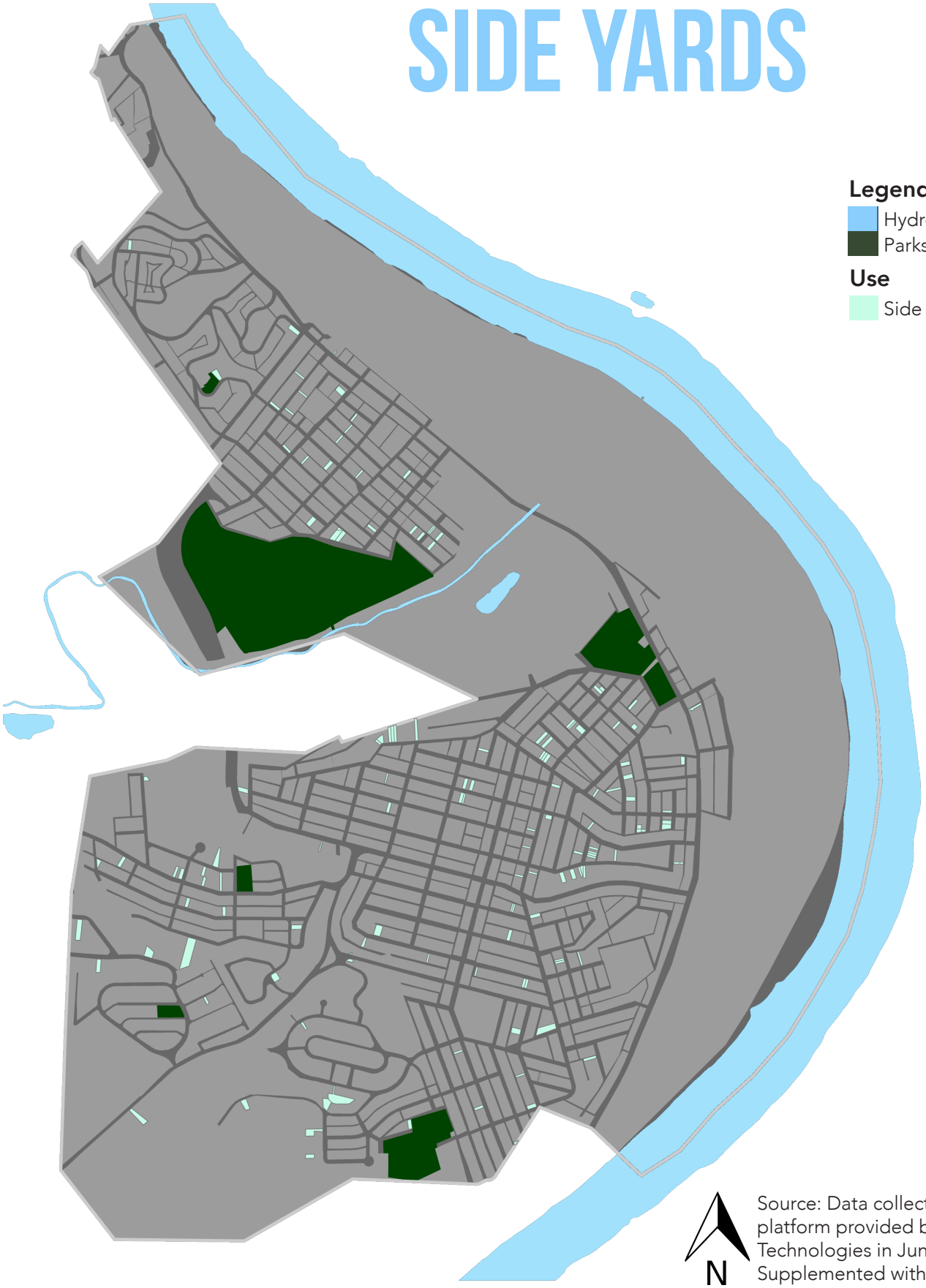
Wooded lots were the most represented classification of vacant lots in Clairton. Wooded lots were identified by their tree canopy, and proximity to larger forested areas and hillsides. These parcels do not include previously identified park or cemetery spaces. There are 604 wooded parcels in the Clairton. These represent 604 additional opportunities for the conservation of open space.

Wooded lots provide a number of environmental benefits. These lots serve as ecological habitats for a variety of wildlife and native species in urban settings. Uninterrupted lengths of wooded lots create corridors that improve the larger ecosystem by connecting distant and varied wildlife habitats to each other. These habitats are host to a wide variety of flora and fauna and encourage the growth of a diverse network of native species. Additionally, one of the most important roles that woodlands and other greenspaces serve is the reduction of stormwater runoff. Many of the woodlands surveyed were along steep, nearly unbuildable hillsides. The trees and undergrowth in these lots can prevent soil erosion, absorb rainwater, and improve overall drainage.

Wooded lots, especially those on steep hillsides, are best preserved as long-term undeveloped open space. They can be classified as wild woodland or integrated into existing greenways where possible. The incorporation of these additionally identified woodlands into existing and newly created conservation and greenway plans can greatly enhance a system that advances stewardship, equity and our economy[2].

To assist in the identification of lots that could be potentially incorporated into existing greenways, we have identified two types of uses in Map 2. Existing greenways have been identified from a state-wide database and are indicated by a darker green shade on the map, while newly identified wooded lots have been mapped and are indicated by a lighter green shade. Those lighter green parcels, or wooded lots, adjacent to or near existing greenways, should be the first candidates for inclusion into these spaces. This land will require limited on-going maintenance and can be used for hiking trails or bikeways.

SIDE YARDS



Source: Data collected using platform provided by Loveland Technologies in June 2016. Supplemented with 2016 Allegheny County Real Estate Assessment Data.

Map 3: Locations of Side Yards

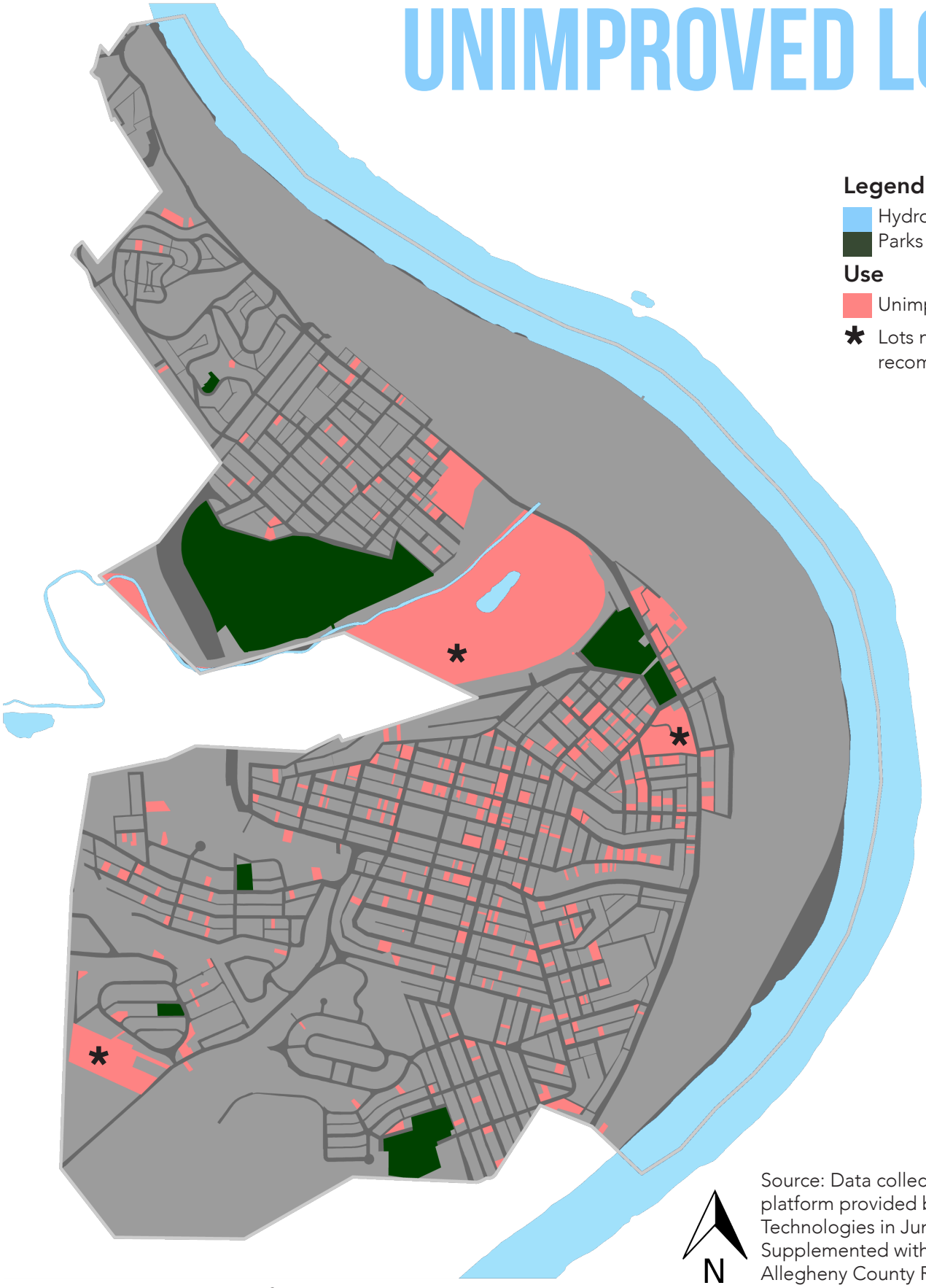
Side Yards

Side yards are one of the easiest solutions to unkept and unmaintained vacant land in Clairton neighborhoods. Encouraging responsible property owners to take ownership of vacant parcels adjacent to their own properties can lead to a lasting reduction in the amount of unmaintained lots. Through the data collection process we observed 140 existing side yards, representing approximately 10 % of all vacant parcels surveyed in Clairton. The side yards, as represented in this report, are not necessarily legal side yards, instead they are lots that our surveyors perceived as being maintained and used as extra yard space by adjacent home-owners or residents. In the effort to support the continued maintenance of these properties, we recommend that residents pursue legal ownership.

One way to increase ownership and maintenance of potential side yards is to take advantage of the Allegheny County Vacant Property Recovery Program (VPRP.) The purpose of the Allegheny County VPRP is to take blighted and/or tax delinquent properties and resell them to an applicant for their reuse, as determined by his or her application and as approved by the municipality. One specific goal of this program is to allow applicants the opportunity to acquire vacant residential lots adjacent to their primary residence to utilize as side yards. Clairton recently re-entered the program, so residents are eligible to apply.

By applying to this program, residents can acquire vacant side lot parcels in Clairton that are at least three years tax delinquent, adjacent to their property, and less than an acre in size. The cost of acquiring these lots is partly subsidized by the program, allowing residents to forego the typical $3,000 parcel fee and halving the cost for the appraised value of the lot. Educating residents of this program and any other means of acquiring and recycling vacant land will ultimately increase property values for homeowners as well as improve the overall appearance of a neighborhood.

UNIMPROVED LOTS



Source: Data collected using platform provided by Loveland Technologies in June 2016. Supplemented with 2016 Allegheny County Real Estate Assessment Data.

Map 4: Locations of Unimproved Lots

Unimproved Lots

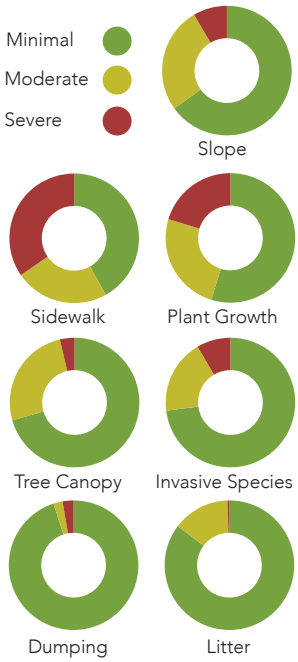
This is the category that is most commonly envisioned when one hears the term 'vacant lot.' These were lots with no current intentional use, no organized or regular maintenance beyond occasional mowing, and little human activity. Unimproved lots were the second most frequent classification for vacant lots in Clairton, with 447 unimproved lots in total.

These lots may be an indicator of blight in a community, and are the most serious vacant land liabilities in a community. Unimproved lots negatively affect the social, environmental, and economic spheres of community health by: diminishing neighborhood pride, contributing to increases in stress and crime, serving as a zone for invasive plant species and unwanted wildlife proliferation, decreasing property values, and drawing public financial resources for periodic damage-control. These lots should be the focus of any large scale blight remediation program in Clairton.

A major goal of this investigation was to identify lots that represent the greatest opportunity for future greening projects or conservation. In order to meet this goal, we focused on those parcels classified as 'unimproved lots' and assessed several conditions that speak to their overall state. Conditions, such as plant growth or maintenance, the presence of litter and dumping, the severity of the slope, and the sidewalk condition were all graded on a scale to determine the level of investment required for stabilization.

Finally, it should be noted that we have identified several spaces as unimproved lots that recommendations provided in the next section of this report should not be applied to. This is for several reasons, including size and scale of the site, accessibility and ownership barriers and current site use. Those vacant lots have been identified with an asterisk in Map 4.

SEVERITY OF CONDITIONS ON UNIMPROVED LOTS



DEEP DIVE

The 447 unimproved lots surveyed showed varying degrees of each condition that could complicate reclamation strategies.

Most lot conditions were graded based on a simple 1-3 scale, 1 representing the least severe display of a condition and 3 representing the most severe case. These conditions are communicated to data collectors in terms of required investment of labor and resources needed to improve the lot. For example, a vacant lot that is graded 1 for the condition of 'Litter', would have little or no evidence of litter and require little to no labor, while a vacant lot that is graded 3 for the condition of 'Litter" would have more trash than could be carried away in a single vehicle, requiring significant labor time and resources.

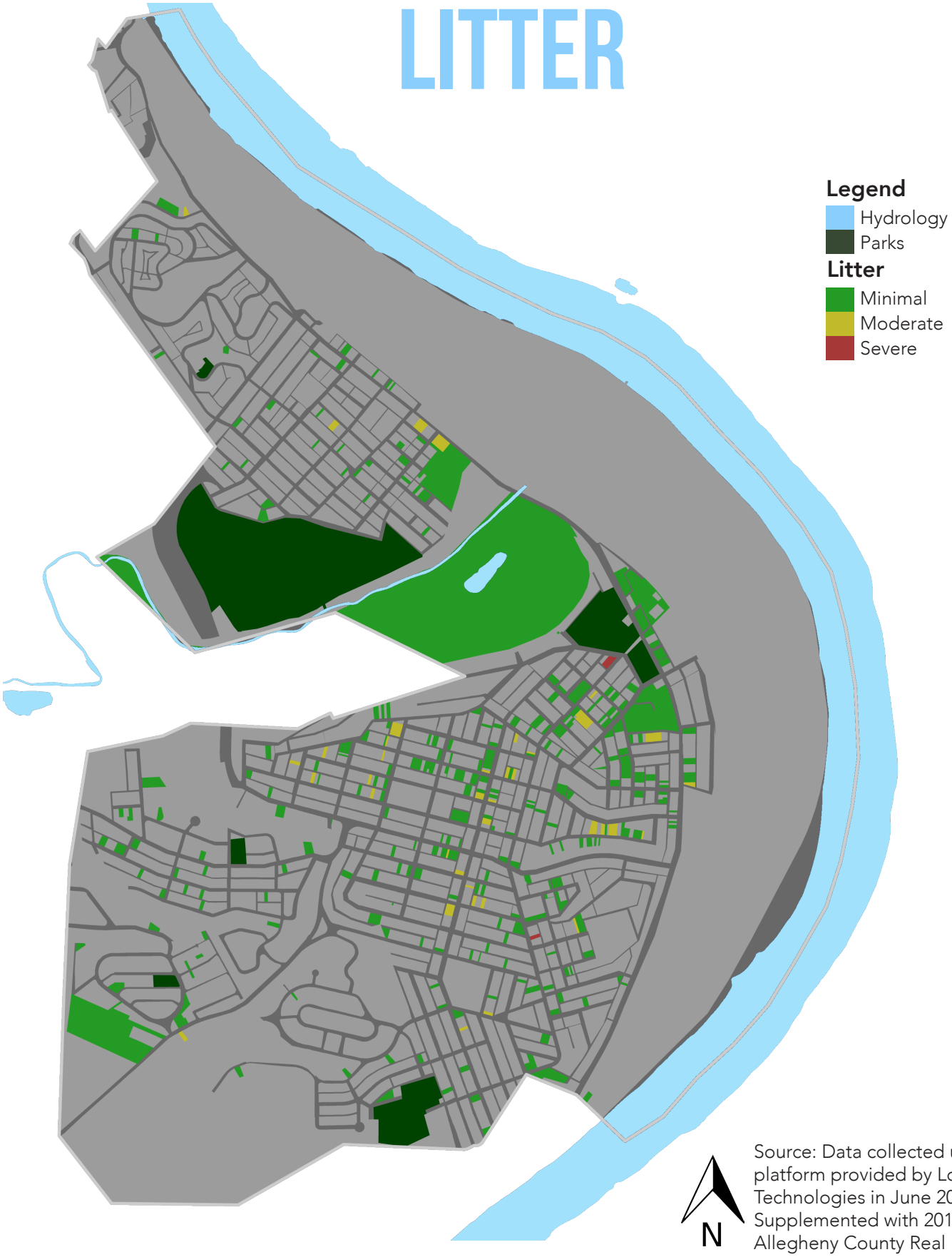
The most severe conditions measured across a majority of properties were plant growth, slope and adjoining side-walk disrepair. There was also a significant presence of litter and dumping.

Unimproved lot conditions ultimately determine the suitability of each lot for specific greening strategies, and what level of resource investment is necessary. This section identifies the conditions present on vacant lots in the community and offers recommendations to remediate or incorporate those conditions into a green strategy.

Condition	Scale		
	1	2	3
Slope	293	116	37
Dumping	424	10	12
Litter	380	63	2
Plant Growth and Maintenance	248	109	89
Invasive Species Cover	327	81	37
Tree Canopy	317	113	16
Sidewalk Condition*	158	84	124

Figure 1: The severity of each condition across the 447 unimproved lots surveyed.

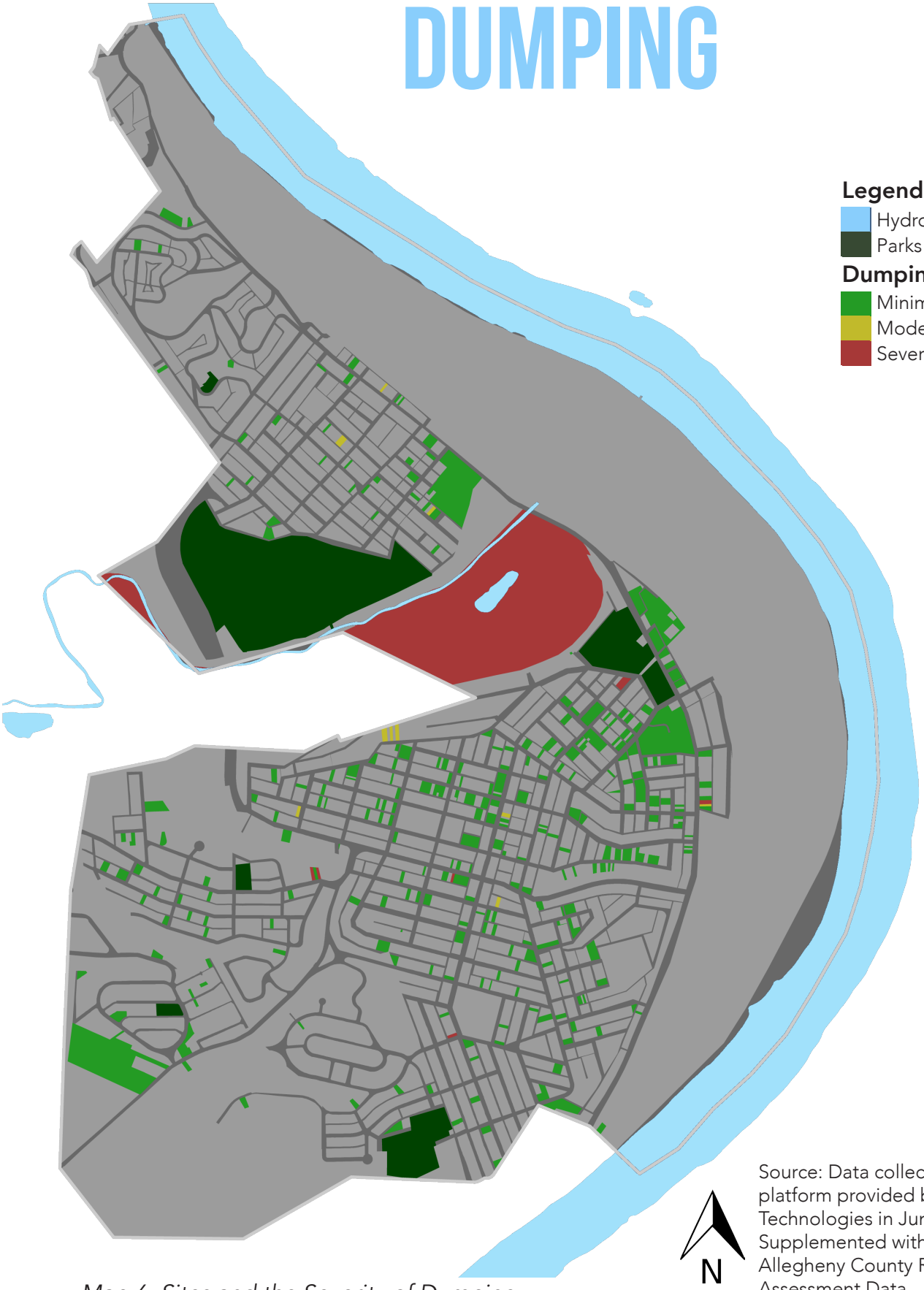
LITTER



Source: Data collected using platform provided by Loveland Technologies in June 2016. Supplemented with 2016 Allegheny County Real Estate Assessment Data.

Map 5: Sites and the Severity of Litter

DUMPING



Source: Data collected using platform provided by Loveland Technologies in June 2016. Supplemented with 2016 Allegheny County Real Estate Assessment Data.

Map 6: Sites and the Severity of Dumping

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.

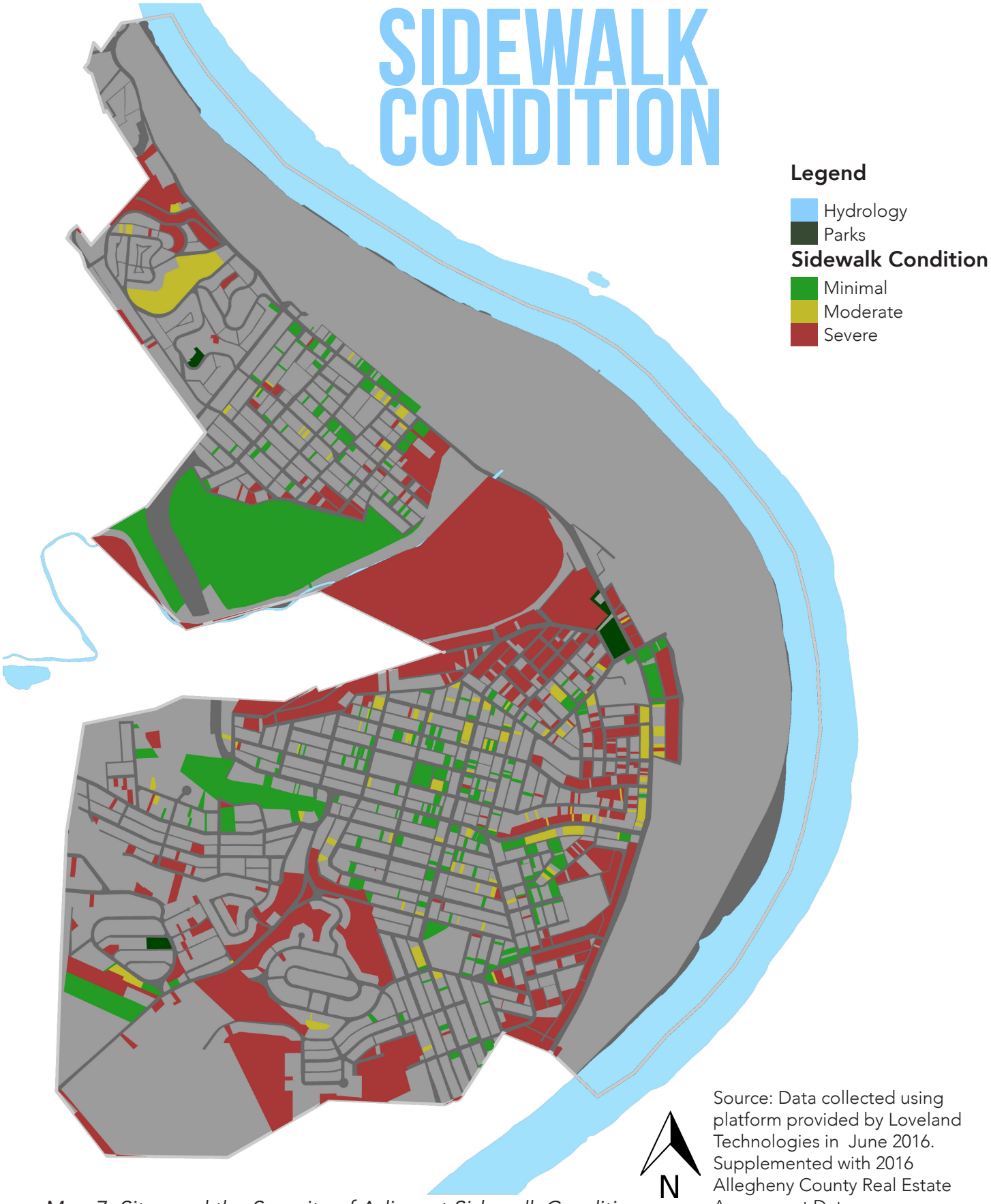
In total, 372 lots were found to have no significant amount of litter present. There were 62 lots that scored as a 2, or had a minor to moderate amount of litter, and 2 lots that scored a 3, or had a major amount of litter present. A majority of the lots with the highest amount of litter were clustered in a handful of areas.

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. To report the problem, you can call the Pennsylvania Resource Council's "Don't Trash My Turf" hotline at 412-431-4534. 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. Currently, community clean-up days are advertised by the City on a semi-annual basis. Residents can increase the amount of community clean-ups by scheduling regular work-days and forming dedicated groups committed to keeping their blocks clean or addressing litter throughout Clairton.

Dumping

Dumping was differentiated from litter by the size of trash and the items present. Out of the 437 unimproved lots, 224 had no significant amount of dumping present. There were, however, 10 lots that scored as a 2, or had a minor to moderate amount of dumping, and 12 lots that scored a 3, or had a major amount of dumping present.

To deter illegal dumping, Clairton officials should work with the Public Works Department to encourage residents to report illegal dumping sites and educate residents on current recycling initiatives. Dumping can also be remediated through community clean-ups led by Allegheny CleanWays, an organization that works with local residents, organizations, businesses, and governments to remove debris dumped within Allegheny County. Their Dumpbusters Program focuses specifically on illegal dumping sites.



Map 7: Sites and the Severity of Adjacent Sidewalk Condition

Source: Data collected using platform provided by Loveland Technologies in June 2016. Supplemented with 2016 Allegheny County Real Estate Assessment Data.

Sidewalks

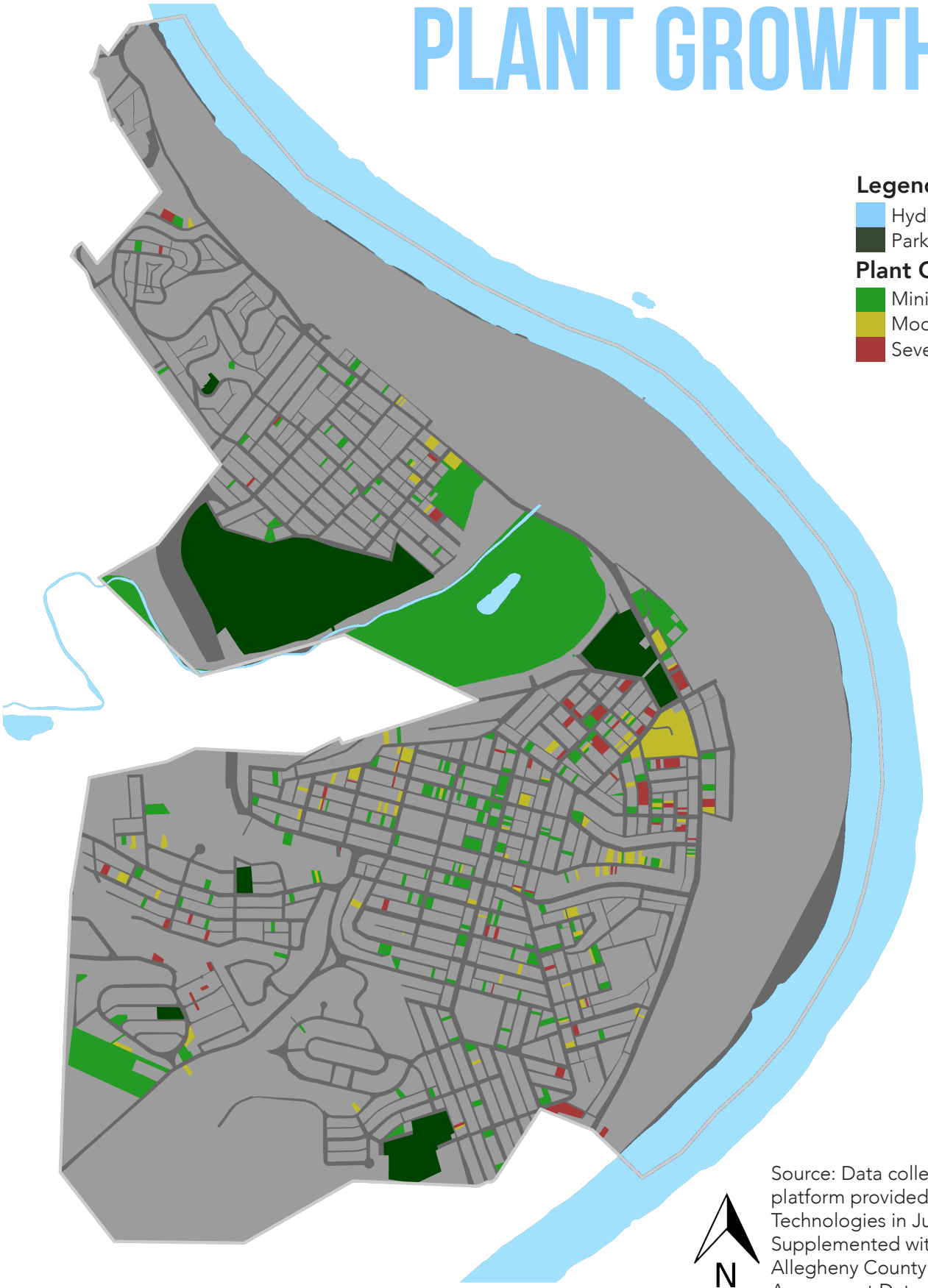
The Clairton Comprehensive Plan, completed in 2011, identifies sidewalks as a key component of the City's transportation infrastructure due to the amount of use by students and other residents[3]. The plan also recognizes the opportunity for improvement in regards to safety, connectivity, and accessibility. Clairton residents are ultimately responsible for sidewalk maintenance.

Our study shows that the issues of vacant land and sidewalk disrepair intersect on a large number of parcels. This is not surprising, given that residents are responsible for the majority of sidewalk maintenance, and that there are no concerned owners for these unimproved lots. Strategies that promote a greater sense of ownership of vacant land and their adjacent sidewalks may help to abate less critical instances of sidewalk disrepair. Parcels that were marked with severe parcel disrepair should be reviewed to ensure that they satisfy the Americans with Disabilities Act standards.

Residents should be educated about existing services such as the Allegheny Home Improvement Loan Program (AHILP,) a program that offers loans and grants to low to moderate income home-owners for sidewalk and general home improvements.

Other options to explore include the allocation of municipal funds for focused and proactive repairs and the establishment of a 'sidewalk task-force' in Clairton to identify specific opportunities to enrich the pedestrian infrastructure. Priority should be given to those properties that are identified as severe in our assessment and that fall in high traffic areas.

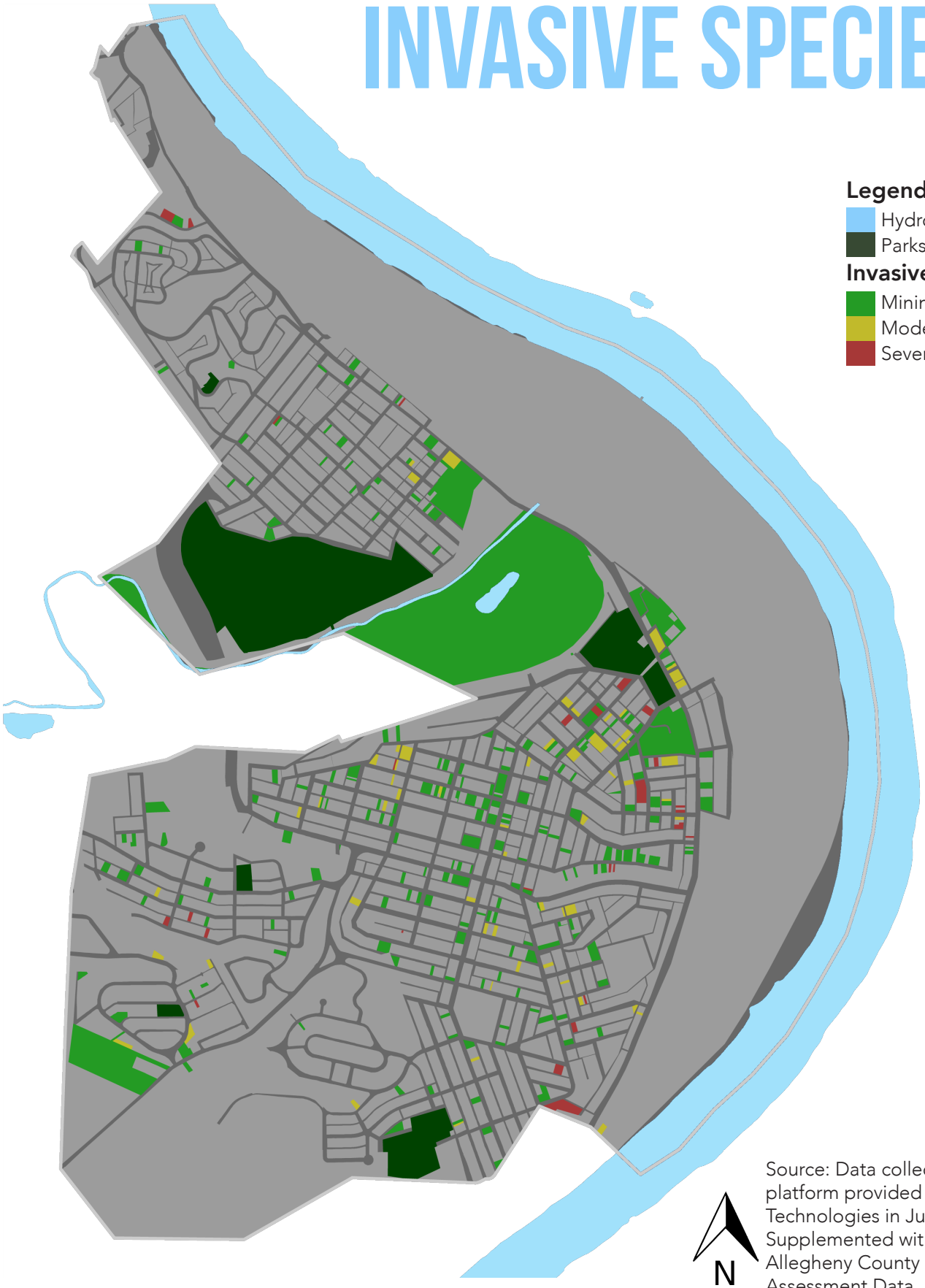
PLANT GROWTH



Source: Data collected using platform provided by Loveland Technologies in June 2016. Supplemented with 2016 Allegheny County Real Estate Assessment Data.

Map 8: Sites and the Severity of Plant Growth

INVASIVE SPECIES



Source: Data collected using platform provided by Loveland Technologies in June 2016. Supplemented with 2016 Allegheny County Real Estate Assessment Data.

Map 9: Sites and the Severity of Invasive Species Cover

COMMON INVASIVES

Garlic Mustard

Tree of Heaven

Japanese Knotweed

Plant Growth

Plant growth refers to the amount of plant life covering a vacant parcel. If unkept, it is a consistent concern when it comes to reclaiming vacant land because it represents a major hurdle in the initial clean-up cost. Although it can be a burden, plant growth may also indicate the health of the soil on site. Many of these lots with severe overgrowth can remain as passive green spaces.

On those lots that are identified as viable sites for greenspace projects, plant growth can be transformed from a liability into an opportunity by incorporating the labor involved into a workforce development program, such as Landforce, or a summer learn-and-earn program through one of Clairton's youth engagement programs. If there are not enough resources to care for a whole site, a foot or two around the edge of a site can be mowed, weed-whacked, or mulched to prevent plants from leaning over onto the sidewalk or street.

Invasive Species

Invasive plants thrive in habitats with low soil quality because they out-compete native plants. Most urban vacant lots tend to have poor soil quality resulting from demolitions or other long-term degradation. This creates a perfect habitat for invasive plants where they are not in direct competition with less hardy native species. Without regular maintenance, invasive plants will spread within and around the lot.

Awareness and education are crucial in preventing the spread of invasive species. Campaigns to inform the community on the problem of invasive species, as well as how best to identify and remove the plants, can be a great starting point for removing non-native plants. There are many potential programming partners in Allegheny County, such as the Garden Club of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania's Department of Conservation and Resources (DCNR), or Phipps Conservancy. For more information on common invasives, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy and Penn State Extension's Master Gardener Program offer extensive guides to invasives in the region.

A native planting site on a vacant parcel can provide many opportunities for people to learn about native versus non-native species, and plant identification. The site will take some effort to get established, but after the initial work it will require little maintenance. Planting native species can also help to remediate the damage done to the resiliency of your local ecosystem by invasive plants. By planting species native to Pennsylvania, you can create a natural habitat that attracts and provides food and shelter to our natural pollinators and other wildlife.

STABILIZATION

This section outlines the challenges in bringing the 447 unimproved vacant lots in the City of Clairton back to a stable condition. For the purpose of this report, lot stabilization is defined as the point at which a vacant lot has been brought to a condition where redevelopment is possible and there is no risk of further deterioration. Rehabilitating 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 (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. All of these conditions have a different effect on 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 sort lots in terms of the amount of work required on them, GTECH created a weighting system using best practices and previous studies[4]. 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 to get the site to a suitable state for future action, much more than would be required for a litter clean up. Each condition and the weight utilized is shown in Figure 2.

Out of the 447 unimproved lots that were surveyed, 142 lots needed no additional stabilization work, meaning that existing maintenance work performed on the lots was sufficient. There were 130 lots that required minor work and 175 lots that required major work. Lots that required major work were spread throughout Wards 2, 3, and 4, with the highest concentration in Ward 2.

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

CONDITIONS AND WEIGHTS

Plant Growth	0.10
Dumping	0.15
Litter	0.05
Tree Canopy	0.20
Slope	0.25
Invasive Species	0.20

Figure 2: Indicators associated with the stabilization of unimproved lots and weighting value used to score their condition.

per acre. This cost is applied to the first two categories on Map 9; 'Minimal' and 'Moderate.'

Lots that require significant work, or lots that scored from 1.5 to 2, are estimated to cost $14,045 per acre. The increase is largely due to the necessary initial clean up costs. Finally, lots that scored above a 2, or lots that need the most 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.

COST OF STABILIZING UNIMPROVED LOTS

Category	Total Lots	Acres	Total Cost
No Work or Minor Work Required (1.0 - 1.5)	272	44.33	$155,554
Major Work Required 1 (1.5-2.0)	149	80.10	$1,125,004
Major Work Required 2 (>2.0)	16	1.82	$38,311
Total	**447**	**126.25**	**$1,318,869**

Figure 3: The breakdown of unimproved lots and the amount of work needed for stabilization after the weighting system was applied.

STABILIZATION NEEDED ON UNIMPROVED LOTS

Source: Data collected using platform provided by Loveland Technologies in June 2016. Supplemented with 2016 Allegheny County Real Estate Assessment Data.

Map 9: Unimproved Lots and Amount of Work Required to Stabilize

RECOMMENDATIONS

Greening strategies are methods of land enrichment that improve quality of life, enhance neighborhood interactions, increase recreational opportunities, and stimulate economic revitalization through smart growth plans that emphasize environmentally friendly land management. Greening strategies to address vacant properties can take a number of forms, depending on the location, condition and classification of each lot, as well as the amount of resources available for remediation. With the information from this study in hand, it is possible to take steps towards reclaiming unimproved land, activating those spaces to address deficiencies in each neighborhood, and to support existing assets. Strategies for action, as well as potential challenges, can be divided in terms of their scope and position on a larger time-line.

The amount of time necessary to implement a greening strategy on a vacant lot or across several vacant lots is dependant on the current objectives, resources, and skills available, and also the condition of the vacant land stock. Short-term projects can demand several hours for initial work (clearing site, disposing of waste, etc.) and a minimal amount of time to maintain and clean the parcel over time depending on the site. Short and mid-term strategies are viable projects for residents and community group management (where land access is permitted,) and should also be considered by the municipality and other larger community organizations. Long-term projects ultimately require at least the same amount of time for the physical preparation work, but will likely demand more in research, planning, implementation, maintenance and care. Therefore, long-term projects and strategies should be considered as a substantial investment of resources and generally not pertinent strategies for individuals or small groups to pursue without support from larger organizations.

In this section, we will discuss challenges to gaining site access to vacant lots, vacant land work currently being planned by the ReClaim Clairton Ambassador program, and present a range of short, mid and long-term strategies for the variety of individuals and institutions who are eager to fight blight in their neighborhoods.

Lot Activation: Barriers and Opportunities

Anyone implementing a greenspace project on vacant land will have to settle the issues of site access, ownership and assessment before any implementation can begin. The first step in this process is to identify the current owner of the property. If the property is owned by the City of Clairton or the Redevelopment Authority of Clairton, residents should contact the City Manager's office at (412) 233-8123. If the property is owned by a private individual, one may attempt to contact that individual. Ownership and contact information can be found on-line through the Allegheny County Real Estate Portal at www2.county.allegheny.pa.us. Once a parcel has been identified, the resident will need to assess the site to see if a particular project is appropriate. This would include looking at the plant growth, slope, sidewalks and potential safety hazards. Additional resources on this process can be found at www.lotstolove.org.

Often, neglected vacant land is tax delinquent and the property owners are not easily found. In that situation, there are a number of programs and policies that exist to simplify the process or reduce the cost associated with gaining ownership or access to those parcels.

Vacant Property Recovery Program (VPRP)

The Allegheny County Vacant Property Recovery Program (VPRP) allows individuals and community groups to apply for the purchase of vacant properties that have been tax delinquent for a minimum of three years. The applicant is still responsible for purchasing the land at its appraised value (half of the appraised value for side-yards) and will be responsible for closing costs (typically around $500). All applicants also provide a reuse plan for the property, which can include a conversion to side-yard, community garden, recreational space or small park. The benefit of using this program is that the associated legal services, appraisal of properties, and title searches are done at no cost, and the parcel fee of $3,000 is waived by the County Department of Court Records. More information on the VPRP can be found at http://www.alleghenycounty.us/economic-development/residents/vprp/index.aspx.

Conservatorship

Individuals seeking access, but not ownership, to particularly

blighted and dangerous properties should be aware of Pennsylvania's conservatorship laws (Pennsylvania Act 135). In response to a request from a petitioner, a judge may designate a conservator, a responsible private or nonprofit entity, to bring a blighted property into compliance with property maintenance and building codes. The conservatorship process provides a legal, court-supervised way to enter onto someone else's property and complete the improvements needed to make it safe. The process involves a long-term investment from individuals, as well as an investment in legal expertise to prepare a strong presentation for a judge. Because of the steep investment, most people should consider conservatorship to be a specialized action for acquiring only the most problematic vacant land when no other options for gaining access exist[5]. To learn more about conservatorship, guides to the law have been published by the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania and the Regional Housing Legal Services. The "PA Blight Library", which has extensive detail on the law, can be found at http://www.pablightlibrary.com/new-page/.

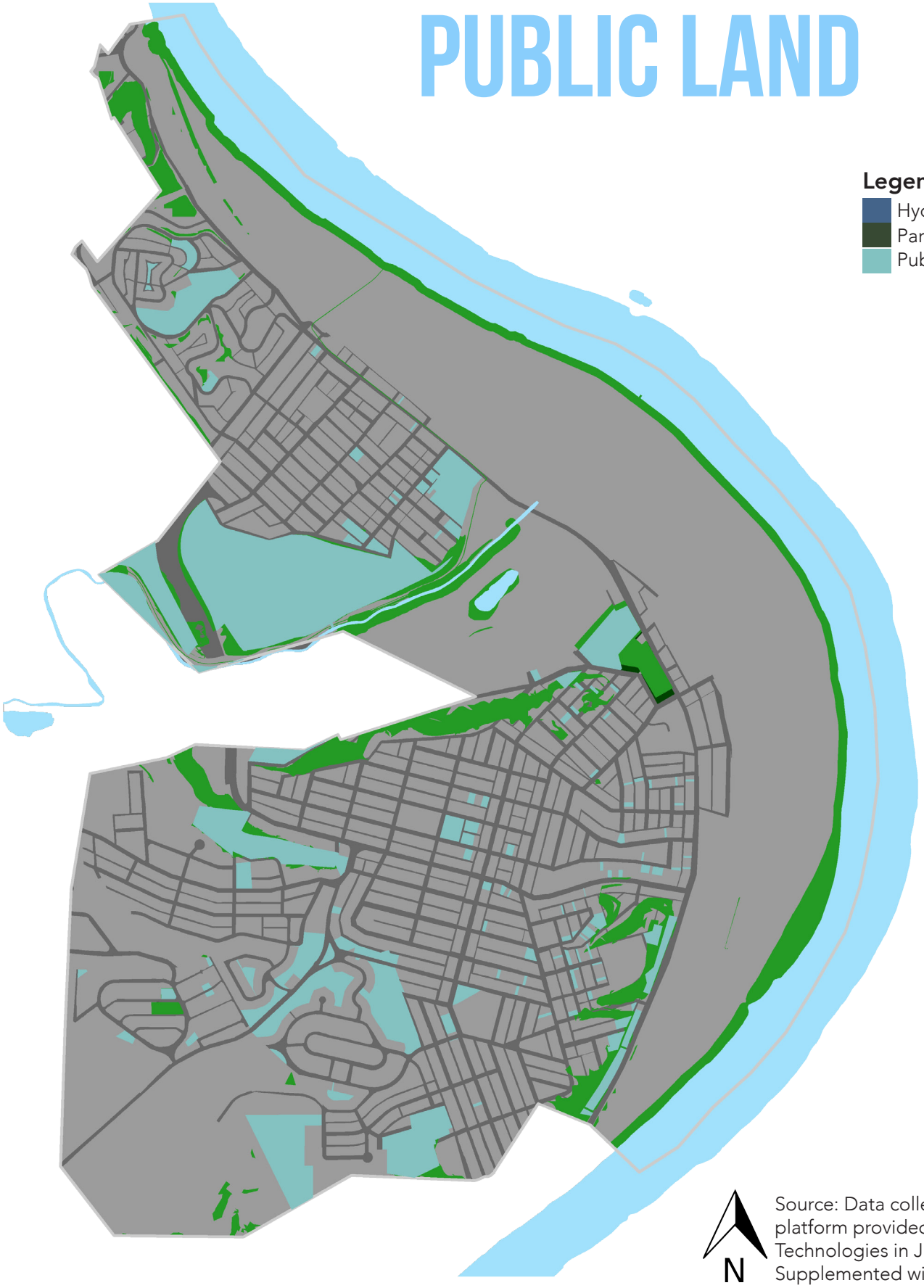
Allegheny County Land Bank

In November 2012, Pennsylvania's State Legislature passed Land Bank Act 153, and in doing so, made land banking in Pennsylvania a reality. This year, Allegheny County will see the development of its own land bank (the Tri-COG Land Bank) to act as a new resource available to aid municipalities and organizations in their effort to mitigate and combat blight within their communities. A land bank does this by acquiring blighted and abandoned properties through various means, including donation and the county's sheriff sale, and "banking" them for future development. Currently, the land bank does not exist as a resource to Allegheny County residents, however in the near future it will be another useful tool in simplifying the process for gaining ownership of vacant property.

Accessing Public Land In Clairton

Having a close municipal ally is key in providing residents and organizations the ability to activate vacant spaces. Through resident-based programs like ReClaim Clairton and Green Playces: Clairton, Clairton city officials have shown a enthusiastic willingness to work with residents to create the types of greenspaces the community needs. With dozens of publicly-owned vacant lots already in the city's portfolio, there is a prime opportunity to allow residents to begin this work immediately. These publicly-owned properties have been identified in Map 10 as a starting point for continued conversations. Residents interested in doing their own projects on public property should contact Howard Bednar, City Manager, at (412) 233-8123.

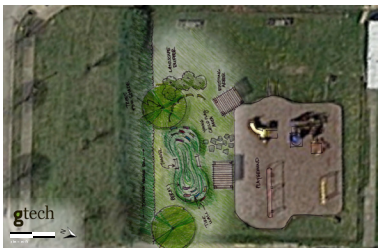
PUBLIC LAND



Map 10: Vacant land owned by public entities

Source: Data collected using platform provided by Loveland Technologies in June 2016. Supplemented with 2016 Allegheny County Real Estate Assessment Data.

AMBASSADOR SITE DESIGNS



ReClaim Clairton

Following our investigative phase, 10-12 Ambassadors, made up of active community citizens, were selected for their dedication to positive change in their community. The ReClaim Ambassador projects are examples of the most immediate, near-term, actions developed from the research presented. The impacts will be broad and long-lasting, but the implementation phase itself should be finished within a year. Participants are currently in the educational phase of the program which consists of 10 sessions focused on issues ranging from site assessment, community organizing, project design, volunteer recruitment and management, budgeting, fund-raising, roles of government and community entities, and additional environmental health issues. Classes run from October 2016 until April of 2017 and are facilitated by GTECH with the assistance and input of various local partners and regional environmental service providers.

This model of education and engagement adds a layer of personal connection and ownership to the process, and equips Ambassadors with the technical skills and process-knowledge needed to make positive action happen in their community. Ambassadors also gain exposure to a broader array of "comprehensive community development" resources such as land use plans, landscaping designs, financial planning, and public policy processes.

Following the conclusion of the education sessions, GTECH will coordinate targeted actions with Ambassadors and community partners through micro-grants to turn their ideas into reality. These micro-funds ($3,000 per Ambassador) will allow us to connect the resources necessary for project implementation. The array of projects being planned by ReClaim Clairton Ambassadors include; a community food garden, children's play-spaces, passive beautification and seating, community gathering spaces, and public art installations.

These projects, managed and implemented by the Ambassadors, are the perfect opportunity to engage neighbors and provide the community with hands-on volunteering activities that have a visibly positive result. ReClaim Clairton Ambassadors will be part of a larger network of Ambassadors across Allegheny County who can share lessons learned and provide valuable insight for how to implement their projects. All projects will be completed by October of 2017.

Additional Next Steps

Aspects of ReClaim Clairton can be built upon and replicated following the implementation of Ambassador projects in the Fall of 2017. Youth engagement programs, new Ambassador cohorts, or ongoing small-scale demonstration projects are just a few ways in which Clairton can continue building momentum in community-led blight elimination efforts.

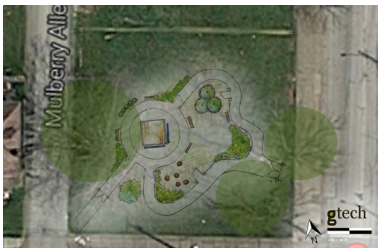
There is a broad range of possible greenspace projects that can be utilized for vacant land remediation in Clairton in the next two to five years. These projects can be implemented through a continuation of the ReClaim Clairton program, through new partnerships with environmental service providers outside of Clairton, or through capacity building with current service providers working in Clairton to incorporate environmental education and greenspace stewardship into existing programming.

An immediate potential is to build off of the youth inclusion and engagement components of ReClaim Clairton and the existing youth-focused programs in the City. Partners like Youth Places and Youth Opportunity Development could incorporate vacant lot clean-up, maintenance, and greenspace project implementation the "Learn and Earn" youth employment initiative. These types of stewardship activities would reduce the overall amount of blight, strengthen youth involvement in community activities, and enrich participants by equipping them with employable skills.

Local partnerships with youth agencies and programs ensure both multi-generational involvement as well as a seasonal labor force to assist with project implementation and green space maintenance in a coordinated and strategic manner through the summer of 2018. These ongoing activities and catalytic place based projects will also enable additional events and programming to be developed for sustained momentum.

Finally, Green Playces, an environmental education and vacant land reclamation program of GTECH, will convene community conversations to identify and create green places that can serve as a way to connect youth with experiential learning activities with an environmental focus. Green Playces and ReClaim Clairton projects are 9 new community greenspaces that represent low-budget, but

AMBASSADOR SITE DESIGNS

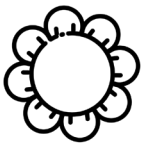


high impact projects that should be used to catalyzed continued stewardship and development of similar types of spaces throughout Clairton. To get started, we have provided examples of what similar types of projects could be below. Individuals who are interested in undertaking their own greenspace project can visit lotstolove.org to find inspiration and a thorough guide to the process of fund-raising, gathering community inputs, assessing, accessing, and transforming a vacant lot.

EXAMPLES OF SHORT-TERM PROJECTS

CLEAN & GREEN

This is a general clean up of a selected lot that may have been overgrown with weeds and debris. This is a great tool to transition the lot and demonstrate to a community what an asset vacant land can be.

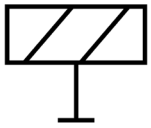


SUNFLOWERS

This transitional strategy allows the community to actively participate in the early stages of converting once-blighted spaces into clean, safe areas while giving the community time to develop and implement plans for a more productive long-term site strategy.

DOG PARK

Any large open parcel or grouping of smaller parcels can be assembled for use as a dog park, which makes a great community space. Fencing materials and minimal maintenance are needed to establish these areas though additional amenities such as benches, trees or other shade structures, and trash cans are beneficial.



GATEWAY

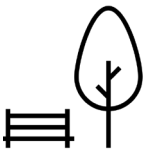
Corners and other prominent parcels can be designed with plantings and signage to create gateways announcing the different neighborhood areas to visitors while also creating opportunities for wayfinding.

RAIN GARDEN

These gardens help to limit the amount of water flowing into our combined sewer systems. They require knowledge of general construction techniques as well as the selection of appropriate plant species. Rain gardens are green infrastructure, being aesthetically pleasing and helping to manage stormwater runoff at the same time.

ART PROJECTS

These projects can be used to display local artists' work, helping to activate vacant spaces. Past projects of this variety have included murals or sculptures. They would be designed to allow pieces to be moved to a new home if it becomes necessary to do so.



PARKLET

Smaller parcels within denser housing areas can be great locations for parklets. By adding simple amenities, such as benches and seating, shade, pathways and plantings, you can create great informal community meeting spaces that can also be a resource for residents without yards. Investment in formalizing these spaces can vary depending upon the amount of time and volunteer commitment available to the project.

Looking Ahead and Big Ideas

Looking further ahead, we can strategize efforts to support larger scale planning projects and missions around specific themes and issues as identified by community members. Such themes might include urban agriculture, stormwater infrastructure or urban greenways and trail development. We can also begin to focus on ways to incorporate vacant lots that, due to their particular conditions, require a more significant investment to achieve stabilization.

The Clairton Comprehensive Community Plan outlines a number of goals and objectives shared by municipalities in Allegheny County that can be addressed by strategies that involve the use of vacant land. The objectives include: providing equitable access to opportunities, transforming brownfields into attractive destinations, and connecting communities and amenities via greenways. Projects that act on these objectives can also serve principles specific to Clairton's vision such as mixed land uses, walkable neighborhoods, strong sense of place, and open space preservation.

The rest of this section details some possible long-term themes and strategies for vacant land remediation in Clairton. This report recommends that anyone working to reclaim vacant land should make the community process a central part of their planning by allowing residents to identify issues and concerns as well as inform the strategy to pursue community goals. One way to accomplish this is to administer a comprehensive survey to measure residents priorities and to hold planning sessions that are advertised and open to community members. The strategies in this section represent some specific possibilities, but ultimately the community should decide what initiatives they want to see grow.

Urban Agriculture

Given the amount of vacant land in Clairton, one of these larger visions might involve an intentional proliferation of urban agriculture. Urban agriculture can have financial, health, and environmental benefits for a community. Community gardens provide a way for residents to stay active, while providing them with natural foods, and reducing the environmental impact of long distance food transportation[6].

The Department of Agriculture's *Urban Agriculture Toolkit*, provides a reference for individuals who want to pursue urban agricultural projects, as well as ways to promote urban agriculture on a larger scale with market and infrastructure development and federal funding opportunities[7].

Municipalities can support urban agriculture by changing ordinances or reviewing policies that act as barriers to urban farming, supporting access to public land, implementing land disposition policies that permit surplus properties to be acquired for urban agriculture, and using non-zoning regulations that affect private land-use (e.g., animal control and residential composting ordinances) to ease participation in urban farming among residents, among many other strategies.

Green Infrastructure

Green infrastructure systems mimic natural systems in order to collect, absorb, evaporate or reuse water at the site where it is generated. This style of development differs from traditional infrastructure practices that seek to rapidly remove urban stormwater through 'grey' infrastructure such as pipes, gutters,ditches, and storm sewers. These traditional high-impact practices create run-off volumes that are much greater than those that would occur naturally, resulting in the erosion of stream banks and disrupted pollutants and sediments entering the streams. By investing in green infrastructure or a mix of grey and green infrastructure, a city can lower overall maintenance costs, preserve open green spaces, and support the health of the environment. By making low impact drainage improvements to vacant sites, a city can turn vacant lots into assets that actively support an areas environmental health[8].

The use of vacant land for stormwater management can occur at various intensities. In some cases, entities may focus on the removal of impervious surfaces through demolition and basic greening to promote stormwater infiltration. Other organizations implement more intensive green infrastructure treatments such as rain gardens or bioswales designed specifically for a site's topography[9].

A good way to begin formulating a plan for green stormwater infrastructure is by referencing the EPA's Water Quality Scorecard. Early steps towards improving stormwater infrastructure may include: the implementation of projects on public land as proof of concept,

outreach and education campaigns around water systems, and offering incentives to private land-owners to make drainage improvements on their own properties.

Greenway and Trail Planning

Greenways are networks of land that are planned, designed, and managed for multiple purposes including ecological, recreational, cultural, aesthetic, or other purposes compatible with the concept of sustainable land use. Greenways improve connectivity between rural and urban neighborhood assets, improve access to open spaces and can serve as valuable biodiversity preservation tools. Greenways also have the added psychological benefit of linking people with nature, fostering a sense of place that is informed by the natural environment. It would be beneficial to consider incorporating additional land, such as Clairton's many wooded hillsides, into larger greenways during any future re-zoning initiatives in Clairton.

Clairton is already synced to the Great Allegheny Passage trail system through the Montour Trail trailhead located in the City, connecting to both the Montour and the Steel Valley Trail. Identifying opportunities to build upon this asset, in the form of smaller trails or larger additional greenway segments, improved signage, and promoting the use of the system among residents can assist in a larger strategy to preserve natural assets and sensitive environmental features. The national nonprofit, American Trails, serves as an excellent resource and starting point for greenway segment planning.

CONCLUSION

This report reviews the findings of a vacant land assessment in Clairton. 1,326 vacant parcels were surveyed, representing 38% of all land area in the City of Clairton. The report provides a full inventory of this vacant land broken down by classification and condition. We identify immediate actions as well as long-term strategies for converting vacant land into productive uses, all while reducing the overall inventory of blighted properties.

By providing detailed data on the condition of these lots in an open-source platform, we can begin to include all key participants such as, municipal departments, agencies, community development corporations, and community residents in the creation of resident-driven solutions. Resident involvement in the future planning of communities is key in transitioning these under-utilized spaces into thriving places that improve the overall community health of Clairton.

We hope that this assessment can serve as a catalyst for continued change, a guide for strategic planning, and a source of motivation for building momentum and community consensus around the potential of vacant land reclamation. We hope to build off of the success of the ReClaim Clairton Ambassador program and to use this report as a road map for GTECH's continued engagement with the Clairton community. By incorporating various stakeholders like those convened by the Neighborhood Partnership Program (NPP) in Clairton, it is our goal to assist in the implementation of a vision of the community created by it's greatest champions, its' residents.

This report and the associated data can be found online at:
www.gtechstrategies.org/resources.

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