



*Resident-Driven Vacant Property Remediation* *Community Development Fundamentals*



Operation Better Block, Inc.



# Introduction

Operation Better Block, Inc. (OBB) has been piloting “Resident-Driven Vacant Property Remediation” in Homewood. Sarah Dieleman Perry of Pittsburgh Partnership for Neighborhood Development has this to say about the OBB pilot:

**This project is unique because resources are being offered directly to residents with the goal of keeping them in their homes. Instead of professional developers getting access to property because they have resources and information, residents are being offered tools and resources, including access to experts, to realize their own vision for the area in which they live.**

OBB recognized that there are certain aspects of this pilot that could be shared to help enhance community development initiatives in any neighborhood in the City of Pittsburgh. This publication is intended to distill the following components of OBB’s community development work in Homewood that stand alone and may be replicated by other community organizations:

- Vacant Property and Resident Survey Process
- Partnering with City of Pittsburgh Bureau of Building Inspection (BBI)
- Getting Permission to Maintain Vacant Lots Owned by the City of Pittsburgh

This guide is essentially OBB’s ‘how to’ conduct neighborhood surveys, and ‘how to’ work with BBI, and ‘how to’ gain access to maintain City lots. We developed our survey process to target vacant properties and develop relationships by engaging residents. We know that having a working relationship with BBI inspectors is core to achieving our parcel strategies. And, we have learned what it takes to assist our City on maintaining vacant lots that are strategic to residents’ vision.

We hope that you can benefit from our learning in Homewood.


**JEROME JACKSON**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
OPERATION BETTER BLOCK, INC.

# Table of > Contents



<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Survey Process Overview</b> .....	5
<b>Detailed Survey Process</b> .....	6
Preparation Phase .....	6
Survey Phase .....	7
Follow-up Phase .....	7
Pre-Survey Letter .....	8
Sample Map .....	9
Staff Training Document .....	10
OBB Survey Field Report .....	11
Address Tracking Sheet .....	12
Door Hangers .....	13
Survey Template .....	14
Post-Survey Letter .....	17
Sample Results Postcard .....	18
Survey Development .....	19
Survey Question Edits .....	21
<b>Publicly Owned Vacant Lot Maintenance</b> .....	25
<b>Bureau of Building Inspection (BBI) Processes</b> .....	27
Section A: BBI Contact Sheet .....	28
Section B: Code Enforcement .....	29
Section C: Vacant Property Due Diligence .....	32
Section D: Priority Demolition .....	35
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	36

# Survey > Process Overview



Operation Better Block, Inc. (OBB) has developed a new approach that has effectively reworked the way that we operate all the programs within our organization as well as in the neighborhood we serve. This new approach to the way we administer our programs and communicate with our residents is called data-driven services. This process is a different way of collecting data in order to connect residents with services that either we provide or our partners provide. This strategic data collection and analysis will move Homewood forward while continuing to streamline OBB's programs.

The process begins with completing a foot survey of a selected target area within the neighborhood. This enables us to track and map every occupied property, vacant property, and vacant lot, while using a rating system to categorize the exterior condition of each property. This comprehensive property inventory is vital as Homewood is on the brink of resurgence.

The resident portion of the survey strategically gathers valuable information from residents in the area so that we better understand who we are serving, what their interests are, and how OBB can be more impactful in their lives. Our goal through this new approach is

to ensure that we are being the most effective organization we can be by serving our residents and benefiting the Homewood community.

The resident surveys are done by OBB staff via door-to-door knocking and mailings. Upon making contact with a resident, we emphasize not only finding out how we can help the residents, but also on building and maintaining a relationship with that resident. The questions on the survey help determine what services residents are eligible for – either through OBB or through our numerous partner organizations. This unique method allows us to be more effective and efficient with the residents and our partners.

Presently, OBB has surveyed four areas of the neighborhood. Throughout these areas, we have signed residents up for food stamps, medical benefits, and LIHEAP. We have also assisted residents with filing their income taxes and filling out the FAFSA (financial student aid). Others have been helped to sign up for weatherization or Act 50 and Act 77 Property Tax Reductions. We have also qualified some to receive home repairs from Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh. Lastly, by gaining insight on the residents' ownership status, we have been able to help with tangled title matters.

## *Goals of this approach:*

- Link residents with specific services (Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh, weatherization, Bridge to Benefits, property and real estate services)
- Gather accurate and current parcel information (occupied properties, vacant properties, vacant lots)
- Build relationships with residents (plug them in to where their interests and passions lie)
- Track and address issues and needs of the neighborhood (examples: crime, vacant properties, youth programs)

# Detailed Survey Process

## PREPARATION PHASE

- 1 Choose survey area within neighborhood – *3 wks prior to beginning survey*
  - Make sure it is manageable (somewhere around 500 total parcels)
  - Good to choose an area with foreseeable investment
- 2 Print off blank maps of the area utilizing GIS, PNCIS, etc. – *3 wks prior to beginning survey*
  - Make sure they are zoomed in enough so that you can see the Parcel ID on each parcel
  - Turn on building outlines (if using PNCIS) – this enables you to see if it's a lot or contains a structure
- 3 Complete foot survey to assess vacancy – *allow 1-2 weeks to complete*
  - Mark parcel statuses on printout maps (see all parcel options listed on #5)
  - If unable to tell if a property is vacant or occupied, look for these signs of a vacant property:
    - > Mail is piled up/Phone books at door
    - > Gas or electric is turned off/Meter has been removed
    - > Old drapes in window
    - > Talk to the neighbors/Mail carrier
- 4 Create Excel spreadsheet that contains the following fields:  
*(time to complete based on experience)*
  - Parcel ID
  - Address
  - Vacancy Status
  - Owner (Allegheny County Assessment website – <http://www2.county.allegheny.pa.us/RealEstate/Search.aspx>)
  - Taxes (Allegheny County Assessment website – same as above)
- 5 Make a map utilizing GIS, PNCIS, etc. based on foot survey:  
*(time to complete based on experience)*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Occupied</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; House</li><li>&gt; Commercial</li><li>&gt; Sideyard</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; Garden</li><li>&gt; Parking</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Vacant</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; House – secured/unsecured</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; Commercial</li><li>&gt; Lot</li></ul>
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## SURVEY PHASE

- 6 Send out pre-survey letter to inform residents of the activity – *2 wks prior to surveying* (see pre-survey letter sample on page 8)
- 7 Split up area amongst staff ensuring each staff has an equal amount of occupied and vacant properties to complete – *1 wk prior to surveying* (see sample map on page 9)
- 8 Staff training – *1 wk prior to surveying* (see sample staff training document on page 10)
- 9 Do the surveys (including thank you's) – *allow 4 wks to complete (depending on size of area)* (see survey template on page 14)
- 10 Send out post-survey letter to those that we were not able to reach along with paper copy of the survey – *1wk after surveying is complete* (see post-survey letter sample on page 17)

## FOLLOW-UP PHASE

- 11 Give out staff assignments (sign residents up for Bridge to Benefits, volunteer opportunities, after-school program, and/or other services that they qualify for) – *2 wks after surveying is complete*
- 12 Report out to community after data has been aggregated – *3 wks after surveying is complete* (see postcard sample on page 18)
- 13 Staff review (what worked/didn't, what needs to be changed) – *immediately after round is complete*

*From start to finish:  
approximately 2-3 months to complete the entire process  
(dependent on capacity)*



# Pre-Survey Letter

Monday, August 30, 2012

Hello Homewood Resident!

Serving Homewood-Brushton for forty years, Operation Better Block, Inc. (OBB) is a non-profit organization that works to strategize, organize, and mobilize residents block-by-block to benefit the Homewood community. We do this through several avenues, but most importantly through community organizing and outreach.

Over the course of the next several weeks, OBB will be conducting a door-to-door resident survey. The purpose of the survey is to gather valuable information from you to determine how we can be of more assistance, ensure that your voice is heard, and sign you up for any services you may be eligible for.

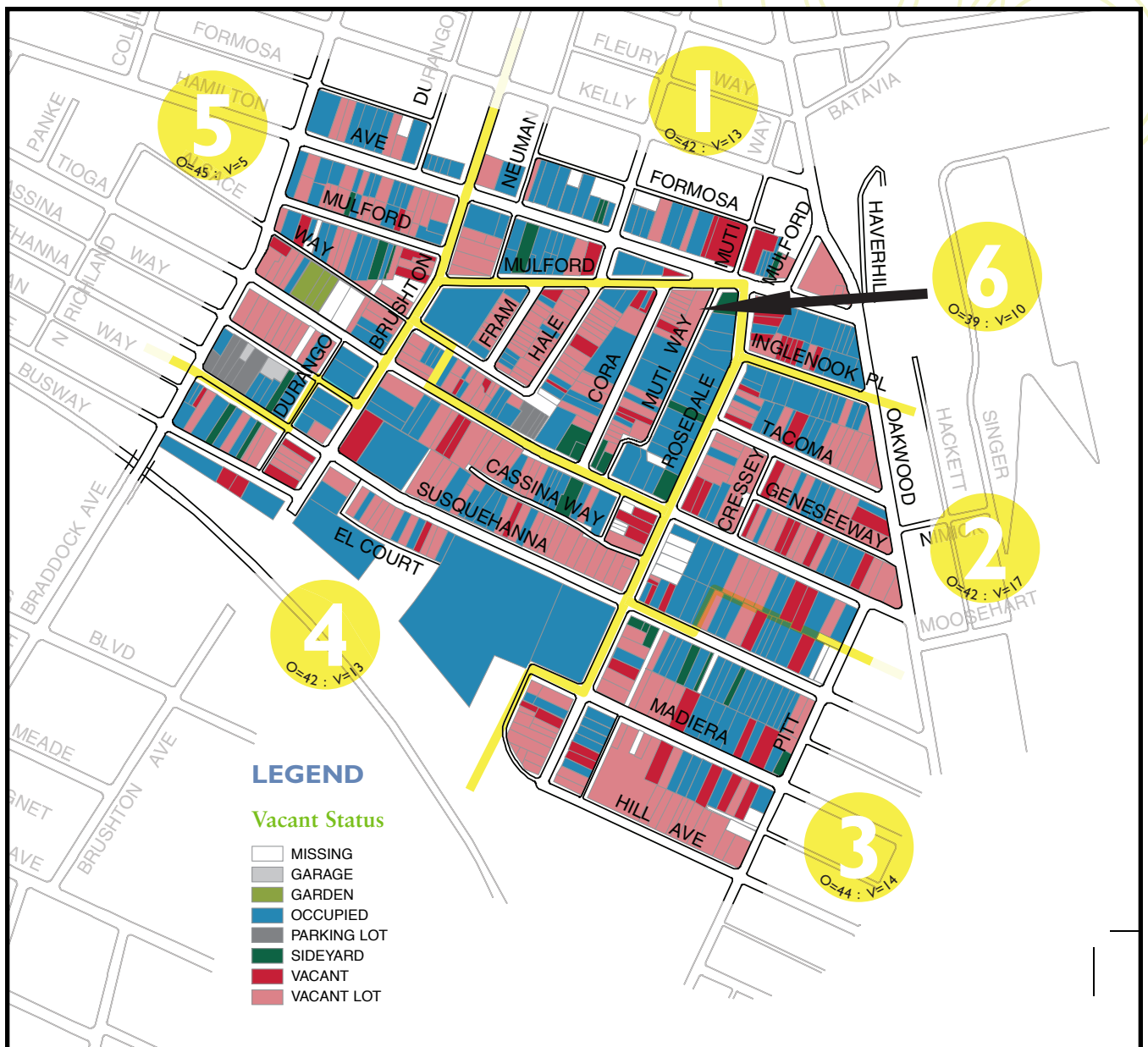
We are sending you this letter to inform you that you can expect staff from OBB to be surveying houses and residents in your area. You will be able to recognize staff members by the badge that we wear with our logo and picture on it. We plan to begin this survey the second full week of September and will be actively working on it for over a month.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me by phone at (412) 731-1908, by email at [dkolke@obbinc.org](mailto:dkolke@obbinc.org), or by stopping in our office at 801 N. Homewood Ave.

Thank you in advance for your participation!

Demi Kolke  
*Senior Community Organizer*

# Sample Map





# Staff Training Document

## STEP-BY-STEP SURVEY PROCESS

- 1 Carry clipboard containing: map (which contains routes), OBB Survey Field Report (see page 11), housing list which includes tracking sheet (see page 12), this paper
- 2 Bring along door hangers (see page 13)
- 3 Bring OBB identification (badge and business cards)
- 4 Check out a handheld device

### FOR OCCUPIED PROPERTIES

Knock on the door **FIRST** before doing property portion of the survey.

Do not complete property portion of occupied houses until the resident portion is complete.

#### **If they answer:**

Introduce yourself and explain the purpose of the survey

- Property inventory
- Connect residents to services
- Connect volunteers with projects
- Gather general information to better understand who we serve

#### **If they DON'T answer:**

Fill out a door hanger and leave it there

### FOR VACANT PROPERTIES, CHURCHES (OCCUPIED OR VACANT), COMMERCIAL/INDUSTRIAL (OCCUPIED OR VACANT)

Only complete the property portion of the survey.

- 5 Be sure to fill out a code for each occupied property on the tracking sheet every time you go out
- 6 When you get back to the office, immediately sync your handheld
- 7 Turn the handheld back in
- 8 If a resident completed a survey, send them a personalized Thank You card right away (I have them in my office)
- 9 When you are done with ALL your surveys, complete the OBB Survey Field Report and turn it in along with your address tracking form



# OBB Survey Field Report

OBB Staff Name: \_\_\_\_\_

All surveys entered into database:  Yes  No

Tracking Form Turned In:  Yes  No

Supervisor Signoff: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## TENTATIVE INACTIVE CODES

*If code is 4, 5, or 6, staff must return to house until code 3, 7, or 9 is reached.*

### Choose One for Each Visit to an Occupied House

- 1 Address is a vacant lot
- 2 Address is a vacant house
- 3 Hard refusal, Resident voices they do not want to complete survey
- 4 Soft refusal, Resident appears home but does not answer door
- 5 Soft refusal, Resident answers door and asks to reschedule survey
- 6 Soft refusal, Resident is not home (left door hanger)
- 7 Visited residence 6–8 times (survey not complete)
- 8 Other (see below for Additional Notes)
- 9 Survey Completed
- 10 Personalized “Thank You” sent

*All reports will be reviewed by Supervisor and Executive Director.*

Additional Surveyor Notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# Address Tracking Sheet

	Parcel ID	Address	Owner of Record	Status	Notes	Attempt #								FINAL
						1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
						DATE/TIME & CODE								
1	125-L-305	6901 Susquehanna St	DAH Partners LP	occupied	commercial									
2	125-L-304	6905 Susquehanna St	DAH Partners LP	occupied	commercial									
3	125-L-303	Susquehanna St	DAH Partners LP	occupied	commercial									
4	125-L-293	6923 Susquehanna St	DAH Partners LP	occupied	commercial									
5	125-L-289	6931 Susquehanna St	Howard, Teresa	occupied										
6	125-M-371	6943 Susquehanna St	City of Pittsburgh	occupied										
7	125-S-20	521 N Murtland St	Harris, Lessie & Joan S	occupied										
8	125-K-130	6890 5th Ave	Anderson, David E	occupied	commercial									
9	125-K-137	6710 Hamilton Ave	Anderson, David E	occupied	commercial									
10	125-L-237-0-1	6814 Hamilton Ave	City of Pittsburgh	occupied	commercial									
11	125-L-228	6888 Hamilton Ave	Morrone, Gerlad A & Dorothy R	occupied	commercial									
12	125-M-392	6934 Hamilton Ave	Jones, Howard	occupied										
13	125-M-389	6940 Hamilton Ave	Baker, Jeanine & Curtis C	occupied										
14	125-M-387	6944 Hamilton Ave	Harden, Jacqueline B	occupied	2 units									
15														
16	125-K-153	6707 Hamilton Ave	Babkes, Joel	occupied	commercial									
17	125-K-149	6723 Hamilton Ave	Anderson, David	occupied										
18	125-K-147	6727 Hamilton Ave	Dow, Marjorie & Ernest	occupied										
19	125-K-146	6729 Hamilton Ave	Jemison, Jesse & Wilma	occupied										
20	125-L-162	6731 Hamilton Ave	Copeland, Darwin	occupied	2 units									
21														
22	125-L-195	6903 Hamilton Ave	Freeman, Maceo E & Frances E	occupied										
23	125-L-196	6905 Hamilton Ave	Latimer, Sarah Fields	occupied										
24	125-L-197	6907 Hamilton Ave	Ward, John F	occupied										
25	125-L-198	6909 Hamilton Ave	Cook, Jacqueline D	occupied										
26	125-M-311	6927 Hamilton Ave	Davie, Willard D & Betty Y	occupied										
27	125-M-319	6943 Hamilton Ave	Henderson, Donna & Stanley	occupied										
28	125-M-321	6947 Hamilton Ave	Durrett, Stephanie	occupied										
29	125-M-296	605 N Murtland Ave	Olivis, Reginald L	occupied	4 units									
30														
31														
32														
33	125-M-299	613 N Murtland Ave	Williams, Brian D & Mary A Randall	occupied										
34	125-F-232	6910 5th Ave	Fifth Ave Car Wash LLC	occupied	commercial									
35	125-F-239	6714 Kelly St	UPMC Presbyterian	occupied	commercial									
36	125-G-16	6728 Kelly St	Carter, Garnetta R	occupied										
37	125-G-17	6730 Kelly St	Mann, Latham & Virginia	occupied										
38	125-L-78	6736 Kelly St	Lawrenceville Holdings IV LP	occupied	2 units									
39														

# Door Hangers

Sorry We  
Missed You!

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Time \_\_\_\_\_

**WE WANT TO HEAR YOUR INPUT  
ON OUR RESIDENT SURVEY!**



Operation Better Block, Inc.

801 N. Homewood Ave.  
Pittsburgh, PA 15208

Please call us at **412-731-1908**



# Survey Template HOMEWOOD SURVEY

## Property Questions

### Property Address

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### Lot and Block

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### Structure Type

- Brick       Frame

### Housing Type

- Single Family  
 Duplex  
 Row House  
 Apartment Building  
 Mixed Use  
 Commercial/Industrial

### Residency

- Occupied  
 Vacant Secured  
 Vacant Unsecured

### Structure Exterior

#### Paint/Siding/Brick

- Good  
 Fair  
 Poor

#### Windows and Doors

- | <i>1st Floor</i>              | <i>2nd Floor</i>              |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Good | <input type="checkbox"/> Good |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fair | <input type="checkbox"/> Fair |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Poor | <input type="checkbox"/> Poor |

#### Fences, Walls, Hedges

- Good  
 Fair  
 Poor  
 Not Applicable

### Porch/Balcony

- Good  
 Fair  
 Poor  
 Not Applicable

### Lawn

- Good  
 Fair  
 Poor  
 Not applicable

### Sidewalk

- Good  
 Fair  
 Poor

### Street Condition

- Good  
 Fair  
 Poor

### Street Trees

- Yes       No

### Rodents

- Yes       No

### Litter

- Yes       No

### Graffiti

- Yes       No

### Drug and Alcohol Paraphernalia

- Yes       No



## Resident Questions

Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Phone/Email

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Do you

- Own  
 Legal Owner  
 Equitable Owner  
 Unsure

Rent

Owner's Name or Property  
Management Company

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Refused to respond

How long have you lived  
at this address?

- Less than 1 year  
 1 year – 5 years  
 6 years – 10 years  
 11 years – 20 years  
 21 years – 30 years  
 31 or more years  
 Refused to respond

Are you current on your  
property taxes?

- Yes  No  
 n/a  
 Refused to respond  
 Unsure

Are you on a payment plan?

- Yes  No  
 n/a  
 Refused to respond  
 Unsure

Do you have property tax  
reductions? *(check all that apply)*

- Act 50 – Homestead/Farmstead  
 Act 77 – Senior Citizen  
 None  
 Refused to respond  
 Unsure

Age

- 18 – 30  
 31 – 45  
 46 – 60  
 61 – 75  
 76 and above  
 Refused to respond

Race

- African American  
 Caucasian  
 Hispanic  
 Asian  
 Other  
 Refused to respond

Are you married?

- Yes  No  
 Refused to respond

Are you/your spouse a veteran?

- Yes  No  
 Refused to respond

Are you/your spouse disabled?

- Yes  No  
 Refused to respond

How many people currently  
live with you? \_\_\_\_\_

What are their ages?

*(check all that apply)*

- \_\_\_\_ Early Childhood (0-5)  
\_\_\_\_ Elementary (6-12)  
\_\_\_\_ High School (13-18)  
\_\_\_\_ Young Adult (19-35)  
\_\_\_\_ Middle Age (36-60)  
\_\_\_\_ Older person (61 and over)  
\_\_\_\_ Refused to respond

What is your household  
income level?

- Less than \$10,000  
 \$10,000 – \$24,999  
 \$25,000 – \$39,999  
 \$40,000 – \$64,999  
 \$65,000 – \$99,999  
 \$100,000 and over  
 Refused to respond

## Resident Questions *continued*

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Are you currently employed?

- Yes       No  
 Refused to respond

How safe do you feel  
in this community?

- Very Safe  
 Somewhat Safe  
 Not Safe  
 Refused to respond

How often do you or anyone  
in your household use public  
transportation?

- Never  
 A few times a month  
 A few times a week  
 Every day  
 Refused to respond

If you use public transportation,  
which buses do you utilize?

*(check all that apply)*

- Busway  
 71D Hamilton  
 86 Liberty  
 77 Penn Hills  
 74 Homewood  
 Refused to respond

If you use public transportation,  
do you have alternative  
transportation if, for some reason,  
your bus route was cut?

- Yes       No  
 Refused to respond

Do you have any needs or wants  
for your property specifically or  
your block? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

If development were to happen  
in the area where you currently  
live, would you be willing/want  
to relocate?

- Yes  
     Stay in Homewood  
     Leave Homewood  
 No  
 Refused to respond

From the list below, are there any  
benefits you are interested in/need  
help applying for?

*(check all that apply)*

- Food stamps  
 Medical benefits  
 LIHEAP  
 Weatherization  
 Income tax  
 FAFSA  
 Refused to respond

Have you heard of Operation  
Better Block and how?

*(check all that apply)*

- Have not heard it  
 History in the neighborhood  
 Been involved before  
 Outreach  
 Neighbors/other agency  
 Staff member  
 Other  
 Refused to respond

Would you like to volunteer with  
Operation Better Block?

- No  
 Tutor/mentor a high school student  
 Participate in community  
development plan  
 Assist with neighborhood  
outreach  
 Start/be a part of a block watch  
or community safety initiatives  
 Annual community events  
 Any capacity  
 Refused to respond

Additional Comments

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Completed by

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date and Time

\_\_\_\_\_

# Post-Survey Letter

Friday, October 12, 2012

Hello Homewood Resident!

Over the last month, Operation Better Block, Inc. has been conducting a resident survey. The purpose of the resident survey is to gather valuable information from you to determine how we can be of more assistance and ensure that your voice is heard. Our target area during this time has been from Hamilton Avenue to the Busway and from North Braddock Avenue to Oakwood Street/Pitt Street.

We are sending you this letter, along with a paper copy of the survey, because we missed you when we came by your house to do the survey. The questions on this survey will allow us to better serve you. However, if you do not feel comfortable answering some of the questions, please complete the survey with the information you do feel comfortable providing.

There are several ways to respond to this survey:

- 1) fill it out and drop it off at our office which is located at 801 N. Homewood Ave.
- 2) fill it out and call our office to have someone pick it up for you; the number is (412) 731-1908
- 3) call our office and schedule a time for someone to come by and complete the survey with you electronically.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me by phone at (412) 731-1908, by email at [dkolke@obbinc.org](mailto:dkolke@obbinc.org), or by stopping in at 801 N. Homewood Ave.

Thank you for your participation!

Demi Kolke  
*Senior Community Organizer*

# Sample Results Postcard



*Operation Better Block, Inc.*

Thank you for those who participated in our resident survey! Flip over this postcard for a sample of the results from residents who live in your area of Homewood.

-The OBB Staff

For more results  contact us at 412-731-1908 or stop in and see us at 801 N. Homewood Ave Pittsburgh, Pa 15208

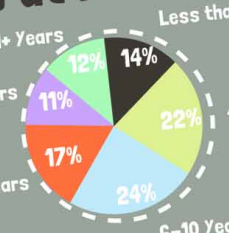
*the results* . . . . .

### Age of Residents

18-30	14%
31-45	21%
46-60	22%
61-75	27%
75+	11%

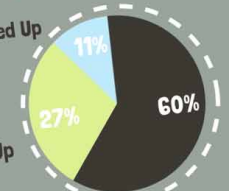
P.S. 1% OF RESIDENTS POLITELY DECLINED TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION

### Time at Residence



31+ Years	12%
21-30 Years	11%
11-20 Years	17%
6-10 Years	24%
1-5 Years	22%
Less than 1 Year	14%

### Occupied or Vacant



Occupied	60%
Vacant Not Boarded Up	11%
Vacant Boarded Up	27%

P.S. 2% OF PROPERTIES ARE UNACCOUNTED FOR IN THIS SURVEY

### Own vs. Rent

50% Own and 50% Rent



# Survey Development

## LESSONS THAT TRANSFORMED THE SURVEY PROCESS

For the very first area, each staff was simply given a chunk of land and was told to assess vacant and occupied houses within their areas. Once everyone had completed their area, I went out to see what each parcel was (vacant lot, vacant house, and occupied house) and check if we had a survey for it. From this foot survey, I developed a vacancy map of the target area.

The steps in which this was done was ineffective because there was no count on which parcels had what status. This led to some staff having lots to survey and others having little. In addition to this, because there was not a total count of parcels, there was no way to see if everyone had “completed” their area until after the foot survey was done.

Our next survey area, I learned from this. In this case, the first thing I did was complete a foot survey and map the vacancy of the area. From this, I had a total count of occupied properties, vacant properties, and vacant lots. Each staff was then given the same number of occupied properties and vacant properties to survey. Staff utilized the office marker board to track the dates that they went out to each property.

For our third survey area, we made yet other changes. Again, the foot survey and vacancy map was completed before the survey, and then the areas were divided fairly. This time, everyone received a tracking sheet that listed each occupied property. Staff documented the day/time (to ensure they were trying the house at different times), attempt number, and the code. The codes allowed us to see why people were not completing the survey. See included OBB Survey Field Report document for codes. Based on the number of times staff had to visit a house to get a completed survey in previous survey areas, it was determined that a minimum of six visits would be required to each occupied house. If the survey was completed before the sixth visit, then this wouldn't be required, of course.

After our third area, I made one major change. Instead of having a separate tracking sheet in a Word document, the tracking sheet will be done through Excel. This is because after I received everyone's tracking sheets, I had to input the data into Excel and it was formatted differently. This way, it will be more cohesive for staff doing the surveys as well as the person entering the data.



## LESSONS THAT TRANSFORMED THE SURVEY PROCESS (CONTINUED)

After the second round of the survey, I sat down with our survey consultant and our Executive Director to ensure that our survey was as effective as possible. Here is a summary of that meeting:

*What is the overall purpose of this survey?*

Why are we collecting the data?

What are we using it for?

Do all the questions align with the overall purpose?

*Answer:*

Property inventory

Gather information from residents to know who is in Homewood

Connect them with services

Find their interests for volunteering

*Are all questions tied to an action? (not collecting data just for the sake of collecting data)*

Ex: take out qualitative question because we know residents want a grocery store, but what can we/are we doing about it?

*Which ones do we clearly know how people feel? And do we maybe not need to include?*

Ex: community development fund?

*Which ones have missing data?*

Ex: financial and children – change the structure and add “refusal to answer/unsure” as options

*Which questions do we need or not need detail on?*

*What are we doing to follow-up?*

Build relationships –  
Send thank you’s this round

Connect residents to services they are interested in/eligible for

Provide report that displays survey results

Some of the outcomes mentioned from this meeting are detailed in the chart below. One of the biggest changes we made was the way in which we communicate with the residents. From the beginning, we had sent out a post-survey letter which included a paper copy of the survey for them to fill out if we had missed them when we went door-to-door. However, we added a pre-survey letter which informed

the residents that we would be coming around to survey them. It explained who we were, what we were doing, and what they could expect.

In addition to this, we drastically changed our follow-up. Prior to this most recent round, we did no type of follow-up. This left me feeling as if we were missing out on some really great opportunities to build relationships. For the last round, staff sent out a thank you to each resident who completed the survey. In addition to this, we generated a report in a post card format that summarized some of the key data points we had gathered from the survey. Providing them feedback proved very beneficial as many residents thanked us for this. This report was sent to everyone who lives in the survey area, regardless of if they completed a survey.

The final significant change we made is making sure that every question leads to an action. If a question was included on the survey, we wanted to ensure that we could do something with that information. This allowed us to more effectively serve those that we surveyed by connecting them to services or other opportunities.

# Changing Survey Questions

QUESTION CHANGED	REASONING	ROUND CHANGE MADE
Litter/Graffiti/Trash from amount (little, moderate, considerate) to Yes/No.	The amount of these things is irrelevant as it is most important to understand their prevalence.	Between 2nd and 3rd rounds
Have you heard of OBB (yes/no) to How have you heard of OBB (with options listed including have not heard of OBB).	This allows us to understand what methods of outreach are most effective as well as gauging our presence in the neighborhood.	Between 2nd and 3rd rounds
Added “unsure” and “refused to respond” to all of the residential questions.	There was a lot of missing data on the first two rounds so this would eliminate circumstances such as staff leaving the answer blank because the resident didn’t know or didn’t want to answer.	Between 2nd and 3rd rounds
Vacant Boarded and Vacant Not Boarded changed to Vacant Secured and Vacant Unsecured	This question was intended to measure how many vacant properties were open and accessible to walk into, but the wording “boarded” and “not boarded” was taken literally so it was not an accurate count.	Between 3rd and 4th rounds



# Adding Survey Questions

QUESTION ADDITIONS	REASONING	ROUND CHANGE MADE
Directly listed out benefits that we are able to sign people up for through Bridge to Benefits	Staff in charge of this program requested this as then she will know what she is contacting residents for.	Between 1st and 2nd rounds
If development were to happen in the area where you currently live would you be willing to relocate? If yes, stay in Homewood or leave Homewood?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bridging the Busway plan had just come out at this time and showed some major changes, so we wanted to get ahead of the curve and understand the desire for residents to stay in their home.</li> <li>• By asking if they wanted to stay/leave, we could better understand their commitment to Homewood.</li> </ul>	Between 1st and 2nd rounds
Are you currently employed?	This is a question asked on many of the public benefits that we sign residents up for through Bridge to Benefits.	Between 2nd and 3rd rounds
Would you like to volunteers with OBB (options of opportunities included)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This was helpful for residents to know what OBB does.</li> <li>• Helps connect staff with residents interested in their program/project.</li> </ul>	Between 2nd and 3rd rounds

# Removing Survey Questions

QUESTION REMOVED	REASONING	ROUND CHANGE MADE
<p>Would you like to see any new/different housing options/ services/places to purchase goods in Homewood?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We were receiving the same basic answers (more houses, grocery store).</li> <li>• This was not something that we could directly impact.</li> </ul>	<p>Between 2nd and 3rd rounds</p>
<p>When using public transit where is your destination?</p>	<p>This is not relevant data.</p>	<p>Between 2nd and 3rd rounds</p>
<p>Would you be interested in contributing to a community development fund?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff was not educated enough on what this meant to properly articulate it to residents.</li> <li>• The majority of residents surveyed were not interested.</li> </ul>	<p>Between 2nd and 3rd rounds</p>

# Publicly-Owned > Vacant Lot Maintenance

# Publicly-Owned Vacant Lot Maintenance

Publicly-owned vacant lots are either owned by the City of Pittsburgh or URA or owned by the City with URA “hold” or “transfer to URA” status. Gaining access to these vacant lots can be useful to community groups for several reasons. The CDC can utilize their resources to clean up and maintain the lots; short-term beautification projects can be done on them to benefit the neighborhood, especially on a main thoroughfare; and if the community desires to do a specific project, such as a temporary garden, this can be a great tool.

There are various ways to gain access to vacant lots. However, the liability exposure for the City of Pittsburgh and the URA are different because the City is self-insured, and the URA is not – the URA carries an insurance policy on its property inventory. Permission to use or enter upon URA lots is strictly constrained to limited activities, if available at all, because of their potential exposure. URA typically does maintain its inventory. Since the City is self-insured, there is more opportunity to gain permission for cleanup and maintenance of City-owned vacant lots.

## PERMISSION TO WORK ON CITY-OWNED VACANT LOTS

The City of Pittsburgh Department of Public Works (DPW) handles requests for permissions of this kind. DPW has a Volunteer Project Registration Form.\* The CDC completes the Volunteer Project Registration Form, listing the specific lots where access is desired, and submits it to DPW. DPW reviews and submits it to the Law Department for review and approval by the appropriate Labor Unions. In the case of OBB’s Volunteer Project Registration Form submission, the Unions asked that the form be revised to divide the lots on two requests – those that would be cleaned in the Spring/Summer and those that would be done later in the year.

While license agreements can be a beneficial tool, there are also limitations to them. Because the application needs to go through various departments, the approval to access the lots can be time consuming. Additionally, if leasing a lot from the City, or URA, any food that is grown on the lot cannot be sold for consumption.

When this type of activity is anticipated on City-owned vacant lots, it may be helpful to touch base with Jeff Koch, who is listed on the DPW Volunteer Project Registration Form as the contact person. He is quite responsive to phone messages and email inquiry. He did advise, however, that ‘I can’t speak for them (Unions) so let’s get the Volunteer Form filled out and forward it to them for approval or denial.’

## PURCHASE

If the CDC is interested in purchasing a lot to do more long term planting and growing, including selling the produce grown, this is a viable option. However, this process can take up to one year for it to be complete. Typically, a business plan including research and numbers will be needed to understand how this urban garden will be profitable because it must be self-sustaining. The entity who owns the property will also look to ensure this is the highest and best use for that/those particular parcels. If the urban garden will be a permanent project, neighborhood buy-in will also be a factor is this. The contact person at the City is Ed Jacob and the contact person at the URA is Byron Crawford. If the lot is directly adjacent to the CDC’s property, the CDC can also purchase the lot as a sideyard.

\* The DPW Volunteer Project Registration Form is not included in this manual but is provided as a separate handout.

# **Bureau of Building > Inspection (BBI) Processes**

# Bureau of Building Inspection (BBI) processes

This particular portion of the guide is to serve as an overview of Bureau of Building Inspection (BBI) processes and explain how CDCs can supplement and/or integrate with these processes. The steps we present are centered on vacant and blighted properties with the overall mindset of improving safety and beautifying the neighborhood. We have found code enforcement to be one of the most powerful tools in our toolkit and is a very effective approach when used strategically. One of the biggest lessons for Operation Better Block has been the value of relationships with the BBI inspectors. These relationships can be a game changer for many neighborhoods and should be kept in the forefront throughout all of these steps.

*Section A* (page 28) Here you will find our BBI contact sheet, which you will refer to frequently. This lays out the structure of BBI and includes a brief description on who does what. Fill out your inspectors' information as the start of building working relationships with them.

*Section B* (pages 29-31) will give you the keys to how code enforcement works. You can use this section to gain code compliance on occupied or vacant properties. Additionally, it will serve as a step-by-step guide on getting a property condemned. These eight steps should be followed for any property you are targeting that is **not on the condemned list**.

If the building(s) you are targeting is already on the condemned list, and you want to see if it is salvageable, you should skip to Section C.

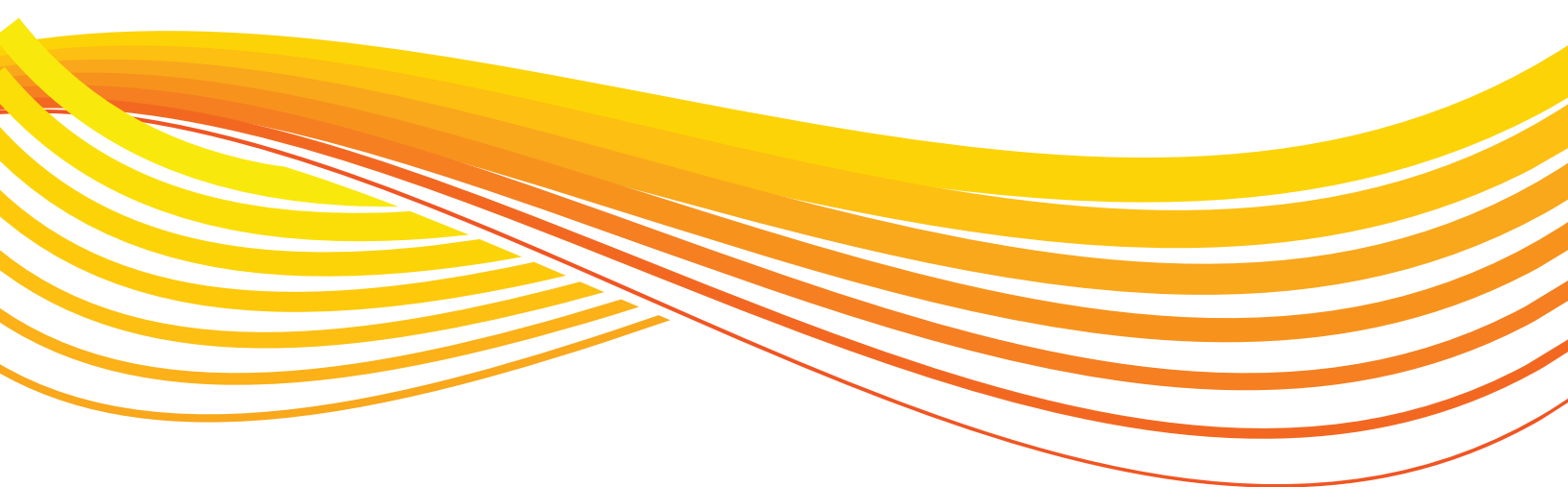
*Section C* (pages 32-34) gives you three key questions to answer to see if a vacant building should be rehabbed or demolished. You can also use this section to understand how to gain access to the property in order to do interior inspections depending on the ownership of the property.

If you determine that the condemned, vacant building should be demolished, you proceed to Section D.

*Section D* (page 35) walks through how to get a property razed and the process BBI goes through as well.

## *Quick Guide to this portion of the manual:*

- If the building is not condemned – see Section B
- If the building is condemned and want to see if it is salvageable – go directly to Section C
- If the building is condemned and want it demolished – go directly to Section D



## Bureau of Building Inspection Contact Sheet (SECTION A)

### BUREAU OF BUILDING INSPECTION (BBI) PRIMARY CONTACTS

as of 3.13.13

#### Administrative Staff ..... 412-255-2187

Mary Weixel

mary.weixel@pittsburghpa.gov

- Email her to request to receive weekly housing court dockets

Sylvia Satariano

sylvia.satariano@pittsburghpa.gov

- Sends out monthly mailings of new buildings posted/demoed
- Puts demo packages out to bid
- Contact person for demolition contractors

#### File Room ..... 412-255-2195

Craig Sipple and Joe Tsumscic

Hours: 7:30am – 3:45pm

- Call to ask about violation notices on properties (*must have actual property address*)

#### Demolition Manager

Paul Loy

paul.loy@pittsburghpa.gov

- Signs off on demos and can also place a hold on demos

#### Inspectors (one per ward)

##### Code Inspector (*Condemnations*)

- Condemns properties and puts demolition packages together

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Best time to reach \_\_\_\_\_

##### Code Inspector (*Lots and Grounds*)

- Handles issues such as rodents, dumping, overgrowth, etc.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Best time to reach \_\_\_\_\_

##### Senior Building Inspector

- Cites code violations on buildings and follows up with 311 calls

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Best time to reach \_\_\_\_\_



## BBI Code Enforcement (SECTION B)

To be utilized on vacant or occupied properties to achieve code compliance and/or as the starting place for getting a property condemned.

### I GET A COPY OF THE CONDEMNED LIST

Through a relationship with the Condemnation Code Inspector, a CDC can typically request to have a copy of the list of properties that are condemned for the specific neighborhood wards. BBI produces a new list every few months, but CDC staff can request monthly updates for new buildings posted and buildings demolished from BBI administrative staff (See Section A for contact information.).

### 2 CALL BBI FILE ROOM (SEE SECTION A FOR CONTACT INFORMATION.)

By providing BBI staff with an exact address, they can check to see if there have been any previous code violations on the property. This is typically a good place to start because if there have been previous violations, then you know what to look for to see if they have been abated. Whether there are previous violations (that have or have not been abated) or there are no previous violations, it is best practice to understand the history of the property by asking BBI File Room to check the property for any code enforcement or condemnation activity.

### 3 UTILIZE THE PROPERTY MAINTENANCE CODE TO ASSESS POTENTIAL CODE ISSUES

The property maintenance code is a local adoption by ordinance of the International Property Maintenance Code (PMC). This following link leads to the City of Pittsburgh Code of Ordinance (<http://library.municode.com/index.aspx?clientId=13525>). Go to Title 10 Building Code and then to Chapter 1004 for what property maintenance code is currently in effect. At the time of writing, the City had adopted the 2003 Property Maintenance Code.

Then, click on this link for the International Property Maintenance Code (<http://publicecodes.cyberregs.com/icod/ipmc/index.htm>) where the 2003 PMC is located. This will provide an understanding of what can be enforced in the City of Pittsburgh. However, the City Code, Title 10, Chapter 1004 may specify certain changes that City Council made to the PMC when it was adopted.

Putting these two sites together, you are able to review the standards for property maintenance in the City of Pittsburgh.

*\* It is important to understand that most of this process typically occurs without CDC/resident involvement. However, if actively engaging residents to transform a particular area, residents and CDC staff can serve as advocates and participate in this process for the community's benefit.*

## BBI Code Enforcement (SECTION B CONTINUED)

### 4 CALL 311 (CITY OF PITTSBURGH'S NON-EMERGENCY RESPONSE CENTER)

Once it has been determined what possible violations are on the property, the next step is to call and report them to 311. When the operator enters the request or concern, the caller should receive a service request number. If not, simply ask the operator for one. This will serve as a reference number and is how the request/concern will be tracked.

If the property is open (no door, no board) and accessible to walk into, it is vital to communicate this to the operator at 311 as well. They will then send out the Board-Up Division to secure the property.

### 5 INVOLVE AREA RESIDENTS IN CALLING 311

After having established relationships with residents in the area, it is important to educate and involve them in these processes. The more attention that is brought to the property, the quicker it will likely be addressed. Providing residents with a simple snapshot as demonstrated here can be highly effective.

Because these residents may live in such close proximity to the property that is being reported, they may notice other code issues as well. Again, explaining to residents why this is important and how valuable their assistance is will create more buy-in for this process which will lead to more success.

#### CALL 311

570 Panke Avenue

- Dumping in front and back
- Porch held up by 2x4's
- Disconnected downspouts
- Broken window

### 6 FOLLOW UP WITH SENIOR BUILDING INSPECTOR

Having a relationship with the on-the-ground BBI staff becomes vital at this point. Following up with the Building Inspector to explain which property the CDC and residents have been targeting will help him/her to prioritize this property, ensure follow-up on the 311 calls, and keep the CDC updated as to what happens with the property.

NOTE: If the Inspector believes the code issues reported are valid, he/she sends the property owner a Notice to Abate the violation on the property. If there is not abatement by the expiration of the time allowed, the Inspector may issue a citation or complaint to initiate a summary criminal proceeding before the Magisterial District Judge (MDJ) in whose magisterial district the property is located. If the property owner pleads not guilty, a court hearing may be scheduled before the MDJ.

## 7 CHECK THE WEEKLY COURT DOCKET EMAILS TO STAY ABREAST OF MUNICIPAL PROSECUTIONS BASED ON CODE VIOLATIONS

If already receiving the weekly emails that contain properties going to court, continue to track these. If not, call or email BBI administrative staff (See Section A for contact information.) to request to receive these weekly updates by email. (The email contains listings for the entire City of Pittsburgh, separated by ward). Again, if the property citation was not abated, the property may end up in front of a MDJ.

CDC staff is encouraged to attend enforcement hearings. It is an opportune time to build relationships with the Code and Building Inspectors (who are typically in attendance), the MDJ, Assistant City Solicitor, and residents/property owners.

## 8 FOLLOWING UP ON PROPERTIES

Check the Magisterial District Courts Docket Sheets (<http://ujportal.pacourts.us/DocketSheets/MDJ.aspx>) by Docket Number or Parcel ID or Participant Name. Docket sheets on a single case and summary sheets that note all related cases can be accessed at this site.

A property owner/code defendant may appeal to an MDJ guilty verdict to Statutory Appeals Court for a trial de novo (new hearing) in the Court of Common Pleas. Check the Common Pleas Courts Docket Sheets (<http://ujportal.pacourts.us/DocketSheets/CP.aspx>).

At least four guilty convictions on the same property for the same violation that remains unabated may be the basis for a misdemeanor charge. A Magisterial District Docket Summary Sheet showing four guilty adjudications should be discussed with an Assistant District Attorney at the MDJ office on DA day. ADA Kevin McCarthy (tel: (412) 350-3105, email: [KMcCarthy@da.allegheny.pa.us](mailto:KMcCarthy@da.allegheny.pa.us)) handles blighted property matters that may be appropriate for escalated criminal prosecutions for code violations.

\* At any time during this process, the Building Inspector may turn the property over to the Condemnation Code Inspector, who can then condemn the property (whether it is occupied or not). A condemned property is deemed as not suitable for habitation.



## Vacant Property Due Diligence (SECTION C)

### DUE DILIGENCE WITH REGARD TO PROPERTY CONDITION OF VACANT (INCLUDING CONDEMNED) PROPERTIES

#### EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR INSPECTIONS

*Vacant structure options: rehabilitation/demolition*

Three (3) key questions:

#### 1. What do the residents in proximity to the vacant property want to see happen with this property?

Operation Better Block, Inc. (OBB) weighed the residents' with highest proximity to the vacant structures opinions heavily. Opinions were obtained only after relationships were developed between OBB and residents by way of resident surveys and one-on-ones and block cluster visioning processes.

#### 2. What is the condition of the property?

This step is a necessary component of the due diligence. The structural integrity of the building will determine if it is truly able to be rehabbed or needs to be razed. Having both exterior and interior inspections completed by a trained individual will be an integral part of the process to determine if the house can be saved, including if it will need to be gutted. Getting an estimate on how much will need to be put into the house will be beneficial. The portion below discusses how to gain access to a vacant structure in order to do the interior inspection.

#### 3. What is the development potential of the property?

Aspects that include the economy also need to be taken into account. These are some questions to think about. What is the amount of funding that is available for rehab projects? What is the average sale price of houses in the neighborhood? How long are houses on the market before selling? Are people (potential homeowners) currently interested in moving to the neighborhood?

## HOW TO GAIN ACCESS TO A VACANT STRUCTURE?

*Access depends on the ownership status of the vacant structure.*

### > Private/owner in existence/nonresponsive

**Code Enforcement** – File a complaint with 311. If the building is open, the City will send its boarding division to seal the building. Report any exterior conditions that do not comply with the Property Maintenance Code, i.e. holes in roof, no downspouts, disconnected downspouts, broken windows, etc.

**Court Appointed Conservator** – {See Handbook} Upon appointment, conservator is authorized to take immediate possession of the property and may conduct interior inspections. It is important to understand that this is not a quick way to gain access to a structure.

**Permission by Owner** – Permission may be difficult with an otherwise unresponsive owner but in certain circumstances it may be worthwhile. If conservatorship is being contemplated, consider carefully whether to contact the owner. An owner can make the property ineligible for conservatorship by minimal marketing of the property.

### > Private/decedent owner

**Estate administration/personal representative appointed** – Research whether or not an estate has been opened. Search for an obituary that provides a date of death, then, search the Allegheny County Department of Court Records Wills/Orphans' Court Division for the Estate's attorney and personal representative. Contact the attorney, and, if no attorney, the personal representative to inquire about the property.

**Estate administration/no personal representative** – An estate attorney may conduct a search for heirs and petition the Allegheny County Orphans' Court to be appointed Administrator of the estate on behalf of a redevelopment authority or any creditor that has a claim against the property.

### > Public/Owned by City of Pittsburgh

City may be marketing these properties for sale. Structures the City is marketing are re-keyed, inspected, and otherwise readied for people to walk through. Interested purchasers, even prior to being allowed access the property, are subject to a qualified-buyer check to ensure potential purchaser has no delinquent taxes. Start with a conversation with Ed Jacob in the City of Pittsburgh Department of Real Estate (412) 255-2314 to inquire about the property and to schedule a walk-through/inspection of the property.

When access to the interior of property is secured, invite someone with expertise in vacant property rehabilitation to inspect the properties and provide an objective assessment of the structural issues and economics involved with rehabilitation.



## Vacant Property Due Diligence (SECTION C CONTINUED)

### > Public/Owned by City of Pittsburgh with URA “hold” or “transfer to URA”

Due to a URA hold on the property, the City is not likely to be marketing these properties for sale and will not have re-keyed, inspected, and otherwise readied the structure for people to walk through.

CDC representatives should request URA’s Engineering & Construction department staff to conduct an exterior-only inspection of the structure which should indicate roughly the cost to rehab the structure without gaining entrance. If absolutely necessary to obtain interior access, contact Ed Jacob in the City of Pittsburgh Department of Real Estate (412) 255-2314 to request re-keying and readying the properties for inspection. The City will likely pass on the associated costs to URA for their re-keying and readying the properties for inspection.

Again, invite someone with expertise in vacant property rehabilitation to inspect the properties and provide an objective assessment of the structural issues and economics involved with rehabilitation.

### > Public/Owned by URA

Contact Susan Malys, URA Manager of Real Estate (412) 255-6680 to determine the availability of the property for possible sale and inspection.

**NOTE:** A structure that is vacant for even a couple of years, perhaps just a bad winter season, may deteriorate significantly and be subject to condemnation by the City of Pittsburgh Bureau of Building Inspection (BBI). If the property is owned by the City, even with a URA hold, BBI may request the approval of the Real Estate Division (not the URA) to raze a condemned structure if it becomes a priority for demolition.





## Priority Demolition (SECTION D)

### HOW TO GET A PROPERTY DEMOLISHED THAT IS ON THE CONDEMNED LIST:

#### CDC PROCESSES

1. Communicate prioritization with Condemnation Code Inspector via phone call
2. Reiterate this communication with Paul Loy via email
3. Give Condemnation Code Inspector a copy of this email to put in the property file

#### BBI PROCESSES

1. Condemnation Code Inspector will put together a demo package.
2. Paul Loy will sign off of this.
3. Asbestos survey also completed at this time.
4. Condemnation Code Inspector will give the demo package to Sylvia Satariano.
5. Approximately one month later, Sylvia Satariano will put the demo package out to bid.  
[http://www.city.pittsburgh.pa.us/bbi/html/demolition\\_postings.html](http://www.city.pittsburgh.pa.us/bbi/html/demolition_postings.html)
6. One week later, BBI will typically accept the bids back and award the bid.
7. BBI will not share contractor's contact information, but once they have awarded the bid, Sylvia can be in contact with them and share with CDC their estimated timeframe for the demo.
8. Contractor will get asbestos permit from the County and then remove asbestos from the property.
9. Once this is completed, the property can be razed.
10. Demo specs may be able to be obtained from Condemnation Code Inspector, if interested.

It is important to keep in mind that once a privately-owned vacant property is condemned and demolished, the City will lien the property for the demo costs. Typically, this lien is in addition to liens for taxes that have accrued. In other words, demolition removes the dangerous structure, but the dirty title remains for that particular parcel. If the parcel is taken to Treasurer's Sale and becomes publicly-owned, the City can work to clear the title for an interested purchaser, CDC, or URA. However, if the parcel is privately-owned, the liens, back taxes, etc. will remain with that parcel.





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