

July 20, 2023



Dear Members of City Council,

Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group (PCRG) is a member-based non-profit that operates in the greater Pittsburgh area. With around 60 member organizations, our member base represents almost all of Pittsburgh geographically, and allows us to be tapped into the concerns of the City's communities and neighborhoods.

We write to you today in hopes of helping the members of City Council understand the importance of passing the currently proposed Tri-Party Cooperation Agreement, also known as the "Second Amended Pittsburgh Land Bank Cooperation Agreement." This agreement, at its most basic level, establishes the transfer procedures for the transferring of the City's and Urban Redevelopment Authority's (URA) property to the Pittsburgh Land Bank (PLB).

Beyond creating the 'two-way street' of property transfer between the City and the PLB, the Tri-Party Cooperation Agreement is also one of the first steps necessary to actualize an effective and efficient land recycling organization, such as the PLB. The need for a fully functional land recycling organization in Pittsburgh is long overdue, as the PLB was originally created in 2014 in response to the City's growing number of vacant and blighted properties. Now, almost 10 years later, these same issues still exist and are now compounded with the City's need for more affordable housing, community spaces, green spaces (recreational and stormwater management), and a shrinking population. The City of Pittsburgh must recognize that the PLB can play an instrumental role in reintroducing vacant properties back into the taxing systems, creating pathways for much needed affordable housing development, and increasing the quality of life for current and new Pittsburgh residents.

As mentioned, the Tri-Party Cooperation Agreement is just the first step to actualizing the full potential of the PLB. With City Council's support in passing this Agreement, we can begin to assist the PLB with pursuing its individual agreements with the necessary taxing bodies (Allegheny County, City of Pittsburgh, and Pittsburgh Public Schools) and renegotiating the current agreement with PWSA.

Your votes, as members of City Council, to pass the Tri-Party Cooperation Agreement are to stand *with* Pittsburgh's communities and send a clear message that City Council is invested in furthering access to affordable housing for *all* residents. We ask City Council to strongly consider the expressed need of community organizations and their residents for a functional Land Bank, and for City Council to recognize that the Tri-Party Agreement is the first step towards fulfilling that need.

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To further amplify the need for a fully functional and efficient land recycling organization, such as the PLB, we have asked our member organizations to add their testimonies on what passing of the Tri-Party Cooperation Agreement would mean for their communities and residents:

**Fineview & Perry Hilltop:** *The Tri-Party Cooperation Agreement and the realization of a fully functional land bank will bring tremendous benefits to the neighbors of Fineview and Perry Hilltop, as well as to our organizations and communities as a whole. With the establishment of a land bank, we can proactively address the blight and vacant properties (over 1,000) that have plagued our neighborhoods for far too long. We look forward to the ability to bring back vibrant community spaces, affordable housing options, and opportunities for small businesses to thrive. This will not only enhance the quality of life for residents but also attract new investments, foster neighborhood pride, and create a sense of belonging. The land bank serves as a powerful tool to empower our communities, promote equitable development, and lay the foundation for a brighter future for Fineview, Perry Hilltop, and the city of Pittsburgh as a whole.*

**Hazelwood Initiative:** *One of the major barriers to HI's goal of "Development Without Displacement" is our inability to acquire vacant houses and parcels in a timely manner. Recently, we acquired three properties after the (typical) three-year wait, and all three had to be demolished because of the deterioration that had occurred while we waited. The City is the largest owner of vacant homes and parcels in the neighborhood. If we don't move quickly, property values will rise before we have the opportunity to be pro-active. Market rate housing will become the only option in Hazelwood. We urge the prompt signing of the Tri-Party Agreement.*

**Operation Better Block Inc.:** *At Operation Better Block Inc., we developed a Strategic Cluster Planning process that created a detailed land use vision for Homewood's future development based on the needs and desires of existing, present-day community members and stakeholders. This plan is the officially recognized community development plan to guide the City of Pittsburgh's approach to developing the Homewood community. OBB is a member of the Homewood Collaborative, a recognized community organization and a group of Homewood-based organizations that represent the views and protect the interest of Homewood residents. Operation Better Block has successfully outreached and served our Residents for over 50 years; however, the failure to have a functioning land bank and Tri-Party agreements restricts our ability to empower Homeownership and Vacant lot projects. Vacancies in Homewood are double the rate in Pittsburgh, at twenty percent in Homewood compared to just over 10 percent for the City.*

*The University of Pittsburgh studies found, of Homewood's 5,183 total parcels, 2,257, or 44 percent of all parcels, held no structure. A public entity (most commonly the City of Pittsburgh or Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh) owned 676 of these parcels. Studies show vacant properties and abandoned homes create the perfect environment for crime, community deterioration, anxiety, depression, and obesity. The city council's disinvestment to collaborate and institute a Land Bank system that works effectively and inclusively with community organizations is an injustice to Homewood residents.*

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*Communities like Homewood desperately need a definitive process allowing organizations like Operation Better Block and PCRG to work with the City to tackle the vacant property issue. The blight owned by the City compromises our residents' mental and physical safety and overall quality of life. The negligence of identifying blight's detrimental impacts on Homewood and communities in similar states reflects how much the City Council representatives care about their underserved constituents. Please consider what we're asking and what our communities need.*

**Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation:** *We respect City Council's careful deliberations in determining how best to frame the relationship among the various parties (city government, Pittsburgh Land Bank, and the Urban Redevelopment Authority). But, in the end, Council needs to jump into the pool. The land bank has put numerous regulations in place to ensure that any development that utilizes real estate which is sold as a result of its operations will have some measure of community support, will be in compliance with the city's zoning codes, will be compatible with its surroundings, and will not contribute to negative environmental impacts. To add any more restrictions than these will risk tying up properties forever at the land bank. We say some measure of community support because it's rare that any project has the support of 100% of the residents, particularly when it comes to new development. We've had some people in Garfield tell us over the years that the neighborhood doesn't need to build any more affordable housing. Fortunately, there were more residents who, feeling threatened by gentrification, encouraged us to continue along that path.*

*If Council wants any more involvement than simply agreeing to allow for the greater movement of city-owned properties between the respective bodies, then we would encourage each Council member, or a staff person, to occasionally sit in on land bank meetings just to take the pulse of things, and to work pro-actively with community groups or developers in their districts to help shape development projects that, if utilizing city-owned properties, will meet neighborhood goals and objectives.*

**Hilltop Alliance:** *The Hilltop Alliance is a collaborative organization whose mission is to create and preserve assets in eleven southern City of Pittsburgh neighborhoods and Mt. Oliver Borough. Many of these City neighborhoods are awash in vacant, decaying City-owned or dead-end, privately-owned tax delinquent properties in desperate need of fast and efficient recycling to return them to productive and taxable reuse. In the simplest terms, the result of the City's slothful action on property recycling is the inability of organizations like ours to most effectively create new, and preserve still-viable, housing stock. From 2014-2017, Hilltop Alliance began the acquisition process of numerous vacant lots to create a new construction, infill development that will consist of 31 detached, single-family affordable homes. This Summer, almost eight years after it was submitted to the Property Reserve in late 2015, the City signed the deed for the last of the involved vacant lots. As of now, this delay has contributed to \$2.5M in approximate additional development costs. To preserve and renovate a vacant, tax delinquent, but salvageable home for affordable resale, in June 2017 Hilltop Alliance requested 952 Industry Street be placed into the Property Reserve. After it was included in the October 2017 Treasurer's Sale, due to City delay, Hilltop Alliance was unable to close on the property until February 2023.*

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*Unfortunately, it now appears the toll of five-plus years of waiting, the house is no longer salvageable. At this time, it is not hyperbolic to posit that any action City Council can take to advance the Tri-Party Cooperation Agreement (and the eventual actualization of a fully functional Pittsburgh Land Bank) and stop restricting supply of vacant properties when a known demand exists will benefit and support the creation and preservation of Hilltop and City-wide housing assets.*

**Allegheny Land Trust:** *Allegheny Land Trust is working with community advocates in Pittsburgh to protect green spaces like food gardens, green infrastructure, and community gathering places so that they may provide essential benefits to our neighborhoods like food security, flood mitigation and cleaner air and water for generations to come. The protection of this land enables more extensive and more sustained investments to be made into its restoration or improvement by community members, institutional supporters, government agencies, and non-profit organizations. Many of these greenspace assets occupy property belonging to the City of Pittsburgh's sizable inventory of vacant and undeveloped land. We have experience with the different processes that are available today to acquire or lease these properties, and we recognize a need for something that is more efficient, and less subject to disruption. The approval of the Second Amendment to the Tri-Party Cooperation Agreement would represent a major step towards the establishment of a functioning, self-sufficient, and effective land recycling organization in the City of Pittsburgh. This passage would enable a more expedient protection or expansion of the Kincaid Street Community Garden and Healcrest Green in Garfield, and the Olde Allegheny Community Garden in the Central Northside. We are working with several more communities to identify green space assets in their neighborhoods that would all benefit from a more efficient land disposition process through the land bank.*

**Schenley Heights Collaborative:** *The Schenley Heights Collaborative (SHC) is an all-volunteer 501©3 organization since 2002. We work only in the Schenley Heights (Upper Hill) neighborhood of Pittsburgh. We are designated as the Recognized Community Organization (RCO) by City Planning for the Schenley Heights neighborhood.*

*The SHC works hard to overcome the effects that vacant and abandoned properties have on our neighborhood. To date we have completed and sold five totally rehabilitated houses. We have two other completed houses about ready to go on the market for sale. We have about six other sites on hold for rehabilitation. All of our rehabilitated houses are for those at or below 80% AMI. We consider these houses as the next best thing to new construction. We see this as the most viable way to provide home ownership for low to moderate income families. As you well know the City of Pittsburgh has ownership of many many blighted and vacant properties. In our experience we find that the City has not been and is not able to maintain or recycle these properties. We view the Land Bank as the best possible assistance to the City for the management and disposition of these properties.*

*We take this opportunity to ask each City Council Member to do everything possible to ensure that all needed legislation and agreements to make the Land Bank fully functioning are completed immediately. We look forward to working with the land Bank.*

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**Community Alliance of Spring Garden-East Deutschtown (CASGED):** *The Community Alliance of Spring Garden - East Deutschtown would benefit immensely from the passing of this agreement. Our neighborhoods have been affected negatively for decades by the construction of two highways that intersect and pass through our neighborhood. This created an abundance of blight that has been difficult for CASGED to reverse. One of the easiest ways to do that is to get properties through the city's T-Sale process quicker. We currently get properties in 5-8 years if we are lucky and the structures on them are usually in such poor shape, it requires massive amounts of money to fix them. If the process were quicker, then it would save EVERYONE time and money and help get these properties fixed up, sold and on the tax rolls again. It would also accelerate our goal to reduce blight exponentially. We cannot emphasize how much we support this Agreement getting passed.*

**Grounded Strategies:** *Grounded Strategies is a Pittsburgh-based non-profit that works to improve the social, economic, and environmental health of distressed and transitional communities by building capacity to reclaim vacant and underutilized land. One of our goals is to increase resident ownership of the vacant land in neighborhoods. The City of Pittsburgh owns over 10,000 vacant parcels, often concentrated in low-income and majority Black communities. These parcels quickly fall into disrepair, which leads to many health and safety concerns. Since 2018, Grounded has supported residents in Homewood, Larimer, and the Hill District in stewarding city-owned vacant land around their homes. These residents put their time, effort, and resources into maintaining these plots, turning them into productive spaces in their communities, yet there is no pathway for them to own the plots they steward, like mow-to-own programs run by land banks in other cities.*

*Recently, a Larimer resident came to us for support in purchasing a lot that was once a convenience store owned by her godfather. She wants to turn it into a garden, supporting her small business. This plot is owned by the URA, so to purchase it she would need to complete a sales process, which is too complicated and time-intensive for individual residents who work full time and have families. The Tri-Party Cooperation Agreement would allow the Pittsburgh Land Bank (PLB) to request this parcel from the URA so that it can be sold to her through its more accessible process. A functioning land bank would speed up the timeline and reduce costs for residents, lowering the barrier to ownership and returning the land to productive reuse. The Tri-Party Cooperation Agreement would allow for the PLB to sell city-owned properties, reducing the city's inventory, getting these properties back on the tax rolls and mitigating the mental and physical health issues caused by unmaintained vacant land.*

PCRG stands with and supports the organizations who have provided their testimonies on how the passing of the Tri-Party Cooperation Agreement, and the eventual actualization of the PLB's full potential, will support the well-being of the City's neighborhoods and residents. Beyond the organizations who we spoke on behalf of today, the expressed need and demand for a fully functional land bank has been a conversation had with many of our member organizations. Our communities need City Council to be vocal advocate for the Pittsburgh Land Bank and to actively work to provide a pathway to actualizing its land recycling capabilities. The proposed

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Tri-Party Cooperation Agreement is an opportunity for City Council to align itself with the voices of their constituents and to stand with the organizations working to provide for the communities of Pittsburgh. Members of City Council must recognize the urgency needed for the City to address its growing vacant and blighted property challenges. The Pittsburgh Land Bank is an invaluable resource to elevating the quality of life for Pittsburgh residents and for providing overdue reinvestment in Pittsburgh communities.

PCRG and our members stand with the Pittsburgh Land Bank, as it will uplift and protect Pittsburgh's neighborhoods and their residents. We believe that the members of City Council share our vision of a more just and equitable future for Pittsburgh. With City Council's support for the Tri-Party Cooperation Agreement and the commitment to removing barriers for the Pittsburgh Land Bank, we can work together to make our vision a reality.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Sincerely,



Ernest E Hogan  
Executive Director PCRG