

# BLIGHT MITIGATION STRATEGY

*DECEMBER 2022*



**GREENSBURG**  
PENNSYLVANIA

**SHAPE GREENSBURG**  
YOUR VOICE, YOUR VISION, YOUR CITY

# SHAPE GREENSBURG

YOUR VOICE, YOUR VISION, YOUR CITY

**Shape Greensburg** is a multi-faceted comprehensive planning effort conducted over the course of 2022. The Blight Mitigation Strategy is one component of the overall Shape Greensburg planning effort. See the Core Comprehensive Plan for more information regarding the planning process and acknowledgment of contributors.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION..... 5**

**BROAD STRATEGY..... 9**

    Priority Issue #1 .....9

    Priority Issue #2 .....9

**FIGHTING BLIGHT ON 3 FRONTS..... 10**

**RECOMMENDED ACTIONS ..... 11**

    STABILIZE with Property Owner Assistance ..... 12

    RECLAIM through Targeted Revitalization..... 13

    HOLD ACCOUNTABLE via Community Code Enforcement ..... 14

**HOW CAN THE COMMUNITY GET INVOLVED? ... 16**

    Potential Partnerships..... 16





# BLIGHT MITIGATION STRATEGY

## INTRODUCTION

*What is blight and what causes it?*

Blight refers to the deteriorated or dilapidated condition of buildings and/or lots which pose threats to public health and safety as well as the general appearance of an area. While blight can be categorized into many specific types and scales, blight is commonly known through public perception, which generally associates blight with negligence and lack of community pride as well as areas unattractive for investment and development.

Blight is not unique to Greensburg but has impacted numerous communities across the broader region due to the following reasons. A major root cause was population decline beginning for Greensburg in the 1980s. Since then, the city has lost over 2,612 residents, accounting for 15 percent of the city historic capacity. Population decline was largely sparked by the collapse of the steel, coal, and other manufacturing industries. Another trend impacting specifically urban communities was the era of suburban housing and commercial growth, spanning over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which drew residents and businesses out of the city and into surrounding suburbs which provided generally cheap land and a younger building stock. Furthermore, home financing policies favored buying new construction homes rather than renovating existing mature houses.

Due to Greensburg's well-established history, roughly 85 percent of the city's housing units are over 50 years in age, a percentage much higher than the value nationwide (53 %). Keeping up with the necessary maintenance and upgrades of these homes is an ongoing challenge for property owners. The presence of blighted property within a neighborhood is often associated with lower property values. Low to moderate income households living within such areas may lack the resources needed to maintain and renovate their properties. The heart of this blight mitigation strategy identifies ways in which resources needed to address blight can be made more accessible for the community.

In addition to addressing blight related to neighborhood housing, another focus of this plan is the revitalization of commercial and mixed-use buildings located in downtown Greensburg. Good quality small businesses will only thrive in downtown if the building stock provides up-to-date good quality spaces for such business. In fact, data indicates that there exists plenty demand for retail and restaurants, but it is likely the scarcity of quality, suitable building space that presents the greatest barrier to a thriving business district. Support for building owners and developers marks the first step in this process. Therefore, addressing blight in downtown is essential in laying the foundation for attracting and sustaining local business entrepreneurship.



### Types of Blight:

- **Vacant/Empty Lot**- Vacant lots with no buildings, potentially resulting from past demolitions, can create a “missing teeth” effect along a street of existing buildings.
- **Abandoned Buildings** - Long term abandoned buildings with significant deterioration may pose a threat to public safety related to fire risk, structural collapse, spread of detritus, place of illicit activity, etc.
- **External Blight** – Generally occupied buildings with unkempt yards and slightly deteriorated exteriors, may be the result of negligence or property owners lacking resources to make improvements.
- **Internal Blight** – While the structure of such buildings may be secure, interior deterioration of old/outdated utility systems (i.e. electric, heating/cooling, etc.) make rehab/renovation work more costly/less feasible.
- **Surface Parking Lots** – Surface parking lots, without aesthetically pleasing landscaping/screening, create lifeless voids within a block, especially prevalent within downtown. As automobiles became the dominant mode of transportation, parking lots expanded throughout downtown, usually taking the place of demolished buildings or lots used for other purposes.
- **Blank Walls** –Façades of occupied buildings, which lack windows or architectural variation, also create lifeless voids within a block.



What has Greensburg already done to fight blight?



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



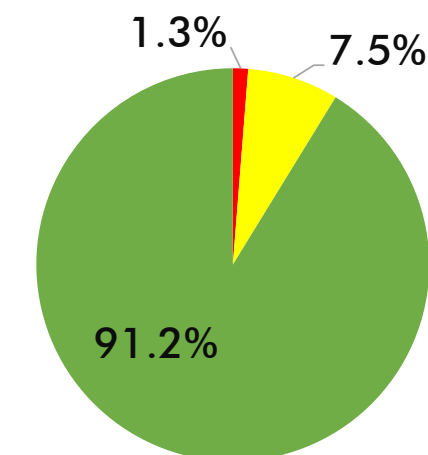
Step 5: Identify Priority Action Steps and Implement Them

**We Are Here!**

The resulting recommendations of this plan will guide the City in completing steps 3, 4, and 5.

Graphic from the Housing Alliance of PA “A Five-Step, Fast-Track Blight Plan”

**City of Greensburg Blight Inventory Project (2021)** – Inventory, as an accounting of existing conditions, is a vital step in helping the community to fully understand and visualize the presence and magnitude of blight. In other words, where does blight exist, and the quality of conditions observed. All parcels across the city were classified by a condition of “good, fair, or poor.” View results here: <https://greensburgblightinventory-wcpagis.hub.arcgis.com/> The blight inventory was completed by the Westmoreland County Department of Planning and Development through their Technical Resources and Municipal Services (TRAMS) program. The insights and trends revealed by this inventory were used in guiding the focus of this strategy. The city’s blight mitigation efforts will continue to be informed by this inventory, especially when prioritizing certain priority areas for block clean-ups and redevelopment opportunities.







Good

- New construction/renovation
- No visible signs of deterioration
- Needs minor painting/basic improvements
- Well maintained and cared for
- Some cleaning necessary
- \*Empty lot/no structure—no major visible debris



Fair

- Some cracking of brick or wood
- Major painting required
- Deteriorated cornice
- Crumbling concrete
- Cracked windows or stairs
- \*Empty lot/no structure—some visible debris (tires, trash, abandoned objects, etc.)



Poor

- Major cracking of brick, wood rotting
- Missing brick and siding
- Broken, missing, or boarded-up windows
- House is a shell or has open holes/Immediate safety hazard
- House is filled with trash/debris and or severely overgrown
- \*Empty lot/no structure—major visible debris (tires, trash, abandoned objects, etc.)

### Take-Aways:

- RED properties (severely blighted; graded as “Poor”) are limited in number (76 parcels or 1.3 percent citywide) compared with other cities struggling with blight. For perspective, an inventory sample of 5,000+ properties in the city of Sharon PA revealed that 13 percent (694 parcels) of properties were designated as poor or abandoned. This indicates that efforts to address these properties (e.g. demolitions) are not a large-scale current challenge.
- RED properties are generally speckled across the city, with no clearly defined clusters of concentrated blight. This may be viewed as either a positive sign or a disadvantage. Such a condition avoids entire sections of the city being labeled negatively, but at the same time means blight can impact any part of the city. Since blight is largely influenced by public perception, just a single blighted lot can impact the impression of a block or neighborhood.
- YELLOW properties (graded as “Fair”) are more prevalent than RED properties and also found across all sections of the city. Such buildings are generally safe and livable but on the brink of falling to RED if maintenance/rehabilitation work is not completed in the near term.

**Red X Program** - The Program is designed to alert firefighters, and other first responders, that certain properties are not safe to enter. Such properties are marked with a large red “X” sign placed on the front of the building in a highly visible area. The program helps ensure the safety of first responders when entering properties.

**City Codes** - The city has adopted property maintenance and rental registration ordinances to enable property inspections and enforcement of code violations.

**Demolitions** - The city has completed demolitions of structures, 1 to 3 per year on average (number to be collected from city staff), deemed a significant nuisance to public health and safety, as is customary by municipalities.

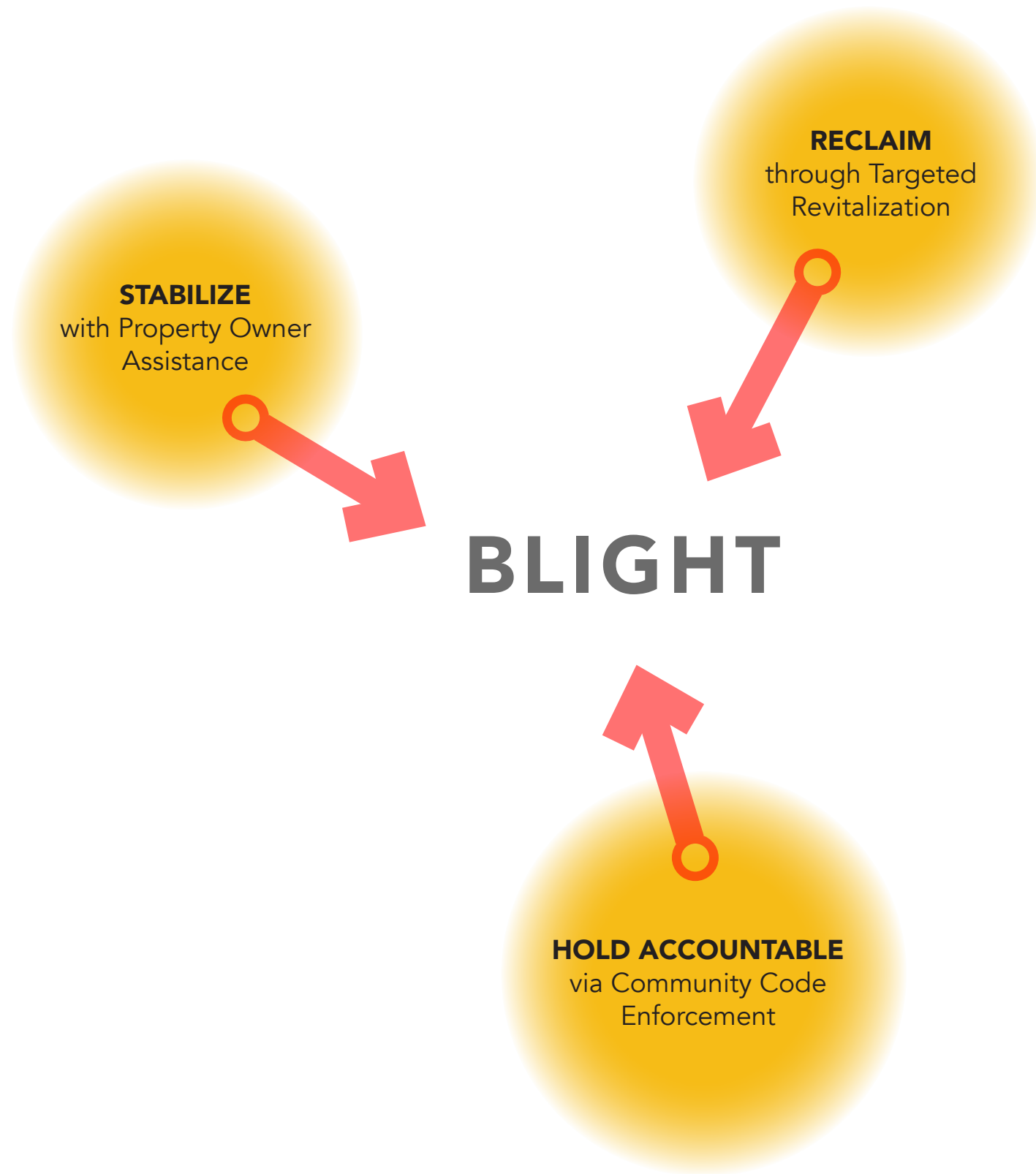


## BROAD STRATEGY

Each type of blight, as introduced above, represents a unique challenge as well as opportunity for various solutions. While all types of blight are present to some extent within Greensburg, some are more prevalent than others. In general, compared to other peer municipalities struggling with blight, Greensburg currently has less issues regarding large numbers of vacant lots or long term vacant/abandoned buildings. Rather, as identified by public input from workshops and technical analysis, Greensburg’s main challenges stem from the following two issues:

*Priority issues currently for Greensburg regarding blight:*

- **Priority Issue #1:** Generally occupied residential dwellings (both owner-occupied or renter-occupied) characterized by unkempt yards and damage/deterioration visible from the street. Many of these properties likely received a YELLOW grade on the blight inventory. They are generally safe and livable but on the brink of falling to a grade RED grade if maintenance/rehabilitation work is not completed in the near term.
- **Priority Issue #2:** Downtown blight, characterized primarily by internal blight and vacant ground level storefronts, but also impacted by blank wall facades and a proliferation of parking lots. Due to the unseen potentially blighted conditions of building interiors, such buildings may not have received a yellow or red grade by the blight inventory, which focused on external observations. Therefore, blight in downtown does not neatly correlate to color grades of the blight inventory and should be addressed on a lot-by-lot basis. See Action B.2 which calls for an assessment of internal conditions for downtown buildings.



## FIGHTING BLIGHT ON 3 FRONTS

Each of the following components are intended to advance simultaneously to address specific aspects of blight from three general directions.

### A. STABILIZE with Property Owner Assistance

This component of the strategy proactively addresses Priority Issue #1 by supporting Greensburg's mature building stock which requires significant maintenance and rehabilitation. Actions include mobilizing a support network of community organizations and facilitating homeowner rehabilitation loans and grants. This work will play a vital role in improving properties from "YELLOW to GREEN" and ensuring no further decline from "YELLOW to RED" as identified by the Blight Inventory Project.

### B. RECLAIM through Targeted Revitalization

This element of the strategy aims to get properties of more critical condition "back into play" through redevelopment. Primarily addressing downtown (Priority Issue #2), this work will involve inventorying the interior conditions of vacant buildings as well as collaboration with community development partners to revitalize properties at strategic points within downtown, the city's most outwardly visible district.

### C. HOLD ACCOUNTABLE via Community Code Enforcement

Understanding that blight can spread widely by a concentration of a relatively few negligent property owners, it is important for the city's code enforcement efforts to be well positioned and fully equipped. Enhanced code enforcement involves Quality-of-Life Ticketing, block sweeps, upgrades to online tracking tools, and regulations designed to discourage negligent property owners.

## RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Please note that actions from each of the three components may occur simultaneously. Within each component, actions are generally listed as a progression with actions building upon each prior.

**Catalytic Action I:** Convene a Blight Task Force to inform and guide the implementation of the actions outlined within this strategy.

The city should assemble a Blight Task Force, made up of various stakeholders (i.e. code enforcement officers, city planners, community development leaders, local residents and business owners, real estate agents/developers, etc.) with knowledge and interest in blight mitigation to serve an advisory and coordination role supporting the strategies and actions outlined within the document. In particular, the Blight Task Force should focus on Action B.1 which seeks to determine the tracks for key properties. The task force should be tight-knit (roughly 5 to 10 members) and inclusive of the most knowledgeable and dedicated members to ensure effective progress is achieved.

**Catalytic Action II:** Expand capacity for city staff dedicated to managing the implementation of blight mitigation efforts outlined by this report.



To support the following recommended actions, the City should consider expanding the capacity of staff dedicated to blight remediation efforts, including code enforcement. The city has already approved additional staff within Planning & Development for such purposes. It is recommended that such a position should allocate roughly 30 to 50 percent of work hours to leading and facilitating the implementation of blight mitigation efforts as outlined within this report.

**A. STABILIZE with Property Owner Assistance**

**Action A.1:** Assemble and mobilize a broad network of partners, including social service organizations (e.g. faith-based organizations), local businesses (e.g. landscapers, contractors), and financial institutions, to assist with property maintenance and renovation/rehab projects.

*Project commitment timeframe: Less than 1 year*

In certain cases, property owners may desire to resolve property maintenance issues, yet they lack the resources or ability to complete the necessary improvements. The city can play an important coordination role between residents and the many support services within the community. In examples from other communities across the state, local contractors and landscapers have offered discounts for certain vulnerable homeowners (i.e. due to age, income, or disabilities). Also, faith-based and social service organizations have offered financial and volunteer labor assistance for property owners. Banks and other financial institutions can also support these efforts by offering loans to property owners and small business landlords. The city can support these efforts by assembling a network of resources and publicizing them, especially on any documents (i.e. tickets, citations, publications/newsletters) related to code enforcement.

**Action A.2:** Pursue programs providing property owner assistance loans and grants for maintenance and rehabilitation projects which will help bring properties into compliance with property maintenance codes.

*Project commitment timeframe: 3 to 6 years*

There are already programs and funding sources that provide financial assistance to property owners for property maintenance, the key for Greensburg is connecting these resources with individuals in need at a more rapid pace and at a broader scale. Two primary funding sources, including federal Community Development Block Grants and HOME Investment Partnerships Program through H.U.D., have been successfully used by municipalities and counties administering local assistance programs.

Currently, the challenge is setting up a program locally to administer these funds to Greensburg property owners. The city should consider establishing capacity to administer such a program (in conjunction with Catalytic Action II) or coordinating with a local community partner to assist with such a program. In the case of accessing CBDG or HOME funding, the city must coordinate with Westmoreland County which is the entity currently entitled to such funding. The city of Altoona is an example of a local municipality that operates both a HOME Rehabilitation Program and a Direct Homeowner Rehab Loan Program, which Greenburg may consult with if pursuing such a direction.



EXAMPLE OF HOME RENOVATION WORK

**B. RECLAIM through Targeted Revitalization**

**Action B.1:** Develop and maintain an active inventory list of properties of critical/severe condition and sort into two-tracks for either 1.) demolition and eventual redevelopment or 2.) rehabilitation of an existing structure.

*Project commitment timeframe: 1 to 3 years*

On-track for demolition: Formalize a uniform and consistent procedure and timeline for properties on track for eventual demolition.

While the number of properties within the city necessitating demolition is of a lesser scale than some other communities fighting blight, there is still value for the city to process demolitions with greater efficiency and consistency. To this end, the following items should be considered:

- Establish a clear set of criteria for prioritizing properties on-track for demolition. Factors for prioritization may include Red X designations, significant amount of public complaints, location along a highly visible/traffic corridor, location within close proximity of other blight properties, cost and/or timing of legal processes to condemn/acquire property, etc.
- Encourage residents to utilize the Westmoreland County Blight Reporter online survey form to report blighted properties by posting a link on the city website’s “How do I?” webpage.
- Formalize an active list of properties which the city has identified as “on-track” for demolition, including the current legal status and potential timeframe for when demolitions are projected for completion.

- Share this list online for the public to view (on the Blight Inventory webpage) so that the demolition process is fully transparent. The number of demolitions per year can be accounted for to record progress completed.

On-track for rehabilitation: Properties designated for rehabilitation should be generally targeted to key buildings of historic or architectural character, at strategic locations within the downtown, which may help spark further revitalization. Examples of such properties include the block of Main Street between Otterman and Pittsburgh Streets across from the courthouse.

The city may consider the following criteria:

- unique or significant architectural character
- older buildings with historic value
- buildings within the central business district at highly visible locations
- prospect of legally transferring property to a community development entity

Once identified, redevelopment efforts for such properties should be pursued in collaboration with community development partners, including Think Greensburg.

**Action B.2:** Assemble an inventory of all vacant downtown buildings (including the condition of structure and internal building systems, suitability for certain uses, etc.) to inform potential redevelopment opportunities and prevent buildings from further deterioration.

*Project commitment timeframe: 1 to 3 years*

While external blight, such as an empty boarded-up storefront, is an eye-catching source of blight, it is often the internal condition of buildings that inhibits restoration of downtown buildings. In particular, older structures may have outdated or degraded utility systems (i.e. electrical, plumbing, heating/cooling, etc.). The condition of elevators and spaces built prior

to ADA accessibility requirements may inhibit older buildings from meeting current building codes. Developers are unlikely to consider redevelopment projects if these internal conditions are unknown. An inventory and assessment of internal building conditions is a valuable tool which offers potential developers’ information, which can limit risk associated with project unknowns. Code enforcement could play a key role in this work by focusing on internal inspections to ensure that property holders continue to upkeep vacant buildings. Think Greenburg (GCDC) and other community development partners could assist with this project as well.

Another component of the inventory would be identifying the size (i.e. square footage) and suitability of spaces accommodating various uses (i.e. retail, restaurant, office, apartments, etc.). Depending on certain attributes and the historic use of a building, some spaces are already suited for certain specialty uses, while other spaces are adaptable and may provide for a variety of new uses. All in all, an inventory provides the city and stakeholders with vital information needed to attract and support redevelopment.

This action directly responds to the issue of downtown blight not accounted for by the Blight Inventory Project, which focus solely on external conditions of properties. This action is vital to paint a more complete picture of blight in downtown.



PHOTO OF VACANT STOREFRONT IN DOWNTOWN

C. HOLD ACCOUNTABLE via  
Community Code Enforcement

**Action C.1:** Establish a Quality-of-Life Ticketing ordinance to encourage more convenient and efficient enforcement for minor external property maintenance violations, such as overgrown lawns, trash, and abandoned vehicles.

*Project commitment timeframe: Within 1 year*

With such a system in place, property maintenance code violations are treated like parking tickets, rather than citations handled by local courts, which require hearings and are often time and resource draining for both residents and municipal governments. How it works: code or police officers place tickets (typically starting at \$25) on doors of properties where external maintenance issues are observed. The ticketing system can be accompanied with proactive warnings and educational opportunities when officers inspect select city blocks (called a “sweep” described more below). This action is identified as a blight prevention tool by the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania “From Blight to Bright” Toolkit.

**Action C.2:** Conduct regular block-by-block “sweeps” as enabled by a Quality-of-Life Ticketing ordinance, in which code and/or police officers walk the streets to proactively educate property owners about property maintenance laws.

*Project commitment timeframe: 1 to 3 years*

Block sweeps provide a proactive and non-threatening way for code enforcement officers to meet with property owners face to face to discuss the issue and work toward resolutions before a fine is warranted. Often times, property owners may not be aware of the code requirements for maintaining their yards and building exteriors. Block sweeps help educate the public by providing information of common

violations (e.g. high grass/overgrowth) and offering a grace period to resolve the issue. It is important for block sweeps to be coordinated with local neighborhood groups/stakeholders to ensure the public has been adequately informed of the City’s new approach to code enforcement. The presence of code enforcement within neighborhood block sweeps should be gauged as to not appear overbearing.

Block sweeps can be paired with citizen-engaged block clean-ups to encourage a shared responsibility of property maintenance. The city may support such efforts by providing supplies, such as dumpsters, to assist with hauling away trash and lawn waste.

**Action C.3:** Bolster the enforcement of the rental registration by shifting the operations process online.

*Project commitment timeframe: Within 1 year*

An online service for rental registration is likely to ensure more rental properties are properly enrolled and in turn regularly inspected. Consistency of rental inspections is key to ensuring safe and humane housing conditions are maintained for all Greensburg residents. A more effective rental registration will also ensure negligent landlords are held accountable for poor property conditions.

**Action C.4:** Upgrade the existing code enforcement database system used for tracking property maintenance code violations to be equipped with the latest technical (i.e. live/online) capabilities.

*Project commitment timeframe: 1 to 3 Years*

Such technical upgrades are greatly necessary for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of code enforcement officers. Due to the significant investment and adjustment to a new system, it is recommended that the city

partner with the Westmoreland County Land Bank & Redevelopment Authority. The Land Bank has voiced support for developing a regional code enforcement database which would serve multiple Westmoreland County municipalities. Regional code enforcement has gained widespread success where implemented, including the Turtle Creek Council of Governments.

Open Gov is a software developer of cutting-edge digital solutions for making enforcement more efficient and strategic for municipalities. <https://opengov.com/products/citizen-services/code-enforcement-software/>

Such new systems may allow for more broader and more effective enforcement as well as the availability of widely accessible data, which can be used to inform city staff/leadership. Easily reportable data, which is digestible for a broad audience is essential for the city to make proactive, strategic decisions related to blight mitigation.

**Action C.5:** Pursue policies and actions, legally afforded by Federal and State law, which discourage negligent property owners from perpetuating blight. (e.g. Disqualify negligent property owners to bid on tax sale).

*Project commitment timeframe: Less than 1 year*

Disqualification of Tax Sale Bidders and Cost Recovery for Properties: Restricting bidders who have tax delinquencies or code violations and recovering costs for maintenance and rehabilitation of properties that fail to sell at upset sale. The city should consider this legal tool as well as others as enabled by the Pennsylvania Neighborhood Blight Reclamation and Revitalization Act, Act 90.

Note: The actions within this strategy relate specifically to the aspects of city government most closely related to blight remediation. This



strategy does recognize that other municipal functions do relate tangentially to blight. The city should consider how zoning and land development code updates may help reduce the ill effects of poorly designed parking lots or buildings that are out-of-scale or out-of-character. In addition, the city should consider policies that support new homeownership or encourage entrepreneurship, such as tax abatements.

## HOW CAN THE COMMUNITY GET INVOLVED?

While city leadership and staff play an important role in blight remediation, every member of the community has an opportunity to join in the “fight against blight” and do their part. At the end of the day, it is up to individual residents and business owners to take pride in their own properties, which can then extend to their neighborhoods. Trash clean-ups and beautification projects (i.e. flower, tree plantings) are excellent opportunities for community members to volunteer their time to make a visual impact within an immediate timeframe (See Action C.2).

Looking ahead to more long term focuses for the city, it is possible that continued regular demolitions will create a more significant number of vacant lots. While other portions

of the Shape Greensburg plan do address how enhanced zoning and land development ordinances can encourage a more complete infill development of such vacant lots, a potential interim use of vacant land can be community green space for gardening, passive recreation, or social gatherings. In the future, the city may consider establishing an “adopt-a-lot” program which allows community members/organizations to lease land for such purposes.

### *Potential Partnerships*

While this Strategy focuses on what the city specifically can take action to address blight, there are many opportunities for other entities to support blight remediation efforts along the way.

- Grassroots citizen groups
- Faith-based congregations
- Central Westmoreland Habitat for Humanity (CWHFH)
- Local real estate agencies
- Contractors/landscapers
- Local property managers/landlords
- Redevelopment Authority of the County of Westmoreland (RACW) & Land Bank
- Surrounding Municipalities
- Local banks/financial institutions
- PA Department of Community & Economic Development – Funding and resources
- Think Greensburg (GCDC)
- Higher education and healthcare institutions



EXAMPLE OF COMMUNITY CLEAN-UP EVENT