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After a controversial first decade, what challenges does the Philly Land Bank face now? Five advocates offer advice.

Mayor Cherelle Parker promised she would have completed getting feedback from Land Bank stakeholders and staff by mid-April.



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Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter signs an ordinance during a ceremony, Monday, Jan. 13, 2014, at City Hall in Philadelphia, creating a municipal land bank.

AP

by Lynette Hazelton

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On inauguration day, Mayor Cherrille L. Parker vowed to start an evaluation of the [Philadelphia Land Bank](#), a decade-old city entity charged with managing and selling thousands of city-owned vacant properties.

Parker, who campaigned on a promise to create more affordable housing and green the city, has described the nonprofit Land Bank as a necessary tool for increasing affordable options for renters and intergenerational wealth for homeowners.

Jamila Davis, a spokesperson for the Land Bank, said Parker's administration has begun conversations with Land Bank staff with ambitions of concluding initial conversations with staff and stakeholders by the end of April.

What is the Land Bank?

In the early 2010s, advocates led by the [Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations](#) (PACDC) pushed for the creation of a nonprofit city-run Land Bank to revise the murky land dispensation process. About that time, Philadelphia had more than 42,000 vacant, trash-strewn lots and 20% of them were managed by four different agencies, each with its own policies. Trying to sell unused city property meant running a daunting gamut of conflicting rules and procedures that often ground development to a halt.

After 10 years of halting progress, the Philadelphia Land Bank is a nonprofit entity within the [Philadelphia Housing Development Corporation](#) (PHDC). The Land Bank, with 17 employees and a \$3.15 million budget, promotes itself as a streamlined one-stop shop for consolidating and dispensing of city-owned lots.

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Angel B. Rodriguez, the Land Bank's executive director since 2017, points to the [Turn the Key](#), \$7 million affordable housing initiative to build

1,000 houses, as “one of the greatest successes.” In exchange for building on a city-owned parcel, a private developer will construct a single family home whose price must top out at \$280,000. Homeowners receive financial help for mortgage and closing costs. According to the Land Bank, 724 units of affordable housing have been approved for development since the spring of 2022.

» **READ MORE:** [Angel Rodriguez takes charge of Philadelphia's Land Bank](#)

Less successful [are initiatives](#) to turn empty lots into private side yards or community gardens.

Critics say the Land Bank has been plagued with troubles since its inception. The lack of affordable housing is at a crisis level, they say, and the Land Bank’s eligibility requirements do not help the most needy.

“The Land Bank must directly support applications for deeply affordable housing and other community-minded uses. It’s up to the city to empower nonprofit developers to hit the affordability levels our neighborhoods need,” said City Councilmember Jamie Gauthier.

Can the Land Bank live up to its promise? Five advocates weigh in

Will Gonzalez, executive director, Ceiba: ‘Be transparent’

Will Gonzalez, executive director of [Ceiba](#), a nonprofit that promotes economic development and financial inclusion for the Latino community, still believes in the Land Bank’s mission. “It is a tool that if structured correctly can do a lot of good and that’s how it was born. It was always about getting land for community development.”

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However, Gonzalez said his concern is that the Land Bank may serve private-market interest long before it serves poorer communities of color.

Public land for public good.

— Will Gonzalez

“You can’t serve the public good without transparency and truth as the bottom line,” said Gonzalez, adding that those key ingredients are missing from the Land Bank’s current operations. He is concerned that over the last decade the Land Bank has turned into a “land grab” for private developers instead of a tool for community development.

“Public land for public good. That takes time, especially in a city that is as challenged with poverty as Philadelphia,” said Gonzalez.

Nora Lichtash, executive director, Women’s Community Revitalization Project: ‘Support nonprofit developers’

Nora Lichtash, executive director of [Women’s Community Revitalization Project](#), was part of the coalition that made the Philadelphia Land Bank a reality. Now, there’s a growing concern that the Land Bank’s policies enable private developers to get inexpensive land to build market-rate housing. Lichtash is now a member of the [Philadelphia Coalition for](#)

[Affordable Communities](#) and working to make the Land Bank a better community development partner.

“The problem is the land is not going to the creation of affordable properties. Instead, it’s all going to rich people,” said Lichtash.

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According to a recently issued report from the [Philadelphia Coalition for Affordable Communities](#): “The vast majority of the land (83%) that has been disposed of through the land bank has benefited households that earn more than \$68,000. In Philadelphia our median household income is \$57,000 and about a third of all households in our city earn \$30,000 or less.”

The problem is the land is not going to the creation of affordable properties. Instead, it’s all going to rich people.

— Nora Lichtash

For Lichtash, the next challenge is getting more land to those actually

creating affordable housing, such as not-for-profit community developers. “In Philadelphia, there is a disparity between who is most in need and who is benefiting from development on our city’s publicly owned land.”

Rick Sauer, executive director of the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations: ‘Plan intentionally’

For Rick Sauer, executive director of the [Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations](#) (PACDC), the Land Bank’s original resolution to promote “the economic vitality of communities” and “encourage a range of beneficial uses” will require more intentional planning if it is to come true.

While acknowledging that the Land Bank has not been 100% effective, he said that “the situation, while better than it was, still has a long way to go.” The key, Sauer said, is intentional planning.

**The situation, while better than it was,
still has a long way to go.**

— Rick Sauer

Sauer, a board member of the Land Bank, believes that the Land Bank has a significant role to play in a meaningful conversation over intentional uses of land that includes more than just considering the highest bidder. It also needs to discuss how to avoid fueling a gentrifying community that lacks affordable housing or displaces long-term residents.

City Councilmember Jamie Gauthier, chair of Council’s Committee on Housing, Neighborhood Development, and the Homeless: ‘Redefine

affordable’

As low-cost housing options plummet, that has fueled the city’s housing affordability crisis. “Since 2016, Philadelphia has lost 37,000 units that cost \$800 or less per month, while gaining 26,000 units priced at over \$2,000 per month,” said City Councilmember Jamie Gauthier. “When the Land Bank disposes of property for ‘affordable housing,’ we should ask, affordable to whom?”

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— City Councilmember Jamie Gauthier

“The average income in our city is \$50,000 a year, less than half of the regional AMI that the city currently uses to set Land Bank policy. And the average income among Black and brown Philadelphians is even less than that. The Land Bank’s policy for prioritizing affordable housing disposition needs to be grounded in Philadelphia’s reality, not a statistic that does not represent our city,” said Gauthier.

Sari Bernstein - staff attorney, Public Interest Law Center: ‘Reduce the backlog’

Since the Land Bank started, the titles of nine parcels representing four gardens have been handed over to the [Neighborhood Gardens Trust](#) (NGT) to protect those community groups who garden on that land. From 2020 until now, 30 land parcels representing 11 gardens have remained in limbo. Essentially, the processing of applications from community gardens ceased.

The (backlog) information is not public so it's hard to get an actual count.

— Sari Bernstein

And there are more gardens outside the NGT network that are awaiting titles. “The [backlog] information is not public so it’s hard to get actual count,” said Sari Bernstein, staff attorney at the [Public Interest Law Center](#). But, Bernstein said NGT’s available metrics speak to the need for the Land Bank to clear its backlog and provide land security for community gardeners, many of whom have spent decades developing their gardens.

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