we can DO this!
A Five-Step, Fast-Track Blight Plan

by Chris Gulotta for the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania
We Can DO This! A Five-Step, Fast-Track Blight Plan
March 2016
by Christopher Gulotta
for the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania
Liz Hersh, Executive Director
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About the Author</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Audience</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where Do We Begin?</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the Five-Step, Fast-Track Method Works</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1: Gain Consensus for Developing a Comprehensive Blighted-Property Strategy</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement of Political Leadership</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment of Staff Resources</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities of the Staff</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement of Key Stakeholders</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2: Assess the Nature and Extent of the Blight</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Blighted Property in Urban Redevelopment Law</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blighted Properties Survey</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3: Convene Blight Task Force</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Task Force Meeting</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Task Force Meeting</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Task Force Meeting</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 4: Engage Municipal Officials</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Meeting of the Task Force:</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 5: Identify Priority Action Steps and Implement!</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to Implementation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Action Team</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Action Plan</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

— continued —
Results to Date of the Fast-Track Method ................................................................. 15
   McKean County .................................................................................................. 15
   Clearfield County .............................................................................................. 16
   Northumberland County .................................................................................... 17
Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 18
Acknowledgments ................................................................................................. 18
Housing Alliance Staff .......................................................................................... 19
2016 Board of Directors ....................................................................................... 19
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Gulotta is the former executive director of the Redevelopment and Housing Authorities of Cumberland County. In 2010, Chris left the authorities after 30 years to form The Gulotta Group, LLC, which provides technical assistance to community development professionals on a variety of issues, including organizational strategic planning and development, neighborhood revitalization, and community economic development. Chris has worked with a number of communities across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in addressing blighted-property concerns in general and forming land banks in particular.

ABOUT THE HOUSING ALLIANCE OF PENNSYLVANIA

Founded in 1985, the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania is a statewide membership and advocacy coalition that provides leadership and a common voice for policies, practices, and resources to ensure that all Pennsylvanians, especially those living with low incomes, have access to safe, decent, accessible, and affordable homes.

Today seen as a leading expert on blight policy, the Housing Alliance published its first research report in 2003. *Reclaiming Abandoned Pennsylvania* became an agenda for the new blight tools that have now become law including Blighted and Abandoned Property Conservatorship, Land Banks, and Property Donation.
INTRODUCTION

We Can Do This! A Five-Step, Fast-Track Blight Plan describes a systematic, proven, and inexpensive way for municipalities and counties to develop a comprehensive strategy to address blight. It is your “411,” a how-to guide for a local, customized, stakeholder-driven method.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Local leaders have long sought guidance in wrapping their arms around the blight problem so that the effort of preventing, remediating, and repurposing blighted properties can move forward.

Depending on the jurisdiction, these local leaders may come from the public, nonprofit, or private sector. They may be—

• **Elected officials** at the county and municipal levels

• **Appointed public officials** from a variety of public agencies, such as community development, housing, and planning

• **Nonprofit organizations** that seek to improve the quality of life in a community, including those engaged in economic development, neighborhood revitalization, and affordable housing

• **Business and civic leaders** concerned about their community’s future and health

WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

One frustration expressed by people who recognize the need to address blight in their communities is, “Where do we begin?” Attacking the challenge can be overwhelming, which frequently results in postponing efforts to deal with blighted properties.

Three counties in Pennsylvania—Clearfield, McKean, and Northumberland—have used the “Fast-Track Method” described in this publication to reach consensus on the most effective strategies to address their local blight. More about their experiences appears in brief case studies provided throughout the document as well as in the **Results to Date** section following Step 5.

Fast-Track Your Blight Plan

The perceived amount of time it takes to craft a comprehensive strategy to counter blight can cause communities to delay. The perception is that the process will be lengthy, costly, and burdensome to staff, who are already stretched thin. The process described in this guide, however, can be achieved in four months, and with minimal cost. It is proven, straightforward, streamlined, and effective.
HOW THE FIVE-STEP, FAST-TRACK METHOD WORKS

The process begins with a quick assessment of the local blight problem. A blight task force is established, meets to discuss the nature and extent of local blight, and identifies possible strategies to address it. Participants engage in a consensus-building exercise designed to help them select the strategies most appropriate for their community. A comprehensive blight strategy report documents what they have decided and is released at a joint meeting of the task force with local, county, and/or municipal officials. The meeting launches the implementation process.

- **Step 1:** Gain Consensus for Developing a Blight Plan
- **Step 2:** Assess the Nature and Extent of the Blight
- **Step 3:** Convene a Blight Task Force
- **Step 4:** Engage Municipal Officials
- **Step 5:** Identify Priority Action Steps and Implement Them

This Five-Step, Fast-Track Method has paid significant dividends for the counties that have embraced it. They have attracted new money to address blight, because funders increasingly want to see a comprehensive plan with clearly identified steps to carry it out, strong local buy-in, and consensus on how to move forward. A blight strategy builds confidence among funders and investors that the money will be well used and make an impact.
INTRO

Keys to Success

The following are essential ingredients in developing a successful comprehensive blighted-property strategy:

- Engagement of Political Leadership
- Commitment of Staff Resources
- Engagement of Stakeholders
- Assessment of the Nature and Extent of the Blight
- Engagement of Municipalities
- Commitment to Implementation

The keys are discussed in more detail under the various steps for completing the blight strategy plan.
STEP-BY-STEP EXPLANATION OF THE FAST-TRACK METHOD

Step 1: Gain Consensus for Developing a Comprehensive Blighted-Property Strategy

Engagement of Political Leadership

The decision to undertake a comprehensive blighted-property strategy should be made by the elected political leadership in the jurisdiction, whether that jurisdiction covers a county, a region within the county, or a single municipality. Although some political leaders will see the need for the strategy without any urging, a typical situation involves staff or local leaders’ approaching the political leadership about the strategy’s importance.

Gaining the support of political leaders is essential for several reasons. First, the political leadership is needed to appoint the members of the blight task force, which will develop the comprehensive blight strategy. This will add legitimacy to the task force’s work, so that its recommendations can hold weight. Second, costs may be incurred in completing the comprehensive blight strategy, particularly if an external facilitator is retained to help identify the most appropriate strategies for dealing with blight. The political leadership makes the final decision on the source of funds needed to complete the task force’s work.

Responsibilities of the Staff

The responsibilities of the staff include (a) engaging a facilitator to lead the process, (b) conducting the blighted-property assessment, and (c) handling task force administrative duties. These are described on the following page.

Commitment of Staff Resources

As mentioned above, one or more staff members in key organizations that see the importance of aggressively tackling blight will need to take the lead. That involves sitting down with the appropriate elected officials to talk about the need for a comprehensive blighted-property strategy. Assuming that staff members get the green light from political leaders, the work is just beginning.

Representatives of local organizations—such as economic development, redevelopment, community development, housing, planning commission, and local nonprofit staff—can encourage political leaders to see the value in this endeavor by connecting the dots between elected officials’ favorite policies or projects and preventing and remediating blight. As examples, policies may include economic development (specifically, creating jobs and expanding business activity), neighborhood revitalization, and reducing crime. Effective staff members or local leaders will be able to show how dealing with blighted properties translates into successful outcomes.
a. Engage the Services of an Internal or External Facilitator to Lead the Process

Because staff members from the lead agency may be unintentionally biased in favor or against certain strategies, and about the causes of blight, they should probably not facilitate the meetings. A consultant or external facilitator is an option, but funds will be needed to cover the expense. Another option is an experienced facilitator who lives in the community—possibly someone who works for a local company, college or university, or nonprofit agency. The role of the facilitator is described more fully in Step 3.

b. Conduct the Blighted-Property Assessment

Completing the blighted-property assessment is essential. Before the task force’s first meeting, staff members from the lead agency will need to draft and implement a survey instrument targeting municipalities.

c. Handle Administrative Duties When the Blighted-Property Task Force Convenes

Staff from the lead agency should be prepared to send meeting notices to task force members, keep notes of task force meetings, and assist in drafting the comprehensive blight strategy report. Even after the report is published, the work of the lead agency staff is not complete. They will need to convene an “action team” to focus on implementing the report’s recommendations.

Engagement of Key Stakeholders

To succeed, the jurisdiction will need to bring together key stakeholders who are directly or indirectly affected by blight.

Communities that have used this approach have included stakeholders in a task force charged with formulating a comprehensive strategy.

Criteria for selecting stakeholders to serve on such a task force might include those with particular insight, capacity, or resources to address the challenges of blighted properties. Representatives from county planning commissions, local government, economic development agencies, the county tax claim bureau, local chambers of commerce, nonprofit community development and housing organizations, councils of government, and redevelopment and housing authorities are typical organizations represented on the task force. To give the undertaking some legitimacy (as mentioned above), it is a good idea for a county or municipal government body to appoint the task force.

Case Study: McKean County

In McKean County, the redevelopment authority took a lead role in advocating for the formation of a blighted property task force. The authority’s executive director approached the county commissioners, offering to provide the staff services needed to support the task force’s work, including sending meeting notices and agendas, arranging for a meeting room, and reaching out to municipal officials to share the report’s recommendations.

Dusti Dennis, the redevelopment authority’s executive director, reports: “The work of the task force and the completion of the comprehensive blight strategy have given us a blueprint for effectively addressing blight in McKean County.”
**Step 2: Assess the Nature and Extent of the Blight**

A comprehensive strategy to address blight must be based on data, not anecdotes. Municipalities are often in the best position to supply information on the nature and extent of blighted properties, but they must be given a definition of blight. One complication encountered in crafting a comprehensive strategy is the variety of thoughts about what constitutes a blighted property. We recommend using the definition of blight from Pennsylvania’s Urban Redevelopment Law, because many legislative tools deployed to address blight require that targeted properties meet the law’s definition.

**Survey Questions about Municipal Effort**

Has the municipality enacted—

- A nuisance ordinance or property maintenance code?
- A landlord registration ordinance?
- A rental housing inspection program?
- A ticketing ordinance to address blight?
- An ordinance allowing the municipality to escrow fire insurance proceeds, as provided by state law?

**Definition of Blighted Property in Urban Redevelopment Law**

35 P.S. § 1712.1

(c) Blighted property shall include:

1. Any premises which because of physical condition or use is regarded as a public nuisance at common law or has been declared a public nuisance in accordance with the local housing, building, plumbing, fire and related codes.

2. Any premises which because of physical condition, use or occupancy is considered an attractive nuisance to children, including but not limited to abandoned wells, shafts, basements, excavations, and unsafe fences or structures.

3. Any dwelling which because it is dilapidated, unsanitary, unsafe, vermin-infested or lacking in the facilities and equipment required by the housing code of the municipality, has been designated by the department responsible for enforcement of the code as unfit for human habitation.

4. Any structure which is a fire hazard, or is otherwise dangerous to the safety of persons or property.

5. Any structure from which the utilities, plumbing, heating, sewerage or other facilities have been disconnected, destroyed, removed, or rendered ineffective so that the property is unfit for its intended use.

6. Any vacant or unimproved lot or parcel of ground in a predominantly built-up neighborhood, which by reason of neglect or lack of maintenance has become a place for accumulation of trash and debris, or a haven for rodents or other vermin.

7. Any unoccupied property which has been tax delinquent for a period of two years prior to the effective date of this act, and those in the future having a two-year tax delinquency.

8. Any property which is vacant but not tax delinquent, which has not been rehabilitated within one year of the receipt of notice to rehabilitate from the appropriate code enforcement agency.

9. Any abandoned property. A property shall be considered abandoned if: (i) it is a vacant or unimproved lot or parcel of ground on which a municipal lien for the cost of demolition of any structure located on the property remains unpaid for a period of six months; (ii) it is a vacant property or vacant or unimproved lot or parcel of ground on which the total of municipal liens on the property for tax or any other type of claim of the municipality are in excess of 150% of the fair market value of the property as established by the Board of Revisions of Taxes or other body with legal authority to determine the taxable value of the property; or (iii) the property has been declared abandoned by the owner, including an estate that is in possession of the property.
A good starting point is to ask municipalities to complete a survey about blight. The survey has three main elements: (a) identify problem properties in detail, (b) identify relevant locational information, and (c) identify what tools, if any, are already in place to address the problems.

**Identify Each Problem Property**
- What is the address of the blighted property?
- Who owns the property? For how long? Is the owner an absentee?
- Does the property have structures, or is it vacant?
- If the property is vacant, for how long?
- If the property is occupied, is it owner or renter occupied?
- Is the property tax delinquent? If so, at what stage (such as judicial sale or county repository)?
- Is the property subject to a foreclosure action or owned by an estate?
- (OPTIONAL) Provide photos of each property (can be taken with smart phones by volunteers or students).

**Identify Relevant Locational Information**
It is helpful to know whether the property is located on a gateway street, in a neighborhood revitalization area, in a central business district, or in a floodplain. The information will be useful in determining funding that might be available to address the problem. It may also help in prioritizing which problems to tackle first, because the community will probably be unable to take on all problem properties at once.

**Identify Existing Tools to Address Blight**
The last portion of the survey should document what the municipality is already doing to address blight. A municipality may indicate that it has a problem with blighted properties but has no effective nuisance ordinance or property maintenance code. If the municipality does have ordinances to address blighted properties, it is important to determine the extent to which the ordinances cover issues such as abandoned vehicles, uncut vegetation, dangerous structures, and the improper disposal of trash.

*A sample municipal survey of blighted properties is provided on the following two pages.*

The lead organization—such as the redevelopment authority, community development agency, or planning commission—can take responsibility for mailing or emailing the survey and compiling the results. Consideration should be given to using an online survey product, such as Survey Monkey, to save time and money. To increase the response rate, follow-up calls will be needed to municipalities that don’t return the survey on time.

When the survey results are compiled, a picture of the nature and extent of blight will emerge, as will a sense of the effectiveness of municipal efforts to address the blight. If possible, the data should be mapped. Local universities and colleges are often a useful resource for mapping or GIS services. The information will lay the foundation for the task force’s work in crafting the comprehensive blighted-property strategy.

**Case Study: Clearfield County**
Jodi Brennan and Lisa Kovalick of the Clearfield County Planning Commission took the lead in the blight assessment process by drafting the survey document and sending it to municipalities. Thirty-three of 51 municipalities responded. Twenty-four of the 33 responded that they had a blighted- or abandoned-property problem. Sixteen of the 33 reported that they had no property maintenance code and that 70% of the 323 blighted properties were located in communities that had no property maintenance code.

Rental properties led the list of types of properties that were blighted, but only three municipalities had a rental registration ordinance. “This information was extremely helpful to the task force in looking at the cause of blighted properties and crafting solutions,” said Brennan, the planning commission’s executive director.
Blighted Properties Survey

Name of Municipality: ____________________________
Person Completing this Survey: ____________________
Address: ______________________________________
City: __________________ State: __________ Zip: __________
Phone: __________________ Email: __________________

Please use the following definition when completing this survey:

A property is considered blighted when...

- The property exhibits signs of deterioration sufficient to constitute a threat to human health and safety or,
- The property has been declared a public nuisance by the local government or,
- The property is an attractive nuisance to children including abandoned wells, shafts, basements, and unsafe fences or structures or,
- Any structure from which the utilities, plumbing, heating, sewerage of other basic facilities have been removed or disconnected so the property is unfit for human habitation or,
- The property has otherwise been declared by the municipality as unfit for human habitation or,
- The land is abandoned for at least six months and there are unpaid municipal liens against the property or the liens placed against a property are 150% in excess of the value of the property.

1. Do you feel that blighted properties are a problem in your municipality?  □ Yes  □ No

2. How many blighted properties are in your municipality? _______

3. Please provide the addresses of the properties that are blighted in your municipality and answer the following questions for each. (Attach additional sheet if necessary.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Address of property</th>
<th>Is there a structure on the property? (circle response)</th>
<th>If yes, is that structure vacant or occupied? (circle response)</th>
<th>If the structure is occupied is it a homeowner unit (HU) or rental? (circle response)</th>
<th>Approx. how long has the property been blighted?</th>
<th>Is it owned by someone who lives outside of the county? (circle response)</th>
<th>Approx. how long has the current owner owned the property?</th>
<th>Why is the property blighted? Enter a code from the list below*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Vac / Occ</td>
<td>HU / Rental</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Reason for blighted property:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Vac / Occ</td>
<td>HU / Rental</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>(a) Elderly homeowner: unable to keep up with home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Vac / Occ</td>
<td>HU / Rental</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>(b) Property owner is deceased; property is not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Vac / Occ</td>
<td>HU / Rental</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>being maintained by the heirs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Vac / Occ</td>
<td>HU / Rental</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>(c) Absentee owners (live outside of the area)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Vac / Occ</td>
<td>HU / Rental</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>(d) Owners/Landlord does not properly maintain property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Vac / Occ</td>
<td>HU / Rental</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>(e) Other (please write in response)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Vac / Occ</td>
<td>HU / Rental</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Reasons for blighted property:
(a) Elderly homeowner: unable to keep up with home
(b) Property owner is deceased; property is not being maintained by the heirs
(c) Absentee owners (live outside of the area)
(d) Owners/Landlord does not properly maintain property
(e) Other (please write in response)
Blighted Properties Survey
(page 2 of 2)

4. Does your municipality have a property maintenance code?  □ Yes  □ No
   If yes, do you have adequate staff to enforce the property maintenance code?  □ Yes  □ No

5. If you answered Yes to the previous question (#4), how does the code address blight? (check all that apply)
   □ abandoned vehicles
   □ uncut vegetation
   □ unsafe structures
   □ improper disposal of trash
   □ other (Please specify: ________________________________)

6. If your municipality does not have a property maintenance code, are you interested in learning more about what is covered by a property maintenance code?  □ Yes  □ No

7. Please tell us what barriers you are facing in adopting a property maintenance code:
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

8. Do you have a landlord registration ordinance?  □ Yes  □ No
   If not, are you interested in learning more about a landlord registration ordinance?  □ Yes  □ No

9. Has your municipality enacted a ticketing ordinance for code violations?  □ Yes  □ No
   If not, are you interested in learning more about an ordinance that would allow your municipality to ticket for code violations?  □ Yes  □ No

10. Has your municipality enacted an ordinance that allows the municipality to escrow fire insurance proceeds?  □ Yes  □ No
    If not, are you interested in learning more about a fire insurance proceeds escrow ordinance that would require insurance companies to share the proceeds of fire insurance with the municipality for the demolition of the property in the event of fire?  □ Yes  □ No

Thank-you for completing this survey!
Please return by ________ (date) to:
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
**Step 3: Convene Blight Task Force**

The purpose of the blight task force is to lead a process that answers these questions: How would my community be better if blight were less prevalent? In the end, what will this community look like, and how will attacking blight yield dividends?

When the members of the task force have been appointed and the blighted-property survey has been completed, the task force work can begin.

Three meetings, spaced about one month apart, will be needed to reach consensus on the nature and extent of the blighted-property problem, guiding principles for the task force, and effective strategies for addressing blighted properties. Task force members should be given a clear idea of their responsibilities in the appointment letter they receive from the governing body that has selected them. The responsibilities include attendance and active participation at all meetings and background reading about the tools available to address blighted properties.

After the task force has been appointed by the political leadership of your community, the initial meeting should be convened. The blight survey results should be sent to members to review well before the first meeting (at least two weeks).

The next section describes how to approach agenda topics and what should emerge from the discussion.

\[\text{Initial Task Force Meeting: What's on the Agenda?}\]

- a. Welcoming remarks by the chief elected official of the organization that appointed the task force members
- b. Discussion of survey results about the nature and extent of the problem as well as the current level of effort
- c. Discussion and consensus-forming on guiding principles for the task force
- d. Discussion of the impact of blight on community and economic development efforts
- e. Discussion and consensus-forming on what success will look like (quantifiable goals if possible)
- f. Initial task force training on the array of tools to address blight

Various questions can be posed about the summary tabulation of the blight-survey results:

- What do the survey results tell us about the extent of blight found?
- What light does the survey shed on possible causes of the blight?
- How would you describe the level of effort your municipality is making to address blight?
c. Discussion and consensus-forming on guiding principles for the task force

After the discussion of survey results, principles that will guide the task force should be addressed. The principles will serve as a set of ground rules for discussion and achieving consensus and for highlighting shared thinking about the process.

d. Discussion of the impact of blight on community and economic development efforts

In discussing the impact of blight on quality of life and on efforts to expand the economic base, a good question to ask is, “How would my community be better if blight were less prevalent?” An open-ended question, it encourages the task force to focus on the essential question: “In the end, what will this community look like, and how will attacking blight yield dividends?”

e. Discussion and consensus-forming about what success will look like (quantifiable goals if possible)

At its first meeting, the task force will also want to talk about what constitutes a successful effort to prevent, remediate, and reuse blighted properties. In the early years, this can be quantified in terms of outputs rather than outcomes. Outputs might include the number of blighted properties demolished or rehabilitated or the reduction in municipal costs related to fire and police protection as a result of blight remediation.

Over time, however, the community will want to measure longer-term goals. They include increased property values and an increase in the tax base and business activity, as the chilling effect that blight has on economic activity is reduced through aggressive remediation and redevelopment.

f. Initial task force training on the array of tools to address blight

The final item on the agenda is to begin educating task force members about effective tools. The members will come from a variety of fields, and many may not be aware of the extensive toolkit that exists for preventing and remediating blighted properties.

An excellent compendium of strategies to address blighted properties is the July 2014 Housing Alliance publication, *From Blight to Bright, a Comprehensive Toolkit for Pennsylvania* http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/swell/fromblighttobright. Six to eight tools should be extracted from the report for a summary discussion at the end of the first task force meeting. Topics could include Blighted and Abandoned Property Conservatorship, Denials of Permits for Tax-Delinquent Properties, Disqualification of Owners at Tax Sales, Creation of a Land Bank, and a Ticketing Ordinance for Code Violations.

At this stage, the goal is not to overwhelm the task force with information about tools and strategies, but to provide a ray of hope: specific ways to successfully address blight do exist.

Before adjourning the first task force meeting, the members of the task force should be assigned to read *From Blight to Bright* cover to cover before the next meeting so that they can gain greater knowledge of what communities can do to arrest blight. Task force members should be given either the printed version or a link to access the handbook online. They should also begin considering the strategies they think will best meet the challenges in their jurisdiction.

---

**Clearfield County Guiding Principles:**

*A Partial List*

- The process and outcomes must be respectful of the rights of property owners in the context of creating an environment that will encourage private investment, with the desired effect of improved quality of life and a more stable tax base. This is a balancing act that will require considerable discussion throughout the process.
- Localities are in the best position to decide if a strategy is appropriate and workable.
- Collaboration among various players will be important in developing and implementing strategies.
- The process is very much an educational one, where information is shared with key players and stakeholders.
Second Task Force Meeting: What’s on the Agenda?

a. Review of notes from first meeting (distributed in advance)

b. Quick review of strategies in reading assignment From Blight to Bright, a Comprehensive Toolkit for Pennsylvania

c. Consensus-building exercise to determine most effective strategies

d. Review of task force thoughts about priority strategies

The second task force meeting should be scheduled about a month after the first. That gives enough time for task force members to process the material in From Blight to Bright and to think about what strategies would be most appropriate given the dynamics of their jurisdiction.

The purpose of the second meeting is to quickly review the strategies and tools referenced in From Blight to Bright and to reach consensus on the most effective comprehensive approach to countering blight.

a. Review of Notes from First Meeting

Notes should be distributed in advance of meeting.

b. Review of Strategies from Reading Assignment

From Blight to Bright, a Comprehensive Toolkit for Pennsylvania

The first part of the meeting will be used to clarify or answer any questions about the material in From Blight to Bright. This can be accomplished with a PowerPoint presentation that summarizes the main strategies and tools referenced in the publication. The purpose of the presentation is not to present an exhaustive explanation for each strategy or tool, but to provide basic information and to give task force members the opportunity to ask questions. Because of the number of strategies and tools described in From Blight to Bright, this part of the meeting typically lasts at least an hour, depending on the number of questions from the task force.

c. Consensus-Building Exercise to Determine the Most Effective Strategies

Before the meeting, the facilitator should group the strategies into one of three categories:

- Prevention
- Remediation
- Redevelopment

The facilitator should write a brief summary of each strategy on a letter-size piece of paper (one piece of paper for each strategy) and place the strategy into one of the three groups. The group headings and the strategies under each group should be taped onto a blank wall in the meeting room.

Northumberland County Blight Strategy Plan, Top- and Middle-Tier Strategies: A Partial List

- Encourage municipalities to implement provisions of Act 90 of 2010.
- Encourage municipalities to take advantage of laws that prohibit bad actors from purchasing additional properties at tax sales.
- Encourage municipalities to ticket for code violations as summary offenses.
- Encourage district attorney to charge repeat code violators with second-degree misdemeanor under the PA Crimes Code.
Each task force member is given five to seven sticky notes. The facilitator will then pose this question: “Based on your understanding of the strategies that are posted on the wall, which will be the most effective in addressing blight in this county [or municipality].” Task force members are given about 15 minutes to use their sticky notes as votes to indicate their preferences. They do this by placing their notes on the strategies that they think will be most effective.1

d. Review of Task Force Thoughts about Priority Strategies

After this segment, the facilitator will review the results of the voting with the task force. This involves tallying the votes (sticky notes) placed on each item. Because the result of the voting is graphic, the top-tier strategies (usually five or six) immediately become apparent. Below the top is a middle tier of strategies that have received votes but not as many as the top tier.2 The middle-tier strategies may be important and should be discussed and identified as such in the comprehensive blight strategy report. The lower-tier strategies that received only a few votes or no votes at all should not be discussed in the report, because there is no consensus about them.

Before adjourning the meeting, the facilitator will instruct task force members to expect a draft strategy report detailing the top- and middle-tier strategies. The draft report will be sent out at least a week before the third meeting, to give members ample opportunity for review.

---

1 If task force members feel strongly about a particular strategy, they may be allowed to place more than one sticky note on it; to avoid skewing the results, however, there should be a limit to the number of sticky notes a member may place on one item.

2 The number of votes that distinguish the top tier from the middle tier will vary. The facilitator may want to suggest the cut-off in terms of number of votes and ask the task force to react to the suggestion.
Third Task Force Meeting: What's on the Agenda?

a. Review of notes from second meeting
   Notes should be distributed in advance.

b. Review of draft comprehensive blight strategy task force report

The draft blight strategy report can be written by an individual such as a paid consultant or volunteer, or by a team of volunteers. The report should consist of the following sections:

- Introduction, which discusses the formation of the task force, guiding principles, and members of the task force
- Survey data on the nature and extent of blight and the level of effort in addressing blight
- Impact of blight on community and economic development
- Desired outcomes

- Priority strategies that emerged from the task force deliberations
- Possible next steps

The report will be given to task force members before the third meeting, but time should be reserved at the beginning of that meeting to briefly review the report’s contents.

c. Task Force Members’ Feedback on Report

Feedback on the report should be invited. One challenge will be to reach a consensus on the validity of comments made by individual members. Although all feedback should be encouraged, the final report needs to reflect the thinking of the entire task force rather than of an individual member. Thus, a trained facilitator can be helpful.

d. Discussion of Agenda for the Last Meeting

Before adjourning, the purpose of the next and final meeting of the task force should be discussed. The last meeting of the task force will be critical because it is an opportunity to engage more municipal officials in the process. Task force members should be encouraged to spread the word about this meeting with any municipal officials they know to maximize turnout.
STEP 4: Engage Municipal Officials

After the draft report has been discussed and consensus on the feedback has been reached at the third task force meeting, a final meeting should be scheduled. It is a joint meeting of the task force and municipal officials. Each municipality in the county (assuming the task force is countywide) should be invited to send one or more representatives. They could include elected municipal officials as well as key staff members, such as the manager and code enforcement officers.

Final Meeting of the Task Force: What’s on the Agenda?

a. Summary of final task force report, with emphasis on priority strategies
b. Feedback on report recommendations
c. Discussion of possible next steps

The final task force meeting is crucial because it provides an opportunity to include municipal government officials who have an interest in dealing with blighted properties. This is particularly important when the comprehensive strategy is being developed countywide. The reason is that the task force probably includes only a fraction of the municipalities, because of the need to limit its size. The bottom line is that the vast majority of the strategies included in the From Blight to Bright will need municipal action. Further discussion of the agenda follows.


The meeting should begin with a presentation on the task force strategy report, with a focus on its recommended strategies.

b. Feedback on Report Recommendations

After the presentation, attendees should be encouraged to provide feedback and to ask questions.

To encourage municipal officials to implement strategies included in the report, sample ordinances should be made available to them at the meeting. For example, if the recommended strategies include ticketing for code violations, denying permits, and initiating a rental housing licensing program, hard copies of sample ordinances related to these strategies should be handed out to any municipal officials who believe that those would be effective approaches in their municipalities.

c. Discussion of Possible Next Steps

Municipal officials should leave the meeting equipped with new ideas to address blight, as well as the documents needed to implement the specific strategies that could be useful to their jurisdictions.

Before adjourning the fourth and final meeting, it is important to discuss next steps, such as—

- Pursuing funding to acquire and demolish or rehabilitate blighted properties
- Technical assistance to municipalities in drafting ordinances to address blight
- Other initiatives, such as engaging a circuit rider code official who could serve two or more local governments
- The formation of an “action team” to oversee the implementation of the report recommendations
Step 5: Identify Priority Action Steps and Implement!

"The blight strategy created a foundation for action among a variety of organizations that have a number of resources to effectively address blight."

—Ed Christiano, executive director of the Northumberland County Housing Authority, crediting the Fast-Track Blight Plan for his county’s success in tackling blight

Commitment to Implementation

The task force’s development of a comprehensive blight strategy is just the beginning of the process of effectively addressing blight. Although the process described above can be concluded in as little as four months, effectively countering blight is an ongoing endeavor that demands considerable focus.

The Action Team

To ensure implementation of the plan, an action team should be formed. The team will consist of representatives from each organization that will have a role in putting the plan into action.

The job of the action team is to develop a detailed action plan for each strategy recommended in the report. Typically, an action plan includes the tasks necessary to implement each strategy, the time frame for accomplishing those tasks, the lead organization(s) for accomplishing each task, the resources (financial or other) that will be needed, and a method to measure success. An example of such an action plan appears on the next page.

The work of the action team is not finished with the completion of the action plan. The action team will want to meet quarterly to assess progress in accomplishing tasks, update the plan periodically, and identify prominent blighted properties that might be good opportunities for redevelopment and reuse.

The action team should consider forming a redevelopment team to look more closely at prominent blighted properties that are deemed good opportunities for redevelopment. The redevelopment team should include organizations whose missions include undertaking such projects. Members would typically include the redevelopment authority, a land bank, an economic development corporation, nonprofit development corporations, and municipal officials. In most cases, the goal of the redevelopment team is to tee the project up for a private developer or investor by obtaining site control, completing preliminary environmental due diligence, and managing other risks that would make the property difficult to develop from a private developer’s perspective. In some cases, a nonprofit organization may be the best option for redevelopment. To undertake the project, the redevelopment team can initiate discussions with appropriate nonprofit organizations.

Typical Action Plan Elements

- Tasks to be completed
- Time frame
- Lead organization for each task
- Resources
- Measuring Success
## Sample Action Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy and Tasks</th>
<th>Lead Organization</th>
<th>Time Frame for Accomp.</th>
<th>$ Resources Required</th>
<th>Measurements of Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STRATEGY 1. Encourage municipalities to adopt comprehensive property maintenance codes</td>
<td>Planning commission</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Four communities adopt a property maintenance code within 12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task a.</strong> Identify which municipalities do not have a property maintenance code</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jun 30</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task b.</strong> Reach out to municipalities to gauge their interest in adopting a property maintenance code</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sept 30</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task c.</strong> Retain consultant to work with municipalities in drafting an appropriate ordinance</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dec 31</td>
<td>$7,500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRATEGY 2. Use the conservatorship process to deal with long-time blighted properties</td>
<td>Redevelopment authority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Three conservatorship actions filed within 12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task a.</strong> Identify properties appropriate for conservatorship action</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mar 31</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task b.</strong> Develop pool of funds to undertake rehab or demolition of properties</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sept 30</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task c.</strong> Retain legal services to file conservatorship actions</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sept 30</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RESULTS TO DATE OF THE FAST-TRACK METHOD

McKean County

McKean County, which completed its comprehensive blighted-property strategy in 2013, recently formed a Blighted Property Review Board. The board, which is authorized by the Pennsylvania Urban Redevelopment Law, permits redevelopment authorities to acquire vacant, blighted properties using eminent domain. That was one of the top strategies identified in McKean County’s Comprehensive Blight Strategy.

In the past year, McKean County gave five municipalities technical assistance to rewrite their ordinances on nuisances, dangerous structures, and property maintenance to make them more effective in addressing blighted properties.

The redevelopment authority has used Act 137 and community development block grant funds to demolish four structures, including one commercial building.
Clearfield County

To demolish blighted structures, Clearfield County has applied for Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement Act (PHARE) funds through the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency. Since completing its comprehensive blight strategy in 2014, the county has tapped into PHARE funds through the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency to demolish and rehabilitate deteriorated properties. To date, more than $130,000 has been awarded from that source.

In addition, several blight strategies identified in the comprehensive blight strategy are moving forward:

- The county is developing an education program to promote public awareness of the tax sale process. The objective is to encourage a greater number of responsible people to bid on the properties.

- The planning and community development office has completed a maintenance guide that is distributed to housing providers and consumers. The guide emphasizes the importance of keeping up with property repairs, rather than deferring them, and cost-effective approaches to repairs.

- The Moshannon Valley COG has provided leadership in encouraging five municipalities to adopt or update property maintenance codes. The COG will provide code enforcement services through a joint cooperation agreement with the municipalities.

- Finally, the City of Dubois is considering the implementation of a rental-housing licensing program; several communities are considering the enactment of a ticketing ordinance.

In each case, the planning process helped build a shared understanding of the problems, the political will to address them, and a consensus about what to do first. The plan provided a platform from which to raise needed funds. The use of the 5-Step, Fast-Track Method made these steps forward possible.
Northumberland County

Northumberland County has been highly successful in its efforts to prevent and remediate blighted properties. In the past three years, 37 blighted properties have been demolished and two have been rehabilitated. The county established Pennsylvania’s tenth land bank in December 2015, building on the blight plan work completed three years before.

The housing authority led the effort to undertake a blighted-property strategy in 2012, and it has provided leadership to secure funding and to use new tools that address blight, including conservatorship and land banking. It was instrumental in spearheading efforts to secure more than $1.5 million in funding through the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, specifically to acquire and rehabilitate or demolish blighted properties. In addition, the housing authority has secured a variety of funding sources to construct new housing for seniors on a previously blighted site.

Municipalities in the county pledged more than $300,000 in community development block grant funds as a match for a state grant that the municipalities used to tear down 12 blighted structures.
CONCLUSION

Frequently, community efforts to address blight are stymied by the lack of a comprehensive blight plan that focuses and coordinates the resources and talents of organizations to effectively counter blight. **The process of developing the comprehensive strategy must be inclusive in order to gain the buy-in of those organizations.** This publication has described a step-by-step process that can be led by an internal or external facilitator and can be completed in a relatively short time so that community momentum to address blight persists.

Also, a comprehensive blight strategy should put the community in a better position to compete for funding from public and private sources because it demonstrates consensus about how blight should be tackled and which organizations will take the lead. Funders want to know that the process for developing the comprehensive strategy has included key stakeholders and that the strategies are based on needs and on data about the nature and extent of blighted properties particular to the community. With a sound, comprehensive strategy and adequate resources, successful outcomes are just around the corner.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Development and writing of WE CAN DO THIS! A Five-Step, Fast-Track Blight Plan was made possible through the generous support of the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation.

The training and technical assistance that has provided the foundation for this work has been supported by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development.

Special thanks to Melissa Orner, graphic designer and Michael Schwanger, copy editor.
HOUSING ALLIANCE STAFF

Elizabeth G. Hersh, Executive Director
Joyce Sacco, Director of Operations
Cindy Daley, Policy Director
Stephanie Cehelsky, Director of Finance
Valerie Kolb, Manager of Special Programs
Gale Schwartz, Project Specialist
Victoria Bourret, Project and Communications Manager
Stephanie Tanenbaum, Administrative Assistant
Brooke Schipporeit and Vanessa Kopp, Interns, School of Social Policy and Practice, University of Pennsylvania

2016 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Officers
President
Gail Hoffmann, Executive Director, Self-Determination Housing Project of Pennsylvania

Vice-President
Ben J. Laudermilch, Executive Director, Housing and Redevelopment Authorities of Cumberland County

Treasurer
Rich Kisner, Executive Director, Columbia County Housing and Redevelopment Authority

Secretary
Stacie Reidenbaugh, Executive Director, Lancaster Area Habitat for Humanity

Policy and Advocacy Committee Chair
Rick Sauer, Executive Director, Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations

Members
Diana Ames, Director, Pennsylvania Coalition to End Homelessness
John Bendel, Director, Community Investment, Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh
Mark H. Dambly, President, Pennrose Properties LLC
Stephen Drachler, Principal, Denny Civic Solutions
Andrew Haines, Executive Vice President, S&A Homes
Joel A. Johnson, Executive Director, Montgomery County Housing Authority
Nora Lichtash, Executive Director, Women’s Community Revitalization Project
Charles G. Scalise, President, Housing and Neighborhood Development Services of Erie
Mark Schwartz, Executive Director, Regional Housing Legal Services
Howard B. Slaughter, Jr., President, Christian Management Enterprises, LLC
Geraldine Wang, Consultant, Pennsylvania Partners for Sacred Places