

# Working Together: The St. Louis Vacancy Summit Final Report

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Submitted by Stacy Ross

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## Introduction

The St. Louis Vacancy Summit was convened by the St. Louis Association of Community Organizations' (SLACO) Vacancy Committee, in cooperation with the City of St. Louis on, Friday, February 24, 2017. The day-long summit was intended to introduce a diverse group of stakeholders to each other and facilitate a discussion about St. Louis's vacancy problem.

The planning committee carefully considered whether to hold the summit on a weekday or on a Saturday. The committee recognized that, realistically, elected officials were less likely to participate on a Saturday. For this first event, the committee decided to hold the summit on a Friday. Because many residents could not take off work, a particular effort was made to encourage neighborhood leaders to attend, with the idea that they would bring information back to other residents.

Because of the relatively small capacity of the venue (100), and the need to have a balanced mix of stakeholders, the summit was invitation-only. More than 400 individuals were invited and final attendance was 102, including two walk-ins. The breakdown of participants by sector was as follows

- Neighborhood representatives 40%
- Non-profit representatives 35%
- Government agencies and elected officials 25%

Participants were assigned to one of nine tables and stayed in their groups for the entire day. Table assignments were carefully balanced with representatives from each sector. The agenda was divided into three sections An opening tone-setting session, presentations of existing reports about vacancy and a final wrap-up session and discussion on next steps (*Appendix B*).

## Session 1 – Tone-setting

*Responses in quotes are lightly edited comments; those not in quotes are paraphrased.*

The opening “tone-setting” session offered an opportunity for participants to get to know their tablemates and share their experiences as they responded to the question “How does vacancy affect you?” They were asked to consider the question from personal, professional, city and regional perspectives and write their answers on Post-its. The responses from the session represent participants' feelings and perspectives when they walked into the room, before they had heard any of the presentations.

The 483 individual responses were sorted into 13 broad topics (*Appendix C*) The following selected responses represent significant themes that emerged for each perspective. The number of responses in each category is not necessarily relevant to this analysis; many comments were difficult to categorize without additional context and could be relevant to multiple categories. The intention of this analysis is to give a sense of the experiences that participants entered the discussion with, and to further humanize and illustrate the challenges of vacancy in the region.

## **Personal**

The most significant personal impact of vacancy was crime (26%), which was cited twice as often as any other category. Other significant impacts included neighborhood image (14%), property value (13%), psychological repercussions (9%), and vacancy as an opportunity (8%).

## **Crime/Safety**

Many of these comments could also fall under the psychological category as they suggest being in a constant state of uneasiness or fear.

- “Raped in vacant home at gunpoint”
- “My niece was dragged into a vacant building and raped about 25 years ago”
- “My daughter is uneasy about walking past vacant houses and lots”
- “Vacancy affects many aspects—Safety, beauty, residents moving to the neighborhood”
- “Vacancy encourages illegal dumping of trash and other waste next door to my home”
- “Neighborhood fires cause panic”
- “Attract homeless stolen property, showering in back yard, doing drugs in back yard”
- “My family does not feel safe surrounded by vacancies”
- “Vacant property next door has pest problems, rodent problems... varmints, raccoons, possums, rats”
- “Illegal use of buildings, airborne mold, lead, stray animals”

## **Negative Image**

- “No scenic ride home”
- “Don't feel proud of my community”
- “Looks like/perceived as place people don't want to live, not safe, perception of a failing neighborhood”
- “Makes us look poor and neglected”

## **Property Value**

How many ways can you say “Vacancy lowers property values”? Most comments were a variation of these four words.

- “Vacancy affects property value”
- “Unable to get a home equity loan”
- Effect on neighborhoods as property values decline

## **Psychological**

- “No neighbors for 19 years”
- “Eyesore out my kitchen window – a constant bit of negative energy”
- Fear of raising children in the neighborhood where you grew up
- “It's depressing to see the abandonment of billions of dollars of previous investment”

- “Negatively impacts the residents who have already suffered the most”

### **Economic Development**

- “Vacancy means to me I don’t have any viable stores to shop in an area”
- “Vulnerable to speculators”

### **Professional**

Many participants work professionally in fields or neighborhoods impacted by vacancy. The impact of vacancy was felt on their own business (such as being a landlord), as well as on neighborhood economics. Significant themes included economic development (25%) and opportunities for investment (25%).

### **Economic Development**

- “As a landlady vacancies make it hard to recruit good renters”
- “Very complicated to educate and engage residents to understand redevelopment processes”
- “Brings property values down for houses that customers want to sell next to or near vacant properties”
- “Hard to sell in unaccredited school districts with high vacancy. It is vicious cycle”
- “Businesses do not see the area as an opportunity to make money”
- “Spend lots of time talking about redlining, disinvestment”
- “Vacancy is the result of many policy decisions that devalue a neighborhood”
- “To ensure future reinvestment, clean up and stabilize vacant properties”

### **Negative Image**

- “Discourages bringing professionals into area. Discourages them from moving into neighborhoods”
- “Awkward to invite professionals and individual clients to come to the area”

### **City**

There was significant overlap between personal experiences and city-wide impacts. Significant themes included psychological impact, depopulation, and vacancy as an opportunity. Several other relevant points included potential for redundancy in addressing vacancy, and divisions created in the city.

### **Psychological**

- “Neighborhoods and residents most affected have decreased hope, resiliency, pride for community and a sense of being heard and respected by ‘government’”
- “Creates negative impression, sense of hopelessness, sense of abandonment”
- “Vacancy is polarizing. Negative view on the city. Quality of life issues”
- “Negative psychological impact on youth within the neighborhood”

## Depopulation

- “My children live in San Francisco and Chicago because they are more vibrant places”
- “Our young people leave city after graduating”
- Makes the county more attractive to families
- “Hurts SLPS because of real and perceived decline of neighborhoods. Flight to suburbs decreases school funding via property taxes”

## Region

Participants also reflected on the regional impact of vacancy. They remarked on how to get the County and the surrounding region engaged in issues of vacancy that seem primarily within the City limits.

- “One of the greatest challenges is convincing those not living among vacant properties that this is a regional issue”
- “There is competition for incentives—blight in Clayton vs blight in north city”
- “Perpetuates county's fiscal abuse of the city”

## All Perspectives

### Vacancy as Opportunity

Vacancy as an opportunity was mentioned in all categories, with particularly strong responses from a professional and city-wide perspectives.

- “Vacancy has successfully given me a reason to become involved and purchase property and become a landlord” “
- “As a homeless person having a place to renovate would be of great help”
- “I have purchased the 2 vacant lots adjacent to my home”
- “Vacant lots provide an opportunity for gardens and community spaces”
- “Vacancy offers opportunities for refugee and immigrant housing”
- “Vacancy has provided me with the opportunity to work with residents and charity, towards a shared vision for the future”
- “Switched career path entirely due to vacancy in order to focus on this tremendous opportunity to reshape St. Louis and connect city residents to nature”
- “Opportunities to do something better”
- “Buildable lots”

### Other

- Concerned that work on vacancy issues will be redundant and/or ineffective without strategic community-focused plan in which all sectors/ stakeholders play a role
- “Need one organization to oversee and all people contribute”
- “Vacancy seems to have created division in the city and reinforces negative impacts racism has had on the city”

- “Very complicated to educate and engage residents to understand redevelopment processes”
- “African American families don’t gain equity”
- “These historic buildings need a savior”

## **Themes**

- Vacancy as a part of everyday life
- Crime, constant state of uneasiness
- Negative image of their neighborhoods
- Declining property values
- Vacancy as opportunity

## **Session 2 - Center for Community Progress Report**

The second session was an overview of the Center for Community Progress (CCP) report *Developing a Vision and Shared Strategy to Address Vacancy and Abandonment in the City of St. Louis*

The report is the result of a technical assistance grant from the CCP, a national organization whose mission is to help cities reduce vacancy. The study took a broad view of vacant property in the city of St. Louis, both publicly and privately owned, and was released in June, 2016. Don Roe, director of the city’s planning and urban development department gave the presentation.

The report suggests nine broad strategies, the first of which is to establish a task force to address vacancy. Other strategies include reducing the time frame for delinquent property tax enforcement, increasing property values, and adding green space. Proposed tactics are offered for each.

Many of the tactics start with collecting baseline data. A significant number require legislative action and/or policy changes.

For this session, each table was asked to discuss the following questions

- What do you see as the most accessible opportunities from the report? Why?
- What do you see as challenges to accomplishing these recommendations? Why?
- What resources are needed to move these recommendations forward? Why?
- What additional questions do you have about these recommendations?

Participants recorded their responses on Post-it notes. Based the responses, the small group discussions appeared to have been brain-storming sessions as most of the opportunities participants identified weren’t specifically addressed in the report.

## **Most Accessible**

- Neighborhood Involvement
  - Ensuring residents feel they are a part of the plans
  - Use participatory budgeting to engage community

- More citizen votes in neighborhood decisions, especially task forces, about these issues
  - Wards make common decision if trying to save property
- Community education i.e. plans for their neighborhood.
- Communication between neighborhoods that are next to each other
- What can residents do themselves?
  - Build on what neighborhoods are already doing
  - Identify community projects that folks could work on
- Get courts, public safety involved
- Community service–restorative justice (work in gardens etc.)
- Involving kids in the community
  - Education
  - Mowing vacant lots
  - Linking H.S. volunteer hours to improving neighborhood projects
- Strong marketing – model after private market, realtor.com
- “Adopt-a-block” program – local business takes care of vacant lots
- Allocate money for code violation enforcement/legal approaches
- Engage new mayor – Fresh set of eyes on vacancy issues
- Expedite tax citation process; reduce the timeframe for collection of back property taxes (*Strategy 2) (Appendix D)*)
- Streamline LRA acquisition process
- Develop operational plan – all work on the same plan
- Citywide plan (not by ward)–prioritized across city (not per ward project)
- Urban Homesteading
- Grants for first-time home buyers
- Incentives for public employees teachers, police, fire, city workers, to purchase vacant/LRA properties

## Challenges

- Siloed efforts on vacancy issues may be redundant and/or ineffective without a strategic community-focused plan that all sectors/stakeholders play a role in.
- Piecemeal/fragmentation is problem – need strategic, structured plan
- Need one organization to oversee plan with all people contributing and reporting to the overarching entity
- History of neighborhoods not being part of conversation (Having plans imposed on them)
- Want to have a voice—need neighborhood buy-in
- Lack of consensus among residents
- Take a proactive approach to planning rather than waiting for developer to tell us what to do
- Need community education
- Trouble with wards—political will/attention
  - Have to have willingness to collaborate
  - Consensus among Wards (seeing selves as part of whole)
- Not enough staff for inspections, code enforcement & planning
- Need curable titles/ insurance
- Lack of demand
- Greenspace

- Can't be too much green space because it makes areas too empty to attract families
- Non-tax-paying "green space" is not a viable strategy. Does not solve issue
- Getting banks (usually national) involved, especially on reselling foreclosed properties
- Large developers, speculators, just trade one problem for another
- Parts of city not covered by CDC (Community Development Corp.)
- Avoid a cookie-cutter approach. What works for one neighborhood is not equivalent to what works for another
- Inconsistent approach to valuing properties (bringing consistency to assessment process)
- Lack of focus on neighborhood level
- Recommendations have to go to the state legislature
- Getting cooperation from state and working with legislature
- Tax abatements and TIFs in already stable areas – redlining

### **Resources Needed**

- People/materials to educate residents
- Clear tax abatement policy
- Lobbyist to push the state legislature to make needed changes
- More LRA staff
- Resources for prevention
- Funding to take care of new green space
- Out-of-box-thinking

### **Themes**

- Residents need a voice and want participation in planning and execution
- Enforce, speed up existing policies
- Concern about fragmentation, lack of overall plan
- Political challenges at city and state level
- Need for consistency across city for incentives and property valuation
- Desire for creative thinking

## **Session 3 - St. Louis Land Bank Assessment**

The third session was a presentation of the St. Louis Land Bank Assessment (EPA/AK) issued in February, 2017. Presenters were David Doyle, Sustainable Communities Coordinator with the US EPA, which commissioned the assessment; and Alexandra Miller, consultant for Asakura Robinson, the firm that performed the assessment and wrote the report. Unlike the broader CCP report, this assessment looked only at vacant property owned by the LRA. It lists six goals and recommendations for achieving the goals. It also references strategies from the CCP report. In this session, unlike the CCP session, participants referred to specific goals and recommendations from the report. (*Appendix D*)

Once again, participants in their small groups were asked to address the following questions

- What do you see as the most accessible opportunities from the report? Why?
- What do you see as challenges to accomplishing these recommendations? Why?

- What resources are needed to move these recommendations forward? Why?
- What additional questions do you have about these recommendations?

## Most Accessible

- Update website—more user-friendly site separate from stlouis.mo.gov (*Recommendation 4.1*)
- Partner with tech start-ups (hackers, nonprofit partners, other agencies)
- Formalize policies and procedures; Define mission and vision of LRA (*Recommendation 2.1*)
- Implement best practices (*recommended throughout the report*)
- Prioritize demolition through a racial equity lens (*Recommendation 3.5*)
- Make it easier to obtain property information. Clarify criteria for purchase and Mow-to- Own (*Recommendation 4.3*)
- Using outside realtors/MLS to market properties (*Recommendation 4.2*)
- Better signage is doable without a ton of money (*Recommendation 4.2*)
- Have phone number for each property for interested buyers to call (*Recommendation 4.2*)
- When LRA property is for sale, disseminate info to neighborhood – link in email, list contact info for buyer (*Goal 4*)
- Clear messaging; Transparency (*Goal 4*)
- Predictability; Trust (*Goal 4*)
- More engagement with communities through volunteer boards
- Engage/collaborate with veterans groups
- Empower people with knowledge (*Recommendation 4.4*)
- Create “support group” for buyers. Those who have been through the process can help others. Rehab help etc. Could have speakers, someone from LRA? (*Recommendation 4.4*)
  - *SLACO LRA subcommittee has presented two well-received workshops for potential home buyers similar to what is described above)*
- Identify properties that are most easily rehabbed
- Increase staffing/prioritize LRA program (*Goal 5*)

## Challenges

- Disconnect in public understanding of LRA and its limitations (*Recommendation 4.4*)
- LRA needs to improve communication to improve neighborhoods’ trust (*Goal 4*)
- Coordination between departments (*Recommendations 3.2 and 3.3, Goal 6*)
- Staff, time constraints (*Goal 5*)
  - Marketing specialist
  - Innovation specialist
- When the city takes a property for back taxes or eminent domain development it needs to use same formulas for all be transparent (*Goal 4*)
- Process seems accessible only to developers (mostly) (*Recommendation 4.4*)
- Community/stakeholder buy-in (*Goal 4*)
- Not a City budget priority
- Political leadership
- State legislature

- Lack of Comprehensive Plan (*Recommendation 6.3*)
- Maintenance money
- Too much bureaucracy
- Need flexibility
- Restrictive building codes and requirements
- Board-ups typically only on ground floor. Deterioration continues
- LRA housing stock is poor (generally)
- Internal organizational culture
- Problems with/lack of data (*Recommendation 6.1*)
  - Data is not easily accessible (even internal city data)
  - Data entry errors /issues
  - Need accurate data to be able to get interactive map online
  - Provide easier public access to data

### **Resources Needed**

- Funding/staff members
- Need pro-bono lawyers/ universities
- More interns, more university students
- Database manager-Someone to pull the data together to see all vacant property
- Lobbyist
- Better construction loan products

### **Questions**

- How do we make sure any new policies and practices are guided by/implemented by diverse representation?
- Have other early generation land banks successfully changed/updated?
- Are there legal options for increases in revenue? Permit fee?
- Can planning and design agencies share staff?

### **Themes**

- Most Accessible
  - New website, streamlined process, access to information
  - Clear messaging, transparency
  - Marketing, signage
- Challenges
  - Lack of LRA staff/resources
  - Problems with/lack of data
  - Political challenges at city and state level
  - Bureaucracy

## Group Discussion and Next Steps

During the final session of the summit, participants pushed for creation of a new task force, the first recommendation in both the CCP and EPA/AK reports. Participants want the new task force to come to a common understanding about vacancy, identify opportunities and Identify any missing stakeholders.

Participants said they want the task force to build on the work of the SLACO Vacancy Committee. They asked that the work of the Legal Tools, Best Practices and LRA subcommittees continue. Participants also had specific recommendations regarding creation of a task force.

- Bring all stakeholders to a common understanding of problem and its causes (make sure the entire city is included)
- Start developing goals
- Engage the new administration
- Identify other initiatives and missing stakeholders
  - Forward Through Ferguson
  - Proposition NS (proposed bond issue to address LRA-owned vacant properties)
  - PIER Plan
- Determine most effective ways to engage
- Identify opportunities for prevention
- Develop educational tool
- Pursue legislative recommendations

## Summary

The first session set a baseline of participants' perspectives coming into the summit. Crime and safety were undeniably of most concern to participants. It is also clear that many aspects of vacancy weigh heavily on those who live and work near vacant properties. **Simple, low-cost ways to improve the appearance of their neighborhoods would give residents a psychological boost in a short period of time.** A significant number see opportunity in vacant property.

In the second session, the presentation of the CCP's broader view of vacancy, participants expressed opinions and brainstormed ideas. **They emphasized the need for active neighborhood participation, and a cohesive, inclusive plan to address vacancy.** They are concerned about fragmented and siloed efforts and want policies enforced consistently. They are realistic about the political challenges they face at the city and state level.

In their summit evaluations, participants overwhelmingly named the LRA assessment presentation as most useful. This was made clear by the participants' embrace of the goals and recommendations of the EPA/AK report.

Participants identified a comprehensive plan, a new website with better access to information, a streamlined LRA purchase process, clear and transparent communication, and a strong marketing effort as the most accessible recommendations from the report.

As with the CCP report, many of the recommendations include legislative changes. **Participants reiterated that ward politics and state legislators are potential roadblocks. Errors in data, lack of data and lack of access to data are also challenges.** Suspicion and distrust have characterized the relationship between the LRA and residents for many years. The report made clear that the lack of LRA staff and resources severely limits its ability to address vacancy. After hearing the Asakura Robinson presentation, participants acknowledged the disconnect between the public's perception of the LRA and reality. Bureaucracy and inconsistent application of statutes and policies are additional concerns for the participants.

Both the CCP and EPA/AK reports make creation of a new vacancy task force the number one priority. Summit participants agree; they are eager for progress. They identified specific steps they'd like see a new task force take.

The CCP report recommends that the new task force develop benchmarks on the direct and indirect costs of vacancy, to include police and fire calls, nuisance abatement, board-up and demolition, lost property tax revenue and lost property value.

Several of these factors were addressed during two short presentations at the summit. Capt. Garon Mosby of the St. Louis Fire Department gave a presentation on the human cost of fighting fires in vacant buildings. Jonah Klein-Barton, an economics major at Washington University, followed with a presentation on a study he conducted during an internship in Mayor Francis Slay's office in the summer of 2016. He looked at many of the costs cited in the CCP report, including lost revenue and property value. A handout of his calculation of lost property tax revenue is in *(Appendix E)*. The city has not released the rest of Klein-Barton's report, which looks at several of the other costs mentioned in the report.

*SLACO and the St. Louis Vacancy Summit planning committee would like to acknowledge T-REX co-working space for their generous and accommodating use of their facility, and Liz Kramer and the Office for Socially Engaged Practice, Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, Washington University in St. Louis for the tireless work Liz did in helping to plan and facilitate the summit. We couldn't have done it without her!*

## **Appendix A**

### **Summit Planning Committee**

Stacy Ross, Chair  
Holly Hills Improvement Association

Lillie Clay,  
Fairground Neighborhood Revitalization  
Organization

Angela Drake  
Tandy Neighborhood Improvement Association

Dana Malkus  
Associate Clinical Professor, Entrepreneurship and  
Community Development Clinic, St. Louis University  
School of Law

David Stiffler  
Equifax Foundation

Sundy Whiteside  
Walnut Park East Neighborhood Association

### **Summit Facilitator**

Liz Kramer  
Assistant Director, Office for Socially Engaged Practice, Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, Washington  
University in St. Louis

### **New Task Force Steering Committee**

Tracy Boaz Regional Supervisor, Missouri Department of Conservation, Rebecca Weaver Green City Coalition

Patrick Brown  
Chief Resilience Officer, City of St. Louis

Sal Martinez  
Executive Director, North Newstead Association, and Pres., Community Builders Network

Sean Spencer  
Executive Director, Tower Grove Neighborhoods CDC,

Dottie McDowell  
Neighborhood Development Executive, City of St. Louis, Department of Public Safety,

Matt Schindler  
Executive Director, Gateway Greening

Rhonda Smythe  
Program Officer, Missouri Foundation for Health,

Dana Malkus  
Associate Clinical Professor, Entrepreneurship and Community Development Clinic,  
St. Louis University School of Law

Sundy Whiteside  
Walnut Park East Neighborhood Association

## **Appendix B**

### **THE ST. LOUIS VACANCY SUMMIT February 24, 2017**

#### **T-Rex Technology Entrepreneur Center**

##### **8:00AM Check-in**

Help yourself to coffee and a light breakfast. We'll have additional materials out you may wish to review. Please sit at your assigned table throughout the day.

##### **9:00AM Welcome and Overview of SLACO Vacancy Committee**

Kevin McKinney, SLACO Executive Director

Stacy Ross, SLACO Vacancy Committee Chair

Dana Malkus, Legal Tools Subcommittee Chair, Associate Clinical Professor, Entrepreneurship and Community Development Clinic, St. Louis University School of Law

Vacant and abandoned properties bring with them a multitude of challenges for our neighborhoods. Vacancy has many causes and contributing factors, and it calls for focused and innovative solutions that bring together a wide coalition of stakeholders. Today's event is intended to share information and to focus on next steps.

##### **9:20AM Small Group Discussion: Impact of Vacancy**

Liz Kramer, Assistant Director, Office for Socially Engaged Practice, Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts.

In this session, we will explore the ways in which we are impacted by issues of vacancy personally, professionally, in the City, and across the region.

##### **9:45AM Vacancy Context**

Patrick Brown, Acting Chief of Staff to Mayor Slay; Director, Office of Resiliency

The City of St. Louis has already begun to focus on the need for solutions. In this session, we will provide some context for the two reports that will be discussed today.

##### **10:00AM The Cost of Vacancy**

Captain Garon Mosby, St. Louis Fire Department

Jonah Klein-Barton, Washington University Student (Economics)

As one example of the cost of vacancy, this session will highlight the human toll vacant buildings present for our city's firefighters. This session will then provide key information resulting from months of work Jonah Klein-Barton has done investigating the true cost of vacancy and its economic domino effect. For example, lower property values lead to lower tax revenues which lead to less funding for schools, which in turn causes people to move out of the City and thus more vacancy.

## **“Developing a Shared Vision and Strategies to Address Vacancy and Abandonment in the City of St. Louis” (Center for Community Progress Report to the LRA, June 2016)**

Don Roe, Director, Planning and Urban Design, City of St. Louis

In 2015, the City of St. Louis was awarded a technical assistance scholarship from the Center for Community Progress, a Flint, Michigan-based non-profit focusing solely on vacancy and blight. This session will provide key highlights from the report and an opportunity to discuss the report’s recommendations.

### **12:30PM Lunch**

Choice of chicken salad, grilled chicken club or veggie sandwich box lunches will be available just outside the main room. Seating is available in the open area

### **1:30PM St. Louis Land Bank Assessment: Final Report**

David Doyle, Sustainable Communities Coordinator, US Environmental Protection Agency

Alexandra Miller, Principal, Asakura Robinson

In 2014, the White House selected St. Louis for technical assistance under the Strong Cities, Strong Communities initiative. The program focused federal agency resources on addressing economic issues in a community. As part of this initiative, city officials asked the EPA for an assessment of the LRA. EPA commissioned the Austin-based urban planning and design firm Asakura Robinson to conduct this assessment. This session will provide key highlights from the report and an opportunity to discuss the report’s recommendations.

### **3:00PM Group Discussion and Next Steps**

Liz Kramer, Assistant Director, Office for Socially Engaged Practice, Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts.

Stacy Ross, SLACO Vacancy Committee Chair

Dana Malkus, Legal Tools Subcommittee Chair, Associate Clinical Professor, Entrepreneurship and Community Development Clinic, St. Louis University School of Law

This session will focus on facilitated discussion intended to help determine priorities and next steps for moving forward.

### **4:00PM Conclusion**

Kevin McKinney, SLACO Executive Director

Please be sure to complete the survey and leave it at the registration table. The survey will provide important information in planning next steps.

*The summit was sponsored by The St. Louis Association of Community Organization’s Vacancy Committee in cooperation with the City of St. Louis Vacancy Task Force.*

## Appendix C

### Tone-setting Topics

The 483 comments from our perspectives were then sorted into 13 topics

Perspective	Crime/ Safety	Image	Property Value	Econ Develop	Opportunity	Psychology	Other	Cost	Social justice	Loss of history/ architecture	Population Loss	City/ County relationship	Bureaucracy	Loss of community	Total
PERSONAL	34	18	17	5	10	12	12	1	4	3	4	2	1	3	126
PROFESSIONAL	6	4	6	22	22	5	24	2	7	3	0	8	6	1	116
CITY	22	36	21	19	16	9	5	19	6	3	12	3	3	2	176
REGION	5	16	4	7	3	0	3	3	3	1	8	12	0	0	65
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>483</b>

## **Appendix D**

### **Report Recommendations**

Preliminary steps have been taken to form a new task force recommended in both reports (Appendix A). The following are additional strategies and recommendations that come directly from the CCP and LRA/EPA reports that participants identified as most accessible.

#### **Developing a Vision and Shared Strategy to Address Vacancy and Abandonment in the city of St. Louis (CCP)**

Strategy #2 Reduce the timeframe for delinquent property tax enforcement and housing and building code enforcement by 75 percent

#### **St. Louis Land Bank Assessment Final Report (EPA/AK)**

Goal 2.

Formalize LRA policies and procedures.

The LRA's operations have evolved over time...However, many of these processes are not documented in a formal manner, leaving the LRA vulnerable to unexpected changes in its relationships, political forces that can hamper the LRA's ability to use its limited resources strategically, and hampered in its ability to share information with the public about how the authority determines its priorities.

The consultant team highly recommends that the LRA work to formalize a number of policies, procedures, and operational relationships, with assistance from the SLDC, Mayor's Office, and potential private and pro-bono consultant assistance.

Goal 3.

Manage vacant properties comprehensively

Recommendation 3.2

Work with the Collector of Revenue to understand the full tax-delinquent property inventory and develop strategic enforcement mechanisms to shape the properties acquired by the LRA each year.

Recommendation 3.3

Define a comprehensive maintenance program that includes target standards for maintenance and stabilization for all properties in the LRA inventory.

Recommendation 3.5

Adopt a set of demolition standards for prioritization of demolition funds based on existing internal standards and best practices. Formalize current ranking system and demolition practices by adopting and adhering to adopted policy.

#### Goal 4. Foster clear communication and transparency to build trust

Media coverage and community feedback on the LRA reveals a perceived lack of transparency in LRA policy that has sometimes created conflict between residents, policymakers, and the LRA. Much of this lack appears to arise from a dearth of adequate systems and resources to convey information to the public; issues also arise from the need to more clearly define and publicize LRA policies and procedures in order to create greater public understanding about the priorities and constraints that guide the authority's actions. Clarifying and publicizing LRA decision-making systems, and creating clear understanding about the LRA's inventory, programs, requirements for purchasers, and public meetings will help build public trust and support.

##### Recommendation 4.1

Develop a new, stand-alone website for the LRA based on national best practices.

##### Recommendation 4.2

Institute an immediate signage policy for LRA properties that have been sold and are undergoing rehabilitation, and active community greening projects on LRA land. In the next five years, expand this policy to include signage on all LRA properties.

##### Recommendation 4.3

Allow the public to sign up for email notifications of LRA public meetings.

##### Recommendation 4.4

Develop tailored materials to provide seminars or learning sessions about requirements for purchase and rehabilitation of LRA property to groups of varying levels of capacity.

##### Recommendation 4.5

Ensure the Annual Report, website, and news articles publicize LRA's strategic plans and successful programs in order to increase community understanding of LRA activities.

#### Goal 5.

Grow the LRA's staffing and financial resources.

The LRA is deeply constrained by the staffing and financial resources available to perform its daily functions. While the current LRA staff are deeply committed to their work, attempting to add additional duties without enhancing the agency's funding and staff capacity will be a very difficult proposition.

#### Goal 6.

Build and solidify partner-ships to further the LRA's mission.

##### Recommendation 6.1

Work with the IT department and other agencies to ensure that multiple sources of data related to vacancy can be reliably accessed and utilized with a single database.

State City priorities related to vacant land and redevelopment strategy in the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.

## Appendix E

### Cost of Vacancy

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Original research

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The problem of vacancy is a pressing one in St. Louis. Vacant buildings and lots across the city are a source of urban blight, depressing property values and the city's tax base, as well as discouraging newcomers from moving to the area. This not only lowers the city's ability to provide public services due to a lower tax base, but also requires that the city spend money every year on upkeep and maintenance of those vacant properties.

Not all vacancies are the same. It stands to reason that a crumbling, decrepit building will cause more blight to a neighborhood than one which happens to be chronically vacant but is otherwise untouched. It is known from past studies that the "low estimate" of the cost of vacancy is 1.12%. More accurately, this is the average value for buildings which are merely chronically vacant, but have little to no structural damage, while the average of 3.15% is the mean value of all types of vacancy.

To model this as best as possible, I have taken the number of vacancies which are in good, fair, poor, and demolition-recommended condition (as identified by Americorp surveyors) and put them along a normal distribution of blighting effects. 28.7% of surveyed vacant buildings in St. Louis are in good condition, 44.4% are in fair condition, 19% are in poor condition, and 7.9% were recommended for considering demolition. Using the mean blight value of 3.15% for the fiftieth percentile and 1.12% (the mean blight value for buildings in good condition) for the 14.35 percentile (the midpoint of the percent of vacant buildings in good condition), I calculated the percent blight values for the midpoints of other regions as shown in the following table.

Quality	Midpoint Percentile	Z Score	Blighting Effect
Good	14.35%	-1.0647	-1.12%
Fair	50.90%	0.0226	-3.19%
Poor	82.64%	0.94	-4.94%
Consider Demolition	96.05%	1.7565	-6.50%

Vacancies imposes a sizeable cost each year on the Forestry department. Lots that are vacant accumulate grass and debris, which have to be cleared regularly. All these activities fall on the Forestry Department. Based on FY16 numbers, a **total of \$5,230,141** is spent on maintenance of vacant lots and buildings alone each year.

It is important to note that the data provided does not differentiate between buildings and lots. Moreover, according to an interview with the Commissioner of Forestry, the current budget only allows for two cycles of debris and weed clearing every year, which is done over the summer. This translates to

a frequency of once every three months over the summer, which is suboptimal. A suboptimal frequency of debris and weed clearing may affect the aesthetics of neighborhoods with vacant lots and buildings and hence create further negative externalities. The negative externalities will be partially accounted for when we look at the decrease in property prices associated with vacancy in the neighborhood.

Throughout the city, vacant buildings put a large strain on the resources of our city’s building department. Over 600 vacant buildings are newly condemned each year for being structurally unsound. Each of these buildings needs to be fully boarded up at best or fully demolished at worst. With vacancies spread around the city, building inspectors must canvass the full city, identifying what buildings are structurally unsound, and each building takes approximately an hour and a half to verify if it must be condemned, at a pay rate of \$29.45/hour. When left in these dilapidated states, vacant buildings can move from merely causing blight to becoming threats to public safety as they are in danger of collapse. Sadly this can happen all too often in areas where there is no private sector push for renovation and development, and so it falls to the city and the taxpayers to bear all costs of stabilizing these properties. Board-ups alone cost the city over \$200 per building, and \$452,061 per year. Not only are these board-ups costing the city money, but as the city is boarding up almost 2,000 buildings a year, that’s 2,000 condemned buildings a year adding to the visual blight in our city and lowering property values.

In addition to the boarding up of unsecured vacant buildings throughout the city, the building department is responsible for demolishing those buildings which are public safety hazards. The associated costs from the past fiscal year are listed in the table below, costing the city approximately \$7,250 per demolition, or around \$1.5 million per year.

<b>One-Time Fall in Property Values</b>	\$405,423,434.19
<b>Loss in Tax Revenue</b>	\$7,703,407.46
<b>Cost to Forestry Department</b>	\$5,230,141.00
<b>Cost to Building Department</b>	\$1,905,893.15
<b><u>Total Annual Cost of Vacancy to City of St. Louis</u></b>	<b><u>\$14,839,441.61</u></b>