

Memorandum

To:	PublicSource
From:	Grounded Strategies
Date:	April 25, 2022
RE:	"Blight"

On March 15, 2022, Public Source released a Public-Service Guide entitled "[Eyesores, nuisances and hazards. What can residents do about blight?](#)" This guide provides ample resources and opportunities for residents to navigate the ins and outs of engaging with vacant land in their communities. Information such as this is paramount to helping remove barriers to entry, however, **we ask that Public Source remove the term "blight" or "blighted" from their terminology.**

Grounded Strategies does not support the utilization of the term "blight" or "blighted." "Blight" has been the default word for describing disinvestment and distressed land but when talking about vacant land, the racist roots and history of the term must be reckoned with. At Grounded, we are encouraging a shift in language that recognizes the distinct place-based history and systems of oppression that cause vacancy.

The term "blight" was originally used to discuss a disease that affected plants, since then it has had varying uses within urban planning to describe vacant land and neighborhoods. The term was most notably used by urban renewal advocates in the 1950s as they weaponized it for revitalization, real estate development, and property acquisition.

"Blight" was to be thought of as a "disease that threatened to turn healthy areas into slums" and "was often used to describe the negative impact of certain residents [Black people and

people of color] on city neighborhoods”.¹ This is not the only definition of “blight” but it is the connotations of disease, crime, and racism that make this term problematic.

An example here in the City of Pittsburgh was the forced displacement of 8,000 families from the Lower Hill District after it was given a “blighted” designation by the redevelopment authorities. At the time, the Lower Hill District was one of the last racially integrated neighborhoods in the City of Pittsburgh. This mass displacement led to the continued segregation within the city to the present day.²

“Blight” has been a tool used within gentrification and urban renewal to harm Black and brown communities through the loss of land, wealth, and wellbeing. The usage of the term “blight” erases the causes of disinvestment and the current work being done within communities to support change and development. It treats communities, neighborhoods, and people as a disease that needs to be gotten rid of rather than finding solutions to help.

It is not the fault of the communities for the failed actions of their government leaders and inequitable economic practices that result in this continued vacancy cycle. By looking at the problem through the lens of “blight,” limits policy and knowledge around vacant land to be very narrowly focused and can prevent individualized changes needed on a parcel, neighborhood, or district-wide scale.³ We must take a place-based approach to understanding why a parcel is vacant and not attribute it to an overarching and encompassing term such as blight. Each parcel has a long history of memories, family, community, development and so much more. The reason for the loss of land can be caused by so many systemic issues and we should work to understand the causes of vacancy in order to end the cycle.

While changing the language from “blight” to language that takes a deeper look at the root cause of vacancy, we cannot undo years of racist and harmful policies, however, it can help us

¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-02-16/why-we-talk-about-urban-blight>

² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-01-13/the-hidden-fences-of-pittsburgh>

³ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/07/13/recognizing-that-words-have-the-power-to-harm-we-commit-to-using-more-just-language-to-describe-places/>

understand how we can make a system that works to repair and reinvest in communities who were most harmed by damage caused by vacancy.

We must work to address these lots in the ways that they became vacant in order to work towards sustainable and justice-led solutions. Following years of redlining, divestment, gentrification, and oppressive policies we know people did not just abandon this land without cause. We must recognize these parcel timelines and see the progression of parcels not as “blighted” but as **properties that have been divested**. When property becomes vacant, do we stop and ask why?

Are these parcels **vacant properties resulting from families experiencing land loss** due to unfair loaning practices or over-assessed land values resulting in unreasonably high property taxes?

When a property is transferred to the City of Pittsburgh’s possession and they are not investing in these lots, we should recognize it as **unmaintained and neglected city-owned land**. Why is the city not investing more money into local workforces and landscaping groups to create jobs and maintain these lots?

On the flip side, when we see a city-owned vacant property that is being actively maintained by a resident, steward, or community group, we should recognize the work, time, and resources these individuals have invested in these **resident or community-activated green spaces**. Are there pathways to ownership for these residents? If there are not, what can we do to remove these barriers and recognize their work?

We must always ask why so we can tell the full story of each parcel. Why was the land lost? Why is the City of Pittsburgh not doing more to repair the damage that led to hypervacancy and reinvest in the communities most harmed by these practices? The City of Pittsburgh has 30,000 vacant lots with nearly one-third of those lots being owned by the city, this inventory continues to grow and directly impacts communities. Let us, as the City of Pittsburgh, put

these questions into action and work with residents and communities to support positive changes to vacant land.