

Roots to Rivers: a resident leadership cohort

Session Three



upstream
pittsburgh

NEIGHBORHOOD **ALLIES**



Roots to Rivers 2026 –2027 Cohort

Empowering Residents for
Environmental Action in our Communities

Lead

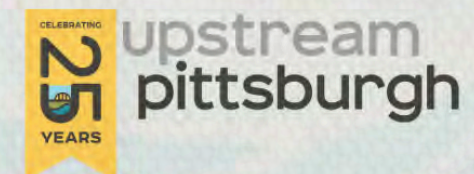
Roots to Rivers is a community leadership program led by UpstreamPgh and Neighborhood Allies that helps residents build the knowledge, skills, and confidence to respond to environmental challenges—like flooding, dumping, water issues, and neighborhood hazards—so communities can lead their own solutions without waiting on outside organizations.

Learn

Over six sessions (February 2026 - March 2027), participants will:

- Learn how neighborhood design, infrastructure, and public systems reinforce environmental inequities
- Understand why certain areas flood, where dumping happens, and how water systems work
- Build practical skills for DIY neighborhood response—such as identifying hazards, reporting issues, mobilizing neighbors, organizing cleanup efforts, documenting environmental impacts, and advocating for services
- Gain knowledge about community-driven green design, from gardens to bioswales to street-scale improvements
- Connect with local organizations doing place-based environmental justice work
- Co-create action plans that reflect the community's priorities and lived experiences

Funding for Roots to Rivers is provided through UpstreamPgh via the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Green & Healthy Homes Initiative under the Thriving Communities Grant Program.



Today's Guests

Roots to Rivers

2026 –2027 Cohort
Session 3

Who Controls the Land?

Tools for Resident Action & Environmental Change

About

This session explores how land is used, maintained, and transformed across Pittsburgh neighborhoods—and how residents can actively shape those outcomes. Through a panel featuring City of Pittsburgh programs, including Adopt-A-Lot and Greenways, alongside community-based partners like Allegheny CleanWays and Wilksburg Code Enforcement, participants will learn how to access land stewardship opportunities, respond to challenges like illegal dumping, and use available tools to take collective action and improve neighborhood conditions.

Meet the Panel



Ben Kusserow,
Education Coordinator



Mackenzie Pleskovic,
Senior Planner



Isabella Gross,
Principal Environmental
Planner



Ms. Donna Smith
East Hills Community
Member



**WILKSBURG
BOROUGH**
Code Enforcement

Thursday, July 9th 5:30 – 8:00PM

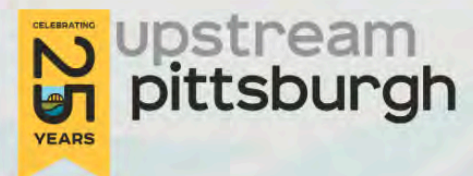
Petra Ministries

235 Eastgate Dr., Penn Hills, PA 15235

This session includes dinner and a panel discussion by key facilitators, followed by an in-depth Q&A strategy session.

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NEIGHBORHOOD **ALLIES**



Cohort Webpage

Reminder to visit the [R2R Cohort Member page](#)



Save the date for the next session: September 10

(subject to change based on facilitator availability)



- Dates, times, and locations for all upcoming sessions
- Recaps or highlights from past sessions
- Any schedule changes or important announcements
- Additional articles, videos, and tools to deepen learning
- Links to partner organizations and community resources
- Bios of speakers, facilitators, and program partners
- Information about fellow cohort members
- Contact information for program support
- Arrival instructions, parking info, and accessibility notes
- Contact form for questions or support

Our Collective Agreement

The Roots to Rivers cohort is grounded in a shared commitment to learning, collaboration, and collective care. As participants, we agree to engage with openness and curiosity, honor diverse lived experiences, and contribute to a respectful and supportive environment.

Together, we take responsibility for co-creating a space where all voices are valued, ideas can be explored, and collective action toward environmental and community wellbeing can grow.

We collectively agree to:

- **Make space and hold space for people so that there is an equal distribution of roles, responsibilities and collective contribution.**
- **Only one person speaks at a time.**
- **No one knows everything; together we know a lot.**
- **Respect each others' opinions even, or especially, if you don't agree with them.**
- **Acknowledge the difference between intent and impact.**
- **Be conscious of time.**
- **Stay grounded in the written project goals.**
- **Maintain the confidentiality of this discussion.**



Recap

Roots to Rivers

2026 –2027 Cohort
Session 2

Designing for Place, People & Ecology: Public Art + Urban Design in Environmental Justice Contexts

About

Join us for a site visit to the Dornbush public art installation in East Hills to explore how art, design, and community engagement can transform vacant land into spaces that reflect neighborhood stories and environmental stewardship. Participants will hear directly from the artist and project partners about the community process behind the installation and how creative design can make environmental issues visible. This session translates environmental justice concepts into real, place-based examples.

Meet the Artist: Marlana Adele Vassar

Marlana Adele Vassar is a Pittsburgh-based artist who creates public artwork that celebrates community stories, growth, and connection. Her work often focuses on themes of history, resilience, and hope, and she enjoys creating pieces that people can experience as part of their everyday lives.

Marlana is passionate about making art that brings people together and helps create spaces where people feel seen, valued, and inspired. She believes public art should feel welcoming and meaningful to the people who live around it, which is why she enjoys working closely with communities to make sure their voices and ideas are reflected in the final work. Through projects like *Sankofa Garden: Roots to a Brighter Future*, she hopes to create spaces that encourage reflection, learning, and pride in the neighborhood. She is honored to work alongside the East Hills community, East Hills Consensus Group, and UpstreamPgh to help Dornbush Rain Garden grow as a place of beauty, learning, and shared history.



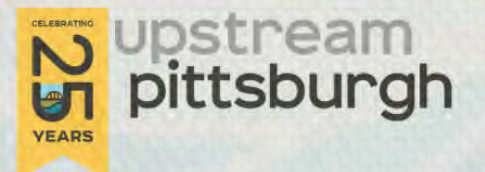
Wednesday, May 20th 6:00 – 7:30PM

Site Visit: Dornbush Rain Garden
8224 Bricelyn St.
Pittsburgh, PA 15221

This session includes a walking tour and discussion with project collaborators.

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Time Keeper | Note Taker | Shareout

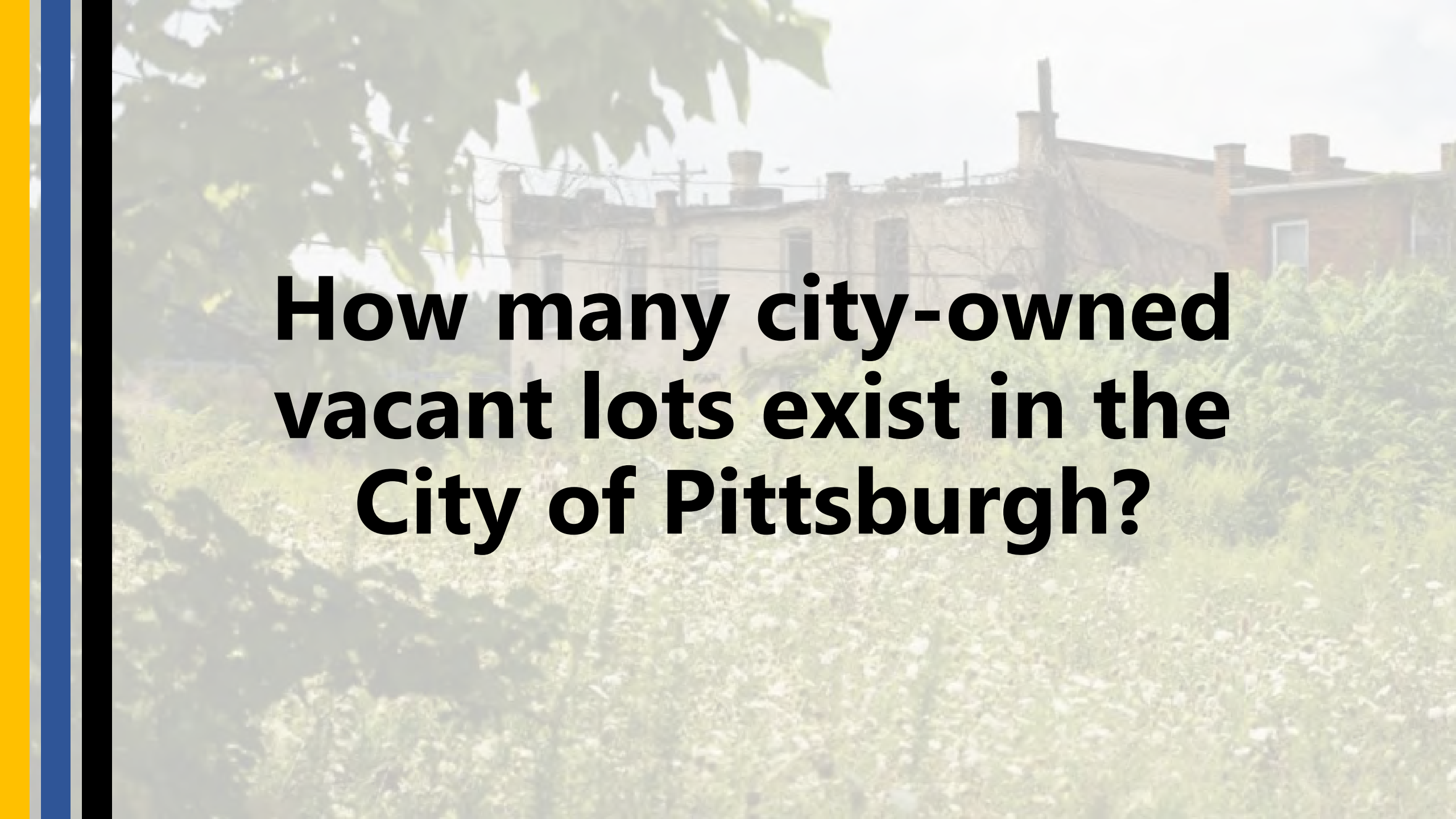
Ice Breaker + Collective Roles





Pittsburgh Stewardship Programs

Roots to Rivers Session 3
July 9, 2026



**How many city-owned
vacant lots exist in the
City of Pittsburgh?**

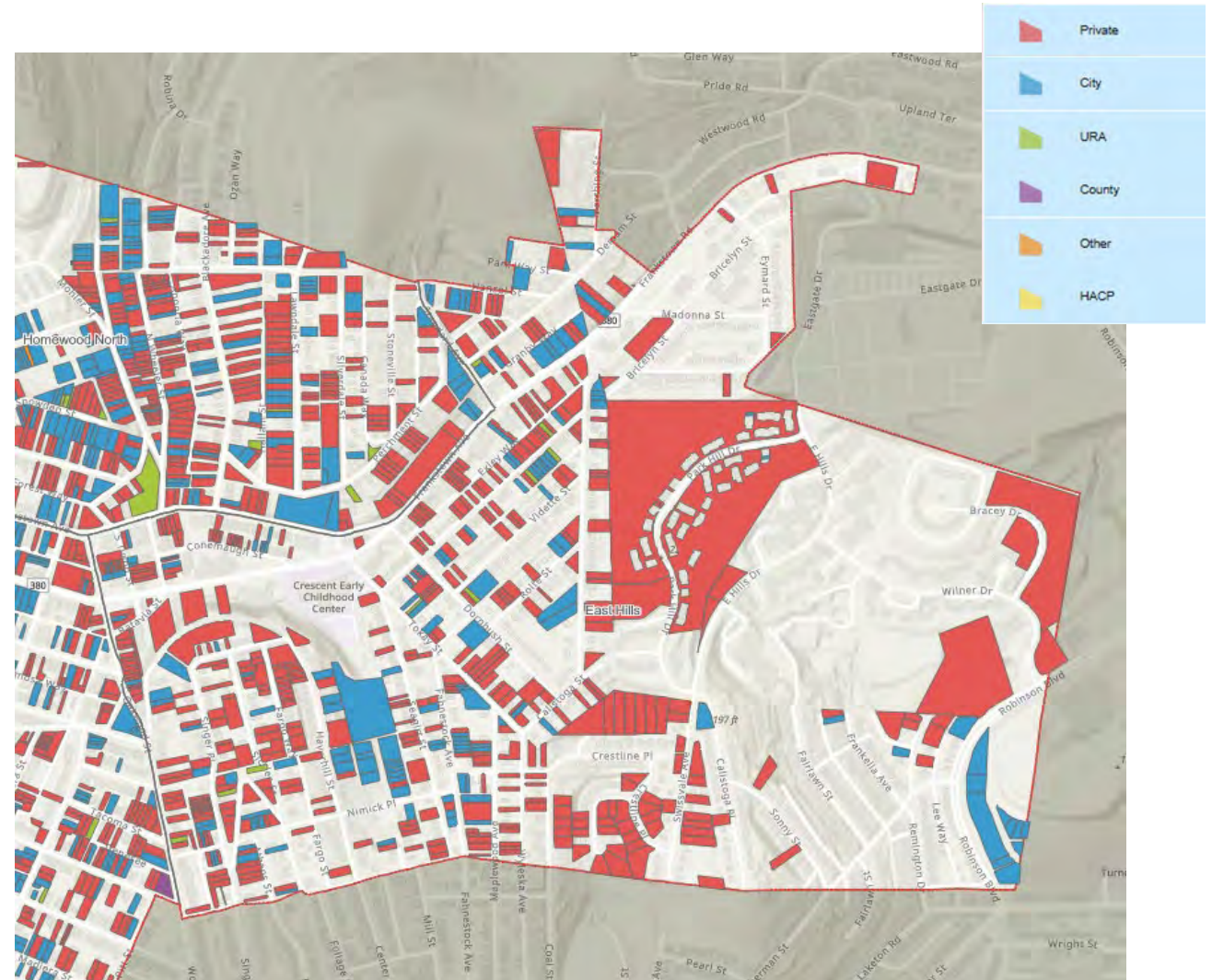
State of the Land

CITYWIDE

- **30,000** vacant properties
- **10,000** - city-owned (about 1/3)

EAST HILLS

- **606** vacant parcels
- **598** tax delinquent properties
- **70** condemned



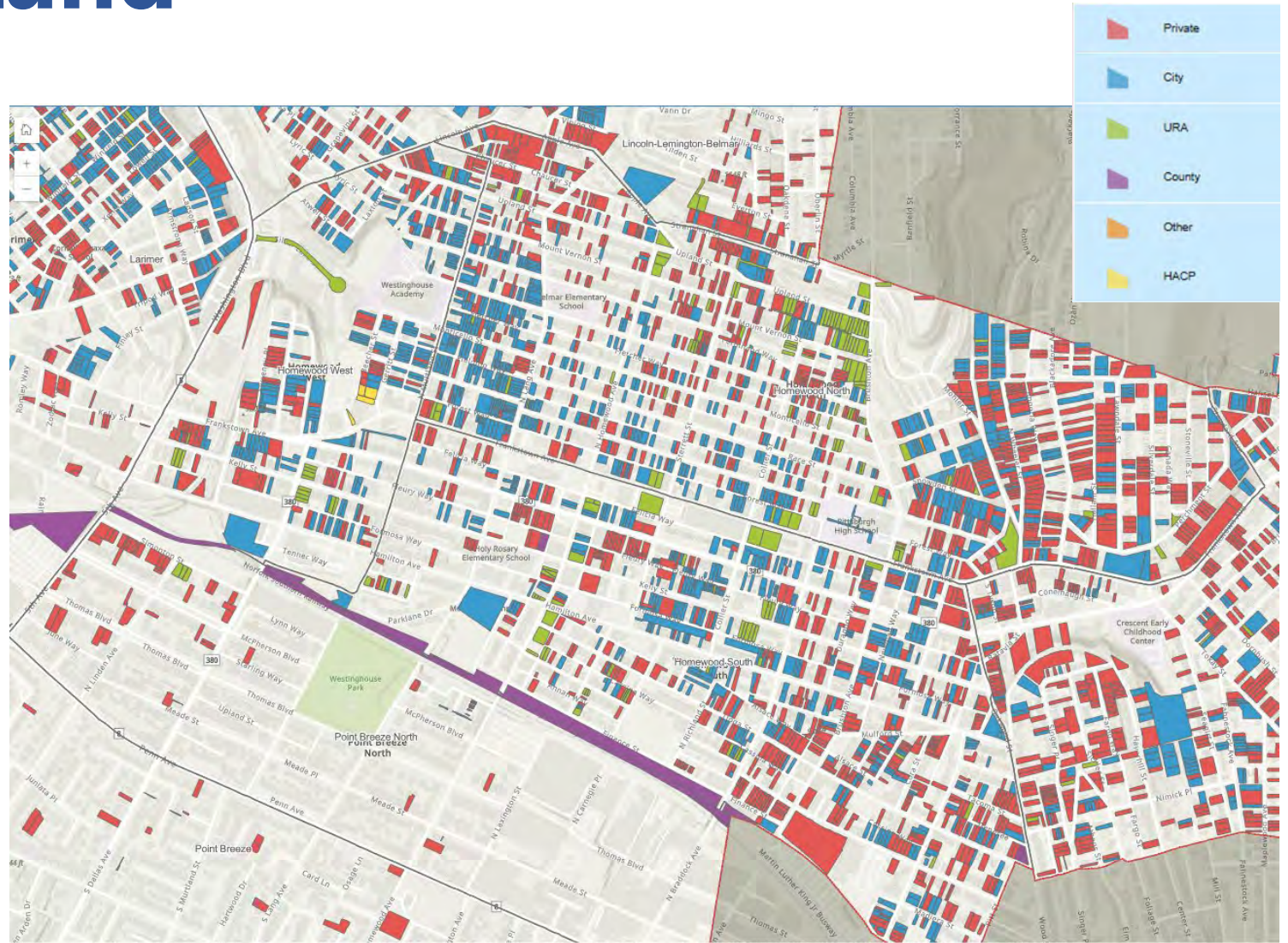
State of the Land

CITYWIDE

- **30,000** vacant properties
- **10,000** - city-owned (about 1/3)

HOMEWOOD (N,S, & W)

- **2.6k** vacant parcels
- **1.5k** tax delinquent properties
- **321** condemned



Public Health & Safety Benefits of Land Care



- KCB beautification program statistics also show a 25% reduction in crime and a 54% increase in economic development.
- A 2018 study of Philadelphia Land Care lots saw residents living near these spaces experience a 40% decrease in feelings of depression and a general improvement in health outcomes when cleanup activities dramatically improved.
 - Another study also showed a 29% decrease in gun violence in neighborhoods with Land Care.
- Streets with vacant lots maintained through a Clean & Green program have nearly 40% fewer assaults and violent crimes than streets with vacant, abandoned lots in Flint, MI.

Pathways to Access and Ownership

Reservation of Space: Events without site stewardship

Help-A-Lot: Single day access for maintenance

Adopt-A-Lot: Temporary activations or incubations

Greenways Stewardship Program: single day, long-term or permanent activations

City Farms Garden Program: Long-term or permanent land activations for urban agriculture

City Real Estate Process: Ownership through auction/bidding process

Land Bank: Ownership of projects with demonstrated success and community support



Stewardship Programs

- **Greenways Stewardship Program**
 - Long-term land access for stewardship in greenways
- **Adopt-A-Lot Program**
 - Temporary use program expansion and updates
- **Help-A-Lot Program**
 - One day access for vacant lot stewardship
- **City Farms Garden Program**
 - Long-term land access for urban agriculture in parks and greenways



Greenways Expansion



10,000 city-owned vacant parcels studied in this project

- Of those, approximately 3,000 parcels proposed as new, permanent passive open space

Benefits of designation:

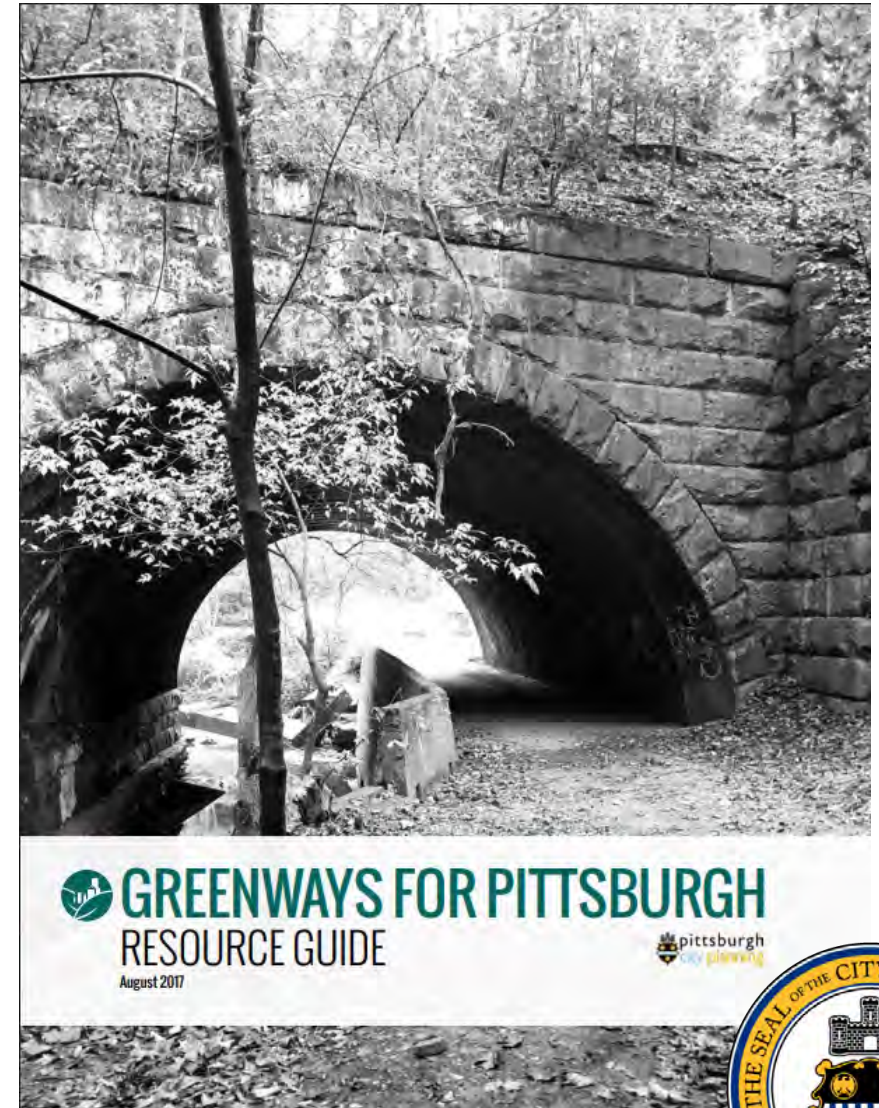
- Minimizes flooding and landslide hazard risk
- Preserves existing tree canopy, reducing urban heat island effects
- Supports greater mobility with improved connectivity and the creation of trails
- Unlocks investments in these green spaces through City funding and grants to support recreation opportunities
- Allows for community and non-profit stewardship



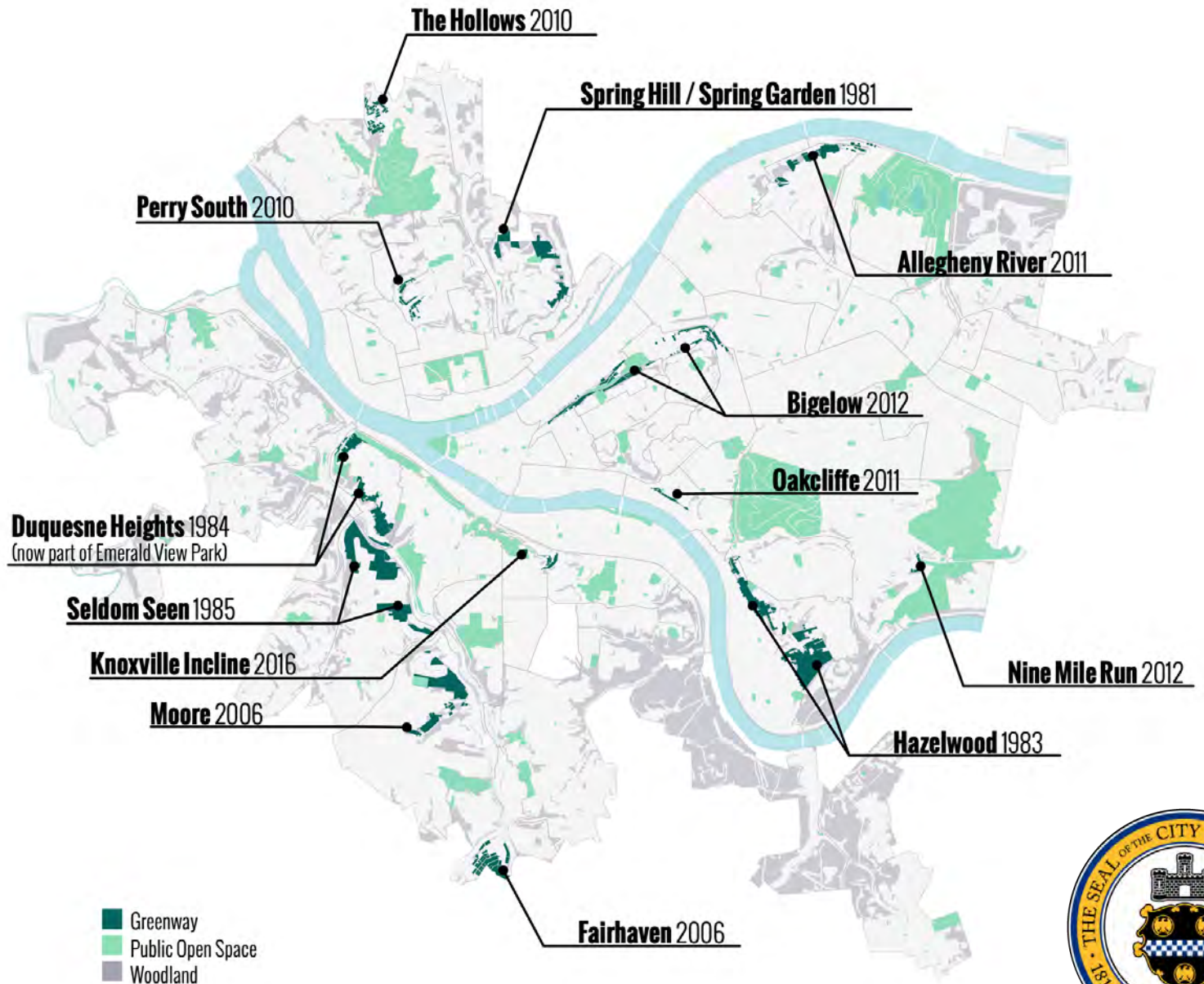
What is a greenway?

A permanently conserved, primarily passive open space that is stewarded primarily by the community and provides benefits such as minimizing landslide risk, reducing the effects of extreme heat, preserving tree canopy, and creating recreation opportunities.

- 12 existing legislated greenways
- 1,199 existing legislated greenway parcels



Existing Greenways



Greenways Stewardship Program



1. Greenway program code
2. Greenway stewardship agreement
3. Greenway volunteer application

- Why was this program created?
 - To encourage and facilitate stewardship and reactivation of these spaces
 - To accommodate lack of funding and capacity for maintenance
 - To formalize and streamline a process

Grants the ability for individuals, non-profits, and community organizations alike to steward greenways



Approved Stewardship Activities

Low-Risk (volunteer application)

- Invasive species removal
- Painting
- Landscape plantings at entrances
- Litter or dump site cleanup
- Mowing and string trimming
- Restoration plantings and/or seeding
- Beautification, landscaping, and plant beds
- Vegetation management for access
- View shed pruning
- Tree management and tree stand maintenance
- Tree planting and pruning
- Snow removal (non-machinery based, no salt)

High-Risk (agreement required)

- Fence repair, replacement, and installation
- Seating, benches, shelters or picnic table construction, installation, repair, or replacement
- Trail maintenance, paving, resurfacing
- Building trails, installing trail markers, signage, and footbridges
- Signage installation
- Stream/waterway restoration
- Slope repair or stabilization for landslide prevention
- Sidewalks or hardscapes installation



Local Partners



Western Pennsylvania
Conservancy



ALLEGHENY
LAND TRUST



sca® student
conservation
association

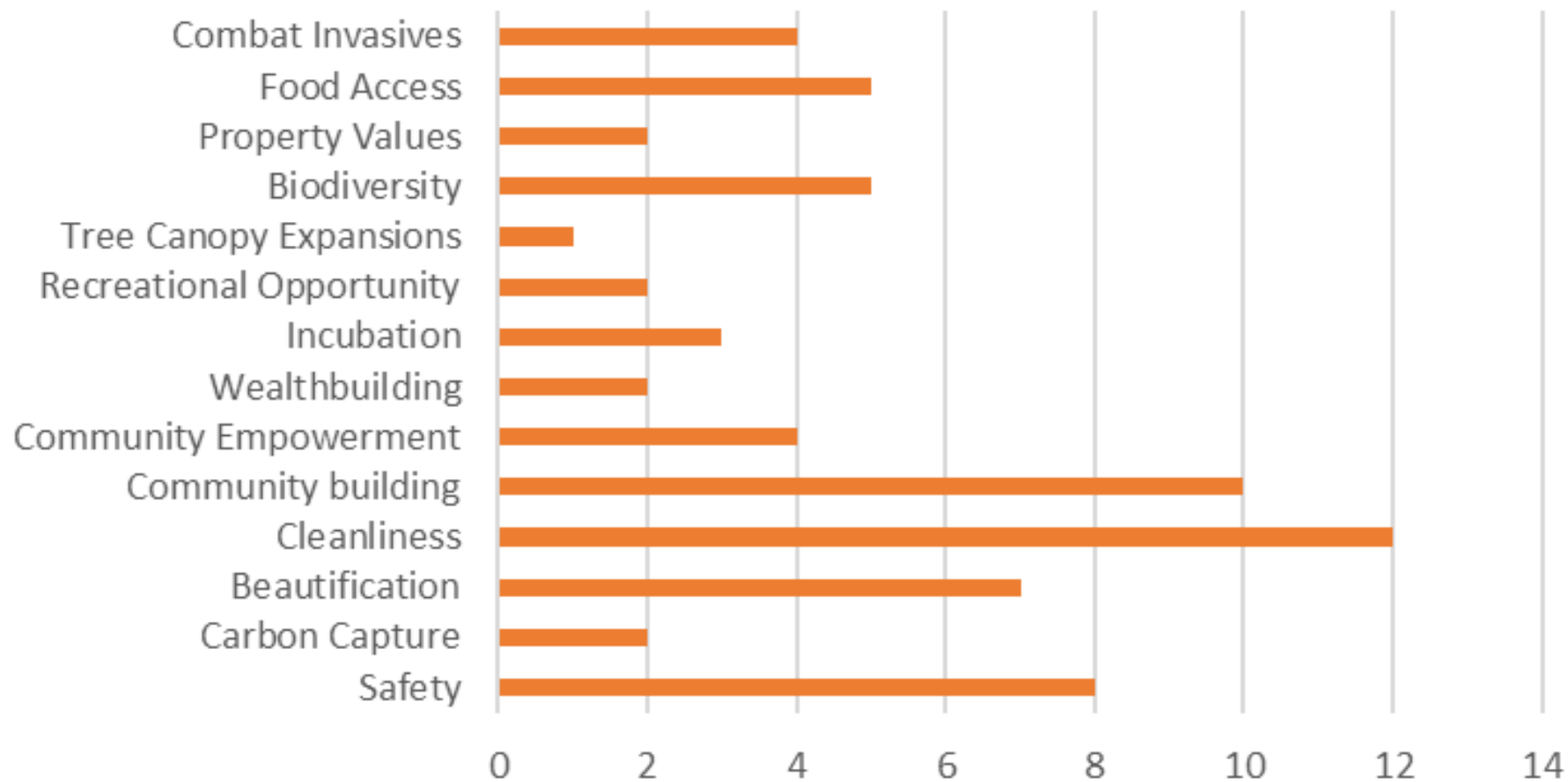


Adopt-A-Lot Program

- Temporary use stewardship program created in 2015 to foster neighborhood interaction, reimagine the potential of vacant lots, and encourage environmental awareness.
- 130 lots currently adopted
- Program created as an implementation of the Open Space Plan (2013) to provide temporary access to City-owned vacant land in the interim of new ownership.
- Only garden uses were permitted previously



The Value & Benefits of Adopt-A-Lot



Program Expansion

- The City has recently updated the program to expand approved project types and permitted site improvements for the temporary reactivation of vacant lots.
- The program toolkit and lease terms are undergoing improvements to better serve participants, and a new website and intake form have been published.

Previous permitted uses:	What we've heard:
Edible Gardens	Commercial Vending (eg. food trucks)
Flower Gardens	Public Art
Rain Gardens	Pop-up Markets
Individual Gardens	Play Fields/Recreation
Community Gardens	Special Events (eg. block parties, outdoor movie nights)
Market Gardens (<\$10,000 revenue)	Community Signage
	Pop-up Public Plazas



Expanded Uses

- Gardening (rain, food, or flower)
- Managed natural landscapes (native landscape plantings)
- Public art
- Community signage
- Commercial vending
- Community use/public space
 - Special events
 - Outdoor theater/movie screenings
- General lot maintenance
- Play fields/recreation
- Tree nurseries



Expanded Elements

Solar Panels (for on-site use)
High Tunnels
Compost Bins
Chess Tables
Little Free Donation Pantry
Firepits/bonfires
Temporary Cooking Stations
Wash & Pack Stations
Portable Generators
Community Announcement Boards

Canopy Tents (less than 400 sq ft)
Shipping Containers
Basketball hoops & volleyball nets
Trash Containers
Picnic Tables and Benches
Stages (through Special Events)
Temporary/removable
irrigation systems
Decks
Signage



Prohibited Elements

Tires

Trees (outside of nurseries)

Amplified Sound (Special Events Permit needed)

Electrical Connection

Play Equipment

Concrete footings

Boulders (for climbing/play)



Help-A-Lot Program

- This program permits the following maintenance activities: **litter clean-up, mowing, weeding, mulching, removing invasive species, and illegal dump site clean-up.**
- Trash pick-up by the Department of Public Works and advertising for your clean-up event on the City's public calendar are available by request in the application.
- The City also supplies free gloves and trash bags at its Environmental Center, located at 3001 Railroad Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15201!

A poster for the City of Pittsburgh's Help-A-Lot Stewardship Program. The poster is set against a background of a grassy lot with trees in the distance. It features a large, light-colored cloud-like shape containing text and graphics. At the top, it says 'CITY OF PITTSBURGH STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM'. Below that, 'HELP-A-LOT PROGRAM' is written in large, bold letters, with a right-pointing arrow. To the right of the title, a paragraph explains the program's purpose: 'Support city land care of vacant properties through this program by requesting one-day access to city-owned vacant lots for community stewardship and maintenance activities. Supplies can be provided!'. Below this, there are six rounded rectangular buttons arranged in two rows. The first row contains 'APPROVED ACTIVITIES:', 'MOWING', and 'LITTER PICK UP'. The second row contains 'REMOVING INVASIVES', 'WEEDING', and 'DUMP SITE CLEAN UP'. At the bottom left, it says 'SUBMIT A VOLUNTEER APPLICATION HERE:' followed by the website 'WWW.PITTSBURGH.PA.GOV/DPW/VOLUNTEER-APPS/'. To the right of this text is a QR code. At the bottom center, it says 'Visit lotstolove.org to verify that the lot you'd like to help is city-owned.' On the bottom right, there is a dark green circular badge with white text that reads 'All volunteers must complete a waiver and receive application approval to participate!'.

City Farms Garden Program

- Adopt-A-Lot Program
- DPW Community Gardens (5) have long waitlists
- There is a need and desire for more permanent land access opportunities to establish lasting urban gardens and farms.
- Collaboration with CitiParks to develop a new park/greenway garden program



Food Forestry/Orchards

- Tree Pittsburgh Giving Grove program partnership
- City Forestry to plant new trees to improve public health and support food security
- IRA grant for tree planting





How to Take Action

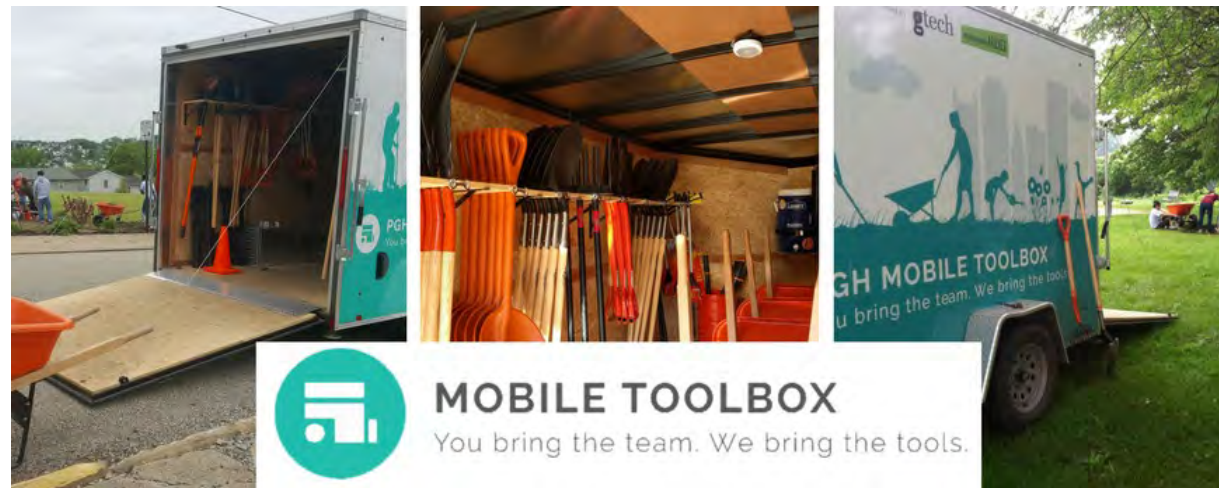
- Adopt-A-Lot or Help-A-Lot!
 - Help-A-Lot Program allows for one-day access to City-owned property for community cleanups or stewardship activities.
- To report on structurally deficient vacant properties that need to be razed, notify the City via 311.
- There are many City-owned lots in the neighborhood that could be tested for soil contamination. DCP can facilitate a connection with Allegheny County Conservation District to request testing.
- Reactivate your greenway! tree planting, urban agriculture, invasives removal, trail building and more....



Resources

Grounded Strategies - Mobile Toolbox

- Tools are provided at no cost for community projects
- Available May 1st through October 31st



Neighborhood Legal Services

- Tangled Title Assistance Program
- Pro-Bono Will Assistance

Urban Redevelopment Authority - Legal Assistance Program

- Tangled Title Services
- Foreclosure Prevention Services

Love Your Block

- City of Pittsburgh grant opportunity (up to \$2,500 per project)
- For volunteer neighborhood improvement projects, including: beautification, community garden maintenance, and tree and flower planting



We want to hear from you!

- Join our stewardship network! Email:
greenways@pittsburghpa.gov
- Share your voice on EngagePGH!
- Contact us:
Isabella Gross
isabella.gross@pittsburghpa.gov
Mackenzie Pleskovic
mackenzie.pleskovic@pittsburghpa.gov



[City Stewardship Webpages](#)





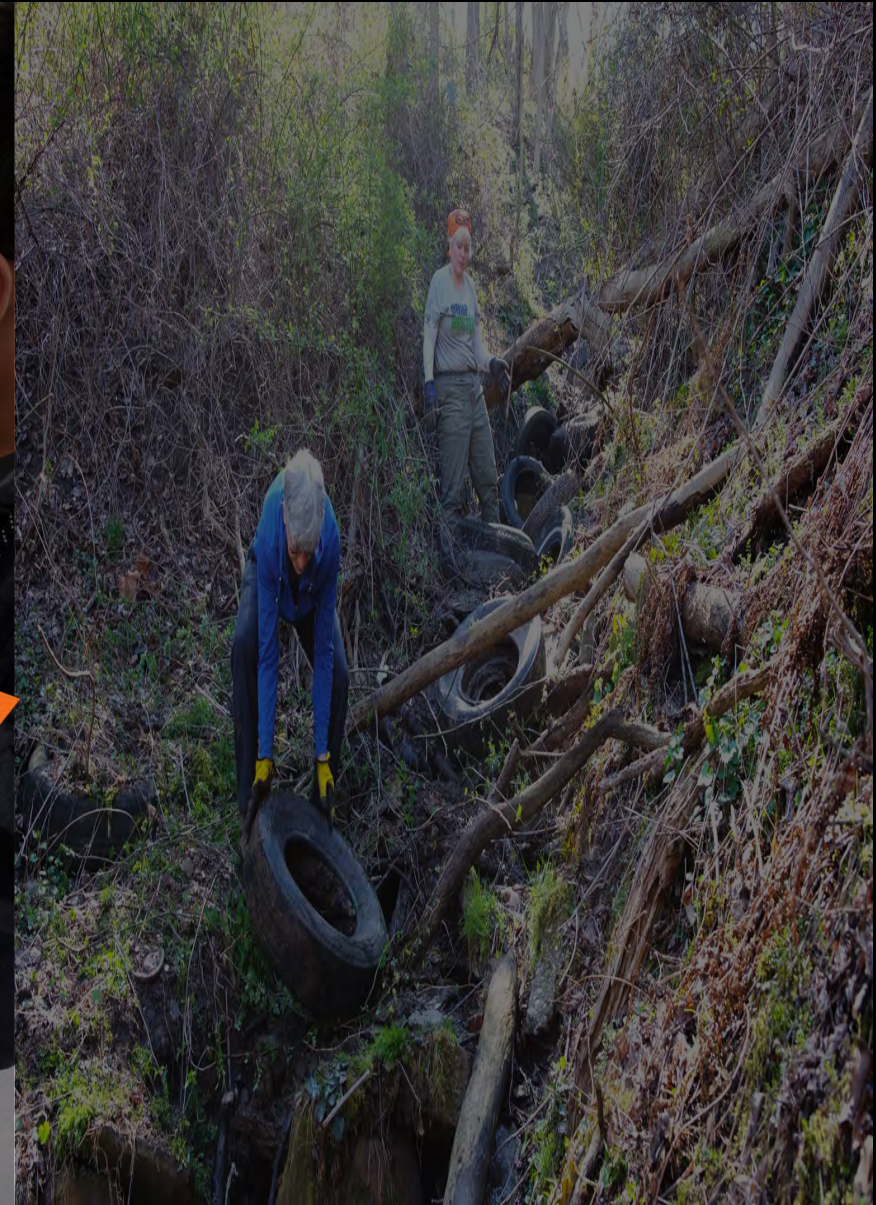
Thank You!

WE APPRECIATE YOUR TIME



Wilkinsburg Code Enforcement

7,393,000+: Pounds of trash removed! **53,000+:** Tires removed!



MISSION: To engage and empower people to eliminate litter and illegal dumping in Allegheny County

VISION: A clean, beautiful, and safe county for everyone

DumpBusters in Wilkinsburg



E-mail Erica Pasquali with any questions
erica@alleghenycleanways.org

Adopt a grate & become a GrateKeeper!



Safety Tips

1. Always wear gloves
2. Only pick up trash & debris on the surface
3. Never reach into storm drains
4. Wear bright clothing and be mindful of traffic
5. Sharp objects can pierce plastic bags; use a bucket or can instead

GrateKeeper Volunteers Help Prevent

- flooding on land
- algae blooms in rivers
- plastic & other harmful waste entering waterways



**E-mail Ben Halberton with any questions
ben@alleghenycleanways.org**

Borrow our Litter Kits!



E-mail Lyssa Eberhardt with any questions
lyssa@alleghenycleanways.org

Education & Outreach



**E-mail Ben Kusserow (me!) with any questions
benk@alleghenycleanways.org**



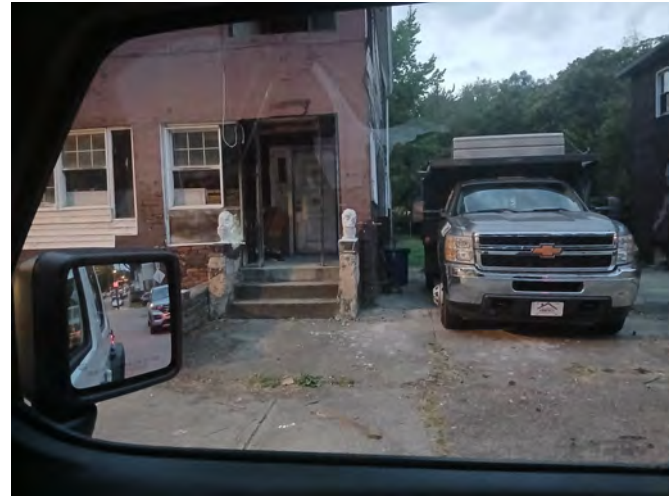
*Ms. Donna,
East Hills Resident*

Private Property Cleanup

Before



After



Before



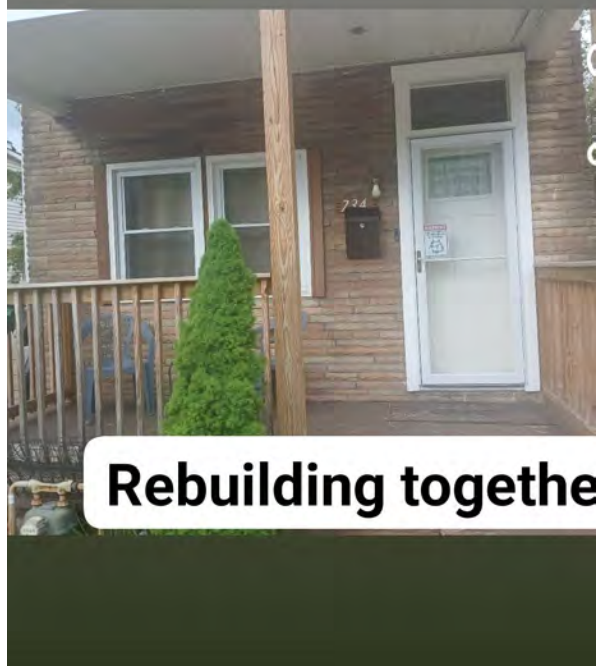
During



After



Rebuilding Together

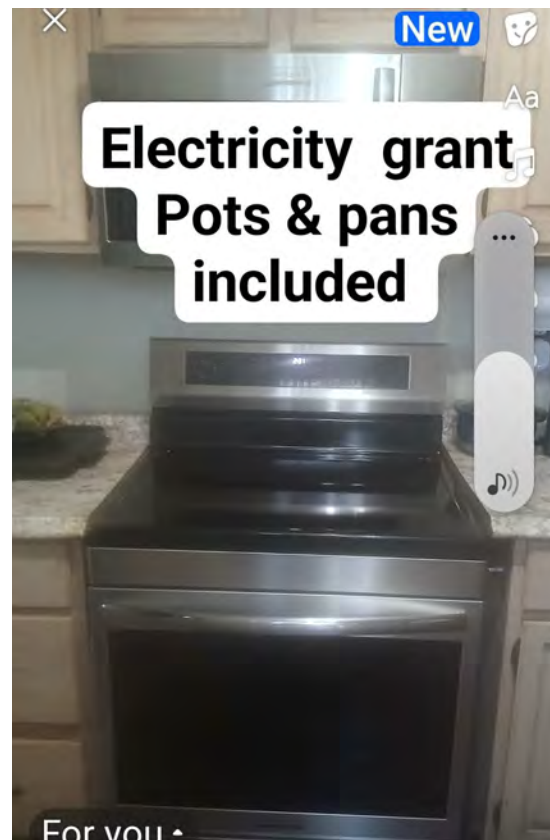
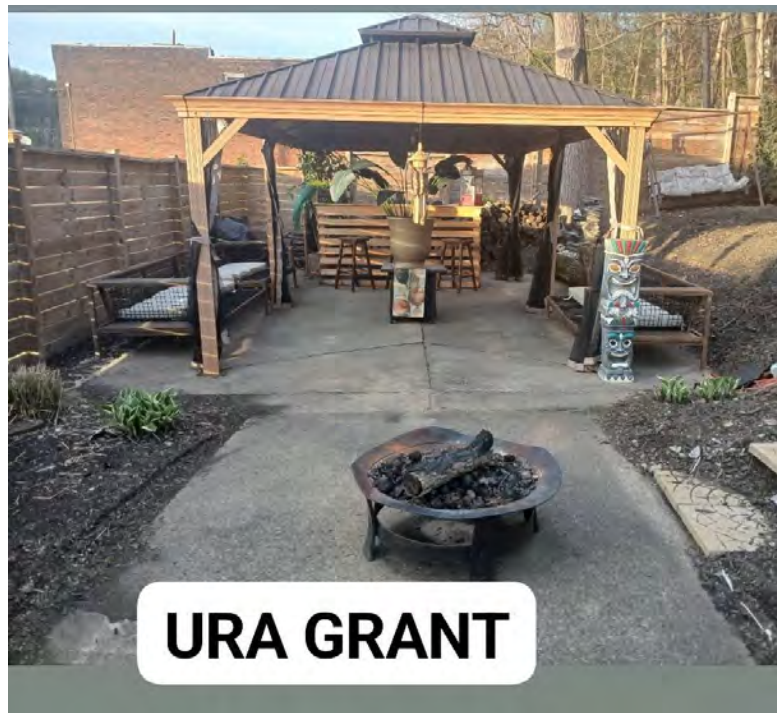




Rebuilding Together



URA



Collective Discussion

- *What are the most important ideas, insights, or skills you're taking away from today's session?*
- *How does the topic we explored today relate to your own experiences or your community's experiences?*
- *After today's discussion, what kinds of changes or improvements would you like to see in your community?*
- *How do you see yourself contributing to future efforts connected to today's theme or to broader community change?*



Reminder of our collective agreement:

- Make space and hold space for people so that there is an equal distribution of roles, responsibilities and collective contribution.
- Only one person speaks at a time.
- No one knows everything; together we know a lot.
- Respect each others' opinions even, or especially, if you don't agree with them.
- Acknowledge the difference between intent and impact.
- Be conscious of time.
- Stay grounded in the written project goals.
- Maintain the confidentiality of this discussion.

Two green leaves with yellow speckles are positioned in the top left and top right corners of the image.

See you on Thursday September 10!

A large, light green oval with a white border is centered in the image, containing the text 'Thank You' in a dark green script font.

Thank You