



By Alex Wigglesworth

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City Council proposals would revolutionize vacant land use in Philly



Rikard Larma/Metro. Properties like this vacant Point Breeze lot may soon be developed more quickly.

As the annual budget battle quickly approaches, City Council is searching between the proverbial cushions to find creative revenue sources without hiking taxes – yet again.

Two packages of legislation introduced on Thursday would revolutionize the way the city deals with vacant properties, possibly netting millions from land parcels that now sit empty and generate no taxes at all.

“We as a Council have to continue to look at ways the administration could streamline our processes so we can create new revenue and further expand our tax base,” said Councilwoman Maria Quinones Sanchez.

Sanchez and Councilman Bill Green reintroduced legislation to create a Philadelphia Land Bank, as well as a Vacant Property Review Committee to speed up the sale of vacant and tax delinquent parcels.

"I have long fought to streamline redevelopment in collaboration with nonprofit and private developers," Sanchez said.

"These bills will create one governmental authority to take control. The Land Bank will help eliminate blight, stabilize our neighborhoods and put vacant property back on the tax roll."

Council President Darrell Clarke proposed "Rebuilding Philadelphia," a package of five bills also aimed at stimulating the sale and development of vacant properties, targeted most squarely at those owned by the city.

"The city of Philadelphia has a numbers problem and timely collection of taxes owed is just a partial solution," Clarke said.

"City-owned vacant properties are a drain on our budget to the tune of \$20 million. We must create incentives for developers, businesses, and residents to bring those properties back online so they are once again contributing to the community."

That legislation includes bills offering incentives for developers to create affordable housing and economic development projects on city-owned vacant parcels and discounts for low-income residents and for those who build and live on vacant properties for at least five years.

"The city of Philadelphia cannot stick its hands in the taxpayer's pocket every time there is a fiscal crisis," Clarke said, noting the city must also work on expanding its revenue base.

"Getting vacant, city-owned properties up and running again is a no-brainer."

Breaking it down

"Rebuilding Philadelphia" would allow the city to:

>> Create development districts in areas with large percentages of city-owned land, vacant

parcels and tax delinquent properties. Vacant city-owned land in those districts will be discounted to 50 to 90 percent of its market value provided that buyers complete construction within 24 months of purchase.

>> Provide incentives like expedited permitting and charge only a “nominal” fee for affordable housing or low-income employment projects.

>> Refund 50 percent of a vacant city-owned property’s Sheriff’s sale purchase price if a buyer completes construction within 18 months of sale.

>> Grant low-income residents who purchase vacant city-owned land a second mortgage that will be forgiven if they build on and live in the property for five years.

Green and Quinones Sanchez’s package would:

>> Establish a single, transparent repository of vacant properties overseen by an 11-member Board of Directors that streamlines and expedites the process of putting the land back on the market.

>> Require the city to notify the Land Bank of all properties slated for Sheriff’s sale before action is taken so the Bank can claim desired parcels.

>> Create a Vacant Property Review Committee of elected representatives to review proposed transfers of Land Bank-owned properties and recommend parcels for certification or sale.

By the numbers

>> There are **40,000** vacant properties in Philadelphia.

>> **25%** of them are city-owned.

>> Blighted properties drag down the total value of city real estate by **\$3.6 billion**, about **\$8,000** per household.