COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

JOINT COMMITTEES ON HOUSING, NEIGHBORHOOD

DEVELOPMENT AND THE HOMELESS AND

PUBLIC PROPERTY AND PUBLIC WORKS

Room 400, City Hall
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Wednesday, October 30, 2024
10:08 a.m.

PRESENT:

COUNCILWOMAN JAMIE GAUTHIER, CHAIR
COUNCILWOMAN QUETCY M. LOZADA, CHAIR
COUNCILWOMAN RUE LANDAU
COUNCILWOMAN CINDY BASS
COUNCILMAN MICHAEL DRISCOLL
COUNCILMAN CURTIS JONES, JR.

ALSO PRESENT:

COUNCILWOMAN KENDRA BROOKS
COUNCILMAN NICOLAS O'ROURKE

RESOLUTION: 240288

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COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Good morning, everyone. I now note that the hour has come and this hearing is called to order. This is the public hearing of the Joint City Council Committees on Housing, Neighborhood Development and the Homeless and Public Property and Public Works. The purpose of this public hearing is to hear testimony on Resolution No. 240288.

Ms. Jones, will you please call the roll.

THE CLERK: Councilmember Jones.

COUNCILMAN JONES:

Present.

THE CLERK: Councilmember Driscoll.

COUNCILMAN DRISCOLL:

Present.

THE CLERK: Vice-Chair Landau.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:

Present.

THE CLERK: Chair Lozada.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA:

Present.

THE CLERK: Chair Gauthier.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Present. Thank you, Ms. Jones. Joining us also is Minority Leader Brooks, Councilmember Kendra Brooks.

I note for the record that a quorum of this Committee is present and this hearing is called to order. Thank you all for being here, most especially my Co-Chair Councilmember Quetcy Lozada, who has been an invaluable partner in this work.

Thirteen years ago a grassroots coalition of CDCs and other community organizations fought for the creation of a land bank. And in 2013 they won over the

support of City Council, which created the Philadelphia Land Bank to "promote long-term affordability and socioeconomic diversity through equitable development and deliberate and sustained public discussion."

At the time, the City of Philadelphia controlled about 8,000 vacant parcels and we set the ambitious goal of getting 2700 pieces of land out the door within five years for long-term affordable housing community gardens and urban farms. Fast-forward 11 years and you will see that we've barely made it past the starting line, even when we account for City Council's Turn the Key program, which exponentially increased land dispositions. Even still land dispositions for genuinely affordable rental housing have declined every single year since 2017. And two years ago land for community green space screeched

to a halt.

The same groups that fought for the Land Bank in the first place routinely receive unfriendly and restrictive service from the agency, and applicants fortunate enough to make it through the process can expect a land disposition to take anywhere from one to five years to complete. These long timelines are not as problematic for large for-profit companies.

They have staff and consultants who can follow up with the agency continuously, which means their applications move to the front of the line. But individuals in smaller nonprofit organizations trying to do it themselves find their applications lost in the system, even though they have a confirmation receipt in hand. And they routinely wait months for a

status update, if they get one at all.

The Land Bank has also never submitted an annual performance review to Council as required by law. And at last, published a strategic plan in 2017, even though the Code requires them to do so every three years. This inefficiency and lack of transparency and urgency cannot continue. And frankly, this is a conversation that should already have taken place elsewhere but it hasn't.

So the Committees on Housing, Neighborhood Development and The Homeless and Public Property and Public Works are here today to fulfill our responsibility to oversee, review and reform a government agency that this legislative body created over 10 years ago.

We must resist the temptation to spend the next few hours complaining without offering solutions or making excuses without first taking accountability. Rather we must all put our pride aside, recognize our collective responsibility to be a part of the solution and have a candid conversation about what needs to change so that the Land Bank can fulfill its founding priorities of building permanently affordable housing and community green spaces, because I think we can all agree that this mission is more important than ever.

Our city is in the midst of the worst housing crisis we've ever seen and our publicly-owned vacant land is the best tool we have to bring the kind of deeply affordable housing online that the private market has shown us it will

not generate on its own. We can do better.

Turn the Key shows us what it looks like when the Land Bank works as intended, but participating in one successful program cannot be the agency's only story. If it is, then we will have failed. I look forward to hearing from stakeholders during our expert panels and public comment. I sincerely hope that this hearing helps us to turn the corner and motivates us to put in the work to get the Land Bank back to its roots.

It is past time for more accountability and fewer excuses, for tough conversations and for a real commitment to make meaningful improvements. Our neighborhoods are counting on us to get this right. Thank you.

And with that, I'd like to pass things over to my Co-Chair

for any opening remarks.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA:

Thank you. I would like to thank Councilmember Council Chairwoman Jamie Gauthier and her staff as well as mine for helping to put together today's hearing. The Philadelphia Land Bank was implemented 10 years ago to the joy of many residents, developers and policymakers. Their goal was to return our city's vacant and tax delinquent properties to productive use by serving as a clearing house and oversight commission to ensure an expedient and fair process.

However, much of our City's vacant land remains unused properties, remain in blighted condition, causing a nuisance to neighbors while our need our city needs more affordable housing now more than ever. Those looking to

acquire land have faced challenges with the Land Bank process.

Today we will hear from those who have experienced those challenges as well as officials from the Land Bank to review and examine the process. In order to deliver on each of our goals as leaders in our city, we must have a land bank that works for the people and functions as intended. As we proceed, let us keep our focus on how we can build on the principles the Land Bank was founded on, ensuring that our Land Bank is an effective, responsive and equitable resource for Philadelphia's communities. Thank you. Let's begin.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you.

Any other opening remarks from members of the Committees?

Minority Leader Brooks.

COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Chair Gauthier and Chair Lozada. And thank you to all the garden advocates who are here today.

In my first term I worked with many of you to buy back the liens of over 90 plots of land, vacant land, that has been transformed into community gardens. But despite years of advocacy and millions of dollars of public investment, these gardens are still not in the hands of community members who care for them.

In order to realize the aim of community ownership of this land, we need a fully functional Land Bank that will exercise its priority bid at sheriff's sale and transfer the parcels in a timely manner to the community members who have been waiting anxiously for years. We have hundreds of community gardens across our city.

And 70 percent of them are in high poverty neighborhoods where the majority of the residents are people of color.

Many of these community gardens used to be vacant lots that attracted trash and crime until the neighbors came together to transform them into a good place for the neighborhood. Now, these gardens provide a plethora of benefits for the people who live near them and for the city as a whole.

A study by Dr. Gina South at the University of Pennsylvania showed that cleaning and greening vacant lots in high-need neighborhoods reduce crime by 29 percent. These gardens are an embodiment of Philly communities at their best. People are coming together to take care of their families, their neighborhoods and our planet.

In Dr. South's study, residents of neighborhoods with clean and green lots also report feeling safer and had up to 69 percent decreased feelings of depression. In Philadelphia we have a long history of community gardens that have been nurtured and stabilized through working-class communities. But with the rising property values and pressure from developers are threatening this tradition.

In 1996 Philadelphia was home of over 500 community gardens. But over the past 25 years, we have lost a third of those gardens. And once the land is sold, we never get it back and we lose the opportunity to make Philadelphia a greener more beautiful city for our children.

As lawmakers, it is our responsibility to protect these community spaces and to support the

people who care for them. A safer greener Philadelphia is possible but only if we reform the Land Bank so that communities can take ownership of the gardens and continue to transform the vacant lots in their neighborhoods. Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you, Minority Leader Brooks.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: I'd like to also acknowledge the presence of Minority Whip Councilmember Nicolas O'Rourke.

Councilmember Cindy Bass, do you have opening remarks?

COUNCILWOMAN BASS: No, I do not. Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: I'd like to recognize the presence of Councilmember Cindy Bass. Thank you.

Ms. Jones, will you now read the title of the resolution.

THE CLERK: Resolution 240288, authorizing the Joint Committees on Housing, Neighborhood Development and the Homeless and Public Property and Public Works to hold hearings on the 10-year performance of the Philadelphia Land Bank, what barriers exist to effective application review, process efficiency and transparent communication and how these can be solved to maximize this unique opportunity to create genuinely affordable housing and community-stewarded green spaces for neighborhoods that need them the most.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: The Clerk will please call the first panel of witnesses to testify on the resolution.

THE CLERK: Brian Larkin, Rick Sauer, Will Gonzalez, Ed McColly, Raphael Alvarez Febo, Carlo

Matos.

(Witnesses approached Witness table.)

MR. LARKINS: Hello. (Inaudible) on vacant, abandoned and deteriorated properties. We help communities across the country. To the members of this Committee, my name is Brian Larkin and I serve as the Director of the National Land Bank Network located at the Center for Community Progress.

The Center for Community Progress is the largest nonprofit in the country focused explicitly on vacant, abandoned and deteriorated properties. We help communities across the country develop solutions and equitable strategies as it relates to code enforcement, tax foreclosure systems and, last but not least, land banking.

In my role as the Director of the National Land Bank

Network, I get the privilege of supporting over 340 land banks across the country. At recent date, that number represents land banks of various sizes who work at the city, county, statewide, Regional level and varies all throughout the country from very small land banks to large entities.

And the one shared experience throughout is that land banks are working to help equitable return of vacant and abandoned properties back to productive use in ways that align with community needs. One of the key challenges that all these communities are having is that systemic vacancy is not random. It's not that houses are just deciding to become vacant or our problem areas are just popping up on their own.

There are histories of systems that were put in place that

cause really harmful practices and harmful legacies left years later. And the only way to break these pockets of entrenched vacancy is to come up with innovative ways to disrupt that process.

Business is normal in many of our communities, in our Rust Belt areas, in the Mid-Atlantic, in the Southeast and Appalachia, they are struggling without ways to really get in and break the cycle up of consistently doing the same work. Land banks present an opportunity to take abandoned property. Often times the primary pipeline of property for land banks is from the tax foreclosure system.

In fact, two-thirds of properties that exist in the inventory of all land banks across the country came from the tax foreclosure pipeline, and the reason is because land banks when they're

established throughout the country have some combination of special powers to acquire this property at a more affordable and more efficient strategy than anywhere else.

This property acquisition tool is where the magic lies. That's the key power of land banks and leveraging that tool makes it possible to turn these distressed properties into community benefit, not just looking for the highest transaction sale possible. If you're able to acquire tax foreclosed properties more affordably and more efficiently than others, then it's more possible for you to do things like create affordable housing, create community gardening, help do site acquisition, do site preparation and site assembly for economic development projects. That's where land banks are working at their best throughout

the country, when they are taking property to align it with community goals.

One key aspect of land banking and while this is different than just having the county or the city or former government doing it is that they can be flexible in their disposition strategies, and that flexibility is important because it needs to align with the community voice.

There are examples of land banks across the country who are focused on partnering with specific nonprofits, utilizing the priorities of a neighborhood association, amplifying in their disposition practices ways in which the community voice can be reflected, whether it's through a citizen's advisory committee, an ambassador board. Land banks across the country are as flexible as they

are resilient.

And if you look at one land bank anywhere across the country and you look at another, no two are the same because the goals of the land bank are to address community needs. It starts with the community voice, community needs. Why is that important? Because when you look at what it's going to take to get us out of this challenge that vacancy presents, it's going to take people and individuals who are committed to the places in which the vacancy is occurring.

That's often times not speculation, not outside investors, but those who are right there in the heart of the community, those who pass that property every day, those who care about the upbringing of this community, this block, this neighborhood. And as a result when those voices are amplified in the

disposition strategies, land banks are much, much more successful.

You're looking across the country for models in which to compare. There's no two that are identical. We have some amazing programming going on in some of our largest land banks, like the Cuyahoga Land Bank where Cleveland is or the Detroit Land Bank.

We also have some really, really amazing activities going on in some of our smaller strategies. Look in the Northeast. There's the Hartford Land Bank that is looking to really focus on building up their small developers cohort and community.

And so, one of my benefits of my job is I get a chance to see all of the different communities across the country and kind of amplify their stories, and I think land banking can be most

effective when it's allowed to be flexible and quick to address this place. Before land banking took off in the early 2000s, the number one challenge that community saw is that they were getting waves of tax foreclosed property, but it was taking so long to turn it over into the hands -- it could be a neighbor or a resident across the street who cared about that place and would love to do something with it, because if the property got too much worse it would impact theirs. By time they were able to get their hands on it years and years later, that individual had already moved out and vacancy and what is commonly referred to as blight has begin to spread throughout the community as a whole.

Land banks were created to quickly get in as a surgical tool, interrupt that space, connect

vitality into those formerly vacant spaces and allow the community as a whole to flourish in an equitable way in which that amplifies the voice of community.

And so, all in all land banks are most effective in places where they can know where their property is coming from, they have a reliable pipeline of property, they can go out to the community and say, hey, this is the property we have and this is what we could have in the future.

When they're open and communicating with the public both sending a message but receiving that message as well, what are your community priorities, how can we align our strategies in there, here are our policies and how we dispose of property, and they're flexible and quick and nimble organizations, if any of those functions -- if all

of those functions are in place, land banks can do amazing things.

They can amplify the voice of your block clubs and your groups and community groups, but they also can support the activity of the city as a whole. They can support a comprehensive master plan. They can align future development and they can get all boats on the same page. But the one thing that is really, really needed of those is being flexible, nimble and quick because as they say in real estate, time kills all deals. And the longer that communities are set to suffer in the presence of vacancy, abandoned deterioration, the lower the quality of life is and the sooner it is that individuals who could choose to leave are making that choice.

So ultimately, hopefully, you all in this hearing will learn

more about what can happen in Philadelphia specifically, and I would be more than happy to join you in a future conversation about this. Apologies for not being able to be there, but I look forward to connecting with you all in the future. Take care.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Okay. Mr. Sauer, please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MR. SAUER: Sure. Thank you. Good morning, Chairperson Gauthier and Lozada and other members of City Council. My name is Rick Sauer and I'm Executive Director of the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations. I also had the honor of serving on the Land Bank Board for more than eight years until recently.

Thanks for the

opportunity to testify today. I've shared copies of my longer written testimony as well as electronically, so we'll try to do a briefer synopsis of that now. PACDC and our members see the Land Bank as key to equitably addressing many challenges facing our communities, particularly those that have suffered from decades of disinvestment and most urgently for those experiencing gentrification.

We have been deeply involved in efforts to reform the City's vacant property system for many years, including playing a leading role in advocating for the creation of the Philadelphia Land Bank. While we have much to celebrate, which I'm sure we'll hear about today, 10 years in we believe the Land Bank has failed to live up to its expectations, especially for longer-term residents who live in

communities impacted by vacant properties.

And we know this hearing is promoted in an earnest desire to improve the Land Bank so that it works for all Philadelphians. We thank the Administration, City Council and everyone else testifying here today for joining us in finding meaningful solutions.

My comments are reflecting concerns and solutions that have been raised by our members over the last couple years as well as my experience serving on the Land Bank Board. And I'd like to focus the remaining of my comments on six sort of higher level issues.

The first is the strategic plan that, as Councilwoman Gauthier already pointed out, the last plan was a draft plan in 2019 that wasn't even approved despite the current requirement of doing a

strategic plan every three years. We need a clearly, articulated strategy for the Land Bank to ensure a balanced approach for the disposition of properties across a spectrum of competing uses with a priority for community beneficial uses that are consistent with neighborhood plans.

Therefore, the City should allocate resources for a fresh, robust, strategic planning process with significant community input that includes a re-evaluation of Land Bank policies and procedures. We understand that's a big lift, but it's necessary to ensure the Land Bank is responsive to both changing market conditions and the needs in our communities.

Secondly, reporting: While we know the Department of Planning and Development maintains a dashboard on their website for the

land management, the Land Bank has not produced an annual report since -- a draft report in 2019. And these reports are really an important tool not just for public officials, but for other stakeholders to evaluate how well the Land Bank is doing and meeting its goals over the previous year.

The failure to produce an annual report with more detailed information on regular basis also harms the Land Bank's own efforts to celebrate successes and address setbacks. So more than just a good practice, these reports are required by both state-authorizing legislation and local ordinance. And so, we strongly urge the Land Bank to prioritize complying with this requirement.

Third is disposition policy. We know that vacant properties is one of the most

critical and finite resources the City has to build a more equitable Philadelphia and preserve cultural and economic diversity in transitioning neighborhoods. We must prioritize the use of publicly-owned vacant property for community beneficial uses, including truly affordable housing and preservation of community gardens.

The public land inventory in transitioning neighborhoods is one of the few options remaining to bake in affordability in those communities. So to achieve this, there's a need to update the disposition policy that was codified in legislation back in 2019.

Fourth, acquisition policy: The power -- as was mentioned earlier, the power to strategically acquire privately-owned vacant land affordably and efficiently is one of the primary

elements that makes land bank models around the country so successful. However, the Philadelphia Land Bank did not develop an acquisition policy as planned back in 2019.

The Land Bank, we think, also needs to update its analysis of vacant properties in the city to identify opportunities to acquire properties both at sheriff's sale but also from other private entities. And again, there should be a priority in particular to facilitate community beneficial uses as the loss of these sites foreclose on the possibility for meaningful affordable housing development and changing neighborhoods in the future.

Fifth, transparency and this is a really key issue. Our members and other applicants have consistently reported that there is a frustrating lack of information

that would allow an applicant to know where their application is in the process, a process that takes months or years or to even know if their request is being seriously considered.

This lack of transparency also directly contributes to a lack of accountability where there are bottlenecks in the process that could be addressed. The initial plan when the Land Bank was created was to have a transparent and accessible process, whereby applicants could track the status of their request.

We know the City is capable of accomplishing this as evidenced by other systems, whether it's eCLIPSE at L&I or the 311 system, so it's well past time that the Land Bank adopts something similar. And then sixth, customer service issue. There's a need we

believe for increased staffing that would result in improved communication and response times as well as the ability to review applications and process standardized documents to reduce delays that add additional expense to projects.

We know that due diligence is necessary but there's ample opportunity for improvement. And when it comes to affordable housing, making these improvements can mean the difference between someone sleeping in their new home for a first night or staying doubled up in unsafe housing or in a shelter.

Finally, we believe that Philadelphia is best served by a land bank that views community applicants as partners and works to identify ways to get deals done by being more flexible and consistent.

So while these six issues stand out as high-level priorities, we know there are other important process issues deserving our attention. I'm sure others will bring those issues up today.

But many of these have straightforward solutions. And we understand that there may be a need to have careful consideration by a range of stakeholders, and that's why we would recommend the creation of a task force or a working group to continue today's conversation and would welcome the opportunity to participate. Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you for your testimony and for your work.

Before we continue, I want to note that our Spanish language interpreter is here. Please stand up and raise your hand.

(Interpreter

stands/raises hand.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: If you need Spanish translation, please let this wonderful woman know.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: (Spanish translation).

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you.

Mr. Gonzalez, please say your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MR. GONZALEZ: Buenos dias, Chairperson Gauthier and Chairperson Lozada and other members of City Council. My name is Will Gonzalez. I'm the Executive Director of Ceiba. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to testify on this important matter.

Ceiba is the backbone to the Latino Equitable Development Collective, a collective of the top 10 Latino community-based

organizations in the city. We are also members of PACDC and we support the testimony that was just shared with you by PACDC.

Our testimony will focus more on the need for a strategic plan. When I think of the way the Land Bank is operating today, 10 years after it was created, what comes to mind is a twist of an old saying, the road to gentrification and displacement is paved with good intentions. The Land Bank was created to better organize how public land should best be used for the public good.

Instead today the Land Bank is best being used by private developers who use the word affordable as a trojan horse to get public land paying cents on the dollar. We hope that this hearing and further work by City Council and the Administration lead to a

Philadelphia Land Bank that is strategic, transparent and accountable.

In terms of strategy, today the Land Bank is subject to the whims of its staff. Sadly, what the Philadelphia Land Bank holds up as a guide, a strategic plan, still bears the word draft, a draft that was published in 2019, five years ago. That is not a plan. It is a concept of a plan.

In 2024 the Land Bank should be working off its second five-year strategic plan, not still doodling on a 2019 draft of a plan. Failing to have a real plan is planning to fail. This lack of a definitive plan is especially damning since the 2019 draft of that plan recognize, and I quote, "the data analysis for this strategic plan update affirms the sense of urgency neighborhoods, markets are

changing and with that change comes a closing window for preserving land for quality affordable housing and managed community open spaces." That is on Page 38 of that draft.

We need the Land Bank to forge a real strategic plan that strengthens its operations, includes a process for an annual review of the plan with public input, has mechanisms to evaluate the Land Bank's performance and its internal capacity.

To be fair to the staff of the Land Bank, the measuring stick of a real strategic plan will help to evaluate their performance. Adherence to a strategic plan will also help the Land Bank address its challenges with its lack of transparency.

It is not easy to deal with the Land Bank. It is difficult to communicate with. Its policies

are not always followed. Changes to its policies are not always spelled out. Whether it is true or not that the Land Bank favors private developers, the Land Bank's lack of transparency about its data, its operations and its policies feed that distrust.

We also ask that you strengthen the oversight of the Land Bank by its board. Congratulations to Herb Wetzel, who recently became the head of the Land Bank Board. We view his leadership and the steps he is taking to improve how the Land Bank staff works with the Land Bank Board as being positive.

However, much more needs to be done so that the power of leading the Land Bank is in the hands of the Board, not in its staff. We also respectfully request that City Council continue asserting itself with the Land Bank. This

public hearing is great, especially in the absence of the Land Bank doing it for itself.

Finally, I will hold the mirror to ourselves. The community of CDCs and others who want to make sure that public land is used for public good. We despite the obstacles placed in front of us can do more, want to do more to call out the importance of making the Land Bank effective despite we not having the cash to hire lobbyists or to make campaign contributions.

We do, however, have a voice. Please help to make the Land Bank a more welcoming place for those of us who want to see it succeed. Please help to make the Land Bank a truly open place to move public land for public good. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Thank you for your testimony and for your work.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MR. ALVAREZ FEBO: Good morning, Chairwoman Gauthier and Chairwoman Lozada. My name is Rafael Alvarez Febo. I am Vice-president for Advocacy and Community Development at Esparanza, a CDC based in Hunting Park, in Feltonville. I am here with my fellow Ceiba, Latino Equitable Development Collective Partners, to testify on the Philadelphia Land Bank. I come to you as a former Council staffer, urban garden manager, neighbor to people seeking side lots and low-income housing advocate.

Over the last decade of

the Land Bank's existence, I have watched how the spirit of the movement, which created the Land Bank and the countless advocates who spent hours and hours in this very chamber advocating for a better and more transparent system continues to go unrealized. These were gardeners who turned blighted lots into neighborhood gems, residents who had rescued side lots from drug sales and dumping, low-income housing advocates, looking for solutions to a problem they foresaw coming, CDCs who integrated vacant properties into their neighborhood plans, and so many other Philadelphians looking for a solution to a systemic problem.

Today 10 years after the Land Bank was launched people are still waiting for their side lots. I know these people. These are my neighbors. Gardeners continue to

wait on waiting lists without a resolution to ownership issues, Eddies(ph) Brown, someone who founded an amazing garden in our community, low-income housing developers struggling to navigate a convoluted system, which working Philadelphians fought to make easier for them.

I came here seeking a better, fairer and more transparent land bank, one who affords applicants predictability and excellent customer service, a land bank that implements a strategic plan based on equity and its disposition of one of the most valuable resources a city has, its land, more specifically, its land acquired using our tax dollars. The Land Bank needs more resources and more staff, but it also needs to operate efficiently with consistent rubrics for scoring applications,

predictable times for processing -- for processing applications and a focus on creating the most public good possible. Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much for your testimony and your work.

Good morning.

MR. McCOLLY: Good morning.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MR. McCOLLY: My name is Ed McColly and I am the Director of Real Estate Development for Habitat for Humanity Philadelphia. As an independent Habitat for Humanity affiliate, we build and repair safe, affordable homes in partnership with families in need.

Since 1985, Habitat Philadelphia has built and sold 268

energy efficient homes to first-time buyers and completed nearly 1,000 critical home repairs. Our vision is a city where everyone has a decent place to live. Habitat Philadelphia has active home ownership projects in the 3rd, 4th and 5th Council Districts. And in the past five years or so has completed projects in the 2nd and 8th Council Districts as well.

Many of these successful projects have been completed through a partnership with the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority. And the Philadelphia Land Bank Habitat greatly values these relationships which are vital to fulfilling our mission to break down barriers to home ownership. The ability to acquire land at nominal cost is essential to maintaining and deepening the affordability of the housing units we develop.

In the spirit of collaboration, we offer the following feedback based on our experience with the land disposition and agreement review processes: The number of inquiries regarding land disposition from groups and individuals across Philadelphia must be staggering and we acknowledge that keeping up with these requests is difficult, but Habitat has experienced months or sometimes yearslong wait times for land applications to be reviewed and assigned to be reviewed and assigned to a project manager. And inquiries regarding and seeking updates regarding these projects are not always addressed.

Habitat Philadelphia would advocate for a system like 311 or eCLIPSE, allowing applicants to track the status of a disposition inquiry. This would also be a

helpful tool for understanding where an application sits in the review process so we can best formulate our plans. Turnaround time for the review and preparation of routine documents such as license agreements or redevelopment agreements has also delayed project starts by months as the legal departments work through a document review. It is possible that this review process could be reduced through the adoption and availability of standard templates wherein non-negotiable language is unable to be altered by reducing the review of such documents to project-specific information that could reduce the strain on the agency legal departments. There are software tools like DocuSign that have these capabilities.

Again, Habitat Philadelphia offers this feedback in the spirit of collaboration and

partnership toward potential solutions and looks forward to an ongoing and productive relationship with the PRA and Land Bank toward our shared vision of developing affordable home ownership opportunities in Philadelphia. Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you for your testimony and for all the wonderful work that Habitat does. We have some questions for the panelists. If folks can come back.

So I'll ask a two-part question and then pass it off to my Co-Chair and any other members that want to ask questions. What are the main obstacles within the Land Bank that prevent your members and nonprofit developers from accessing

public vacant land for community-minded purposes? And what transparency measures do you think are most important for the Land Bank to implement?

MR. GONZALEZ: What we hear is that there's no consistency in process and that the speed of some transactions varies by who is making the request. You know, it'd be interesting to see if that was trackable with data, right. I'm just giving you anecdotal stuff. If like the gentleman just said it could be tracked, then that goes into to efficiency, correct. So I think that's in terms of process.

I was surprised to see in some documents that were presented before the Board where some of the pro formas would have X number of square feet but the plans would have Y number of square feet for the same building. If I did that to my

employer, I'd get fired. So it's kind of like these type of things are a challenge with process.

In terms of transparency, more public engagement. Public engagement should not be limited to the ability of someone to pay a fee to enter into an event. Earlier this year Land Bank staff was at an event where you had to pay a fee. It was sold out. We requested a similar event for free in our community. We have yet to hear an answer. So that's my take.

I don't know if you want to...

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you.

Anybody else want to comment?

MR. SAUER: Yeah, just to reiterate maybe a couple points I made earlier in my testimony. I think having adequate staffing to be

able to respond in a timely manner is really key. There's just a lot of uncertainty around where your application may lie or even once a decision has been made, clearly communicating the outcome of the decision especially if you didn't get selected as to why, so that people can remedy that issue in future submissions. I think that's really important.

Everyone's mentioned the tracking. You know, the importance to have a system to be able to track where your application is in the process. I think that's important not just for knowledge for the people that submit a request, but it really is important figuring out where there are bottlenecks in the process. In part, that might be a staffing issue but it might be something else that's identified.

And so, if we don't have

a consistent process to figure out what those bottlenecks are, it's really much more difficult to troubleshoot them and have a more efficient process overall.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you.

MR. McCOLLY: One thing I would say is that Habitat Philadelphia we're really intentional about the sites that we choose for future development. And whenever we are preparing our applications for review, we're expending resources to make sure that they are fully complete and as complete as they can be for PRA and Land Bank staff to review.

And when we then are expending those resources with particular sites in mind and are unable to then really have any feedback on the status of that application or again whether it is

being taken seriously as a potential Habitat site, those are resources we could be spending elsewhere to assist other families. So it's not only an expenditure of resources, but then it's how do we know where we're -- if we rely so heavily on the resources of the nominally valued land that we acquire, that we're really looking to the Land Bank and the Redevelopment Authority to be partners on these projects. And so, without that transparency knowing where we're developing it's difficult.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you.

Councilmember Co-Chair Lozada.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: Thank you. Thank you all for your testimony this morning. I know that when I talk to community residents there's always frustration when

they're dealing with Land Bank, but not just from community residents, right, from some of you, the community-based organizations.

Can you share with us the average amount of time that it takes for you all to submit an application and hear back some type of a response from the Land Bank and how is that communicated to you all, the applicant?

MR. McCOLLY: I can't say an average time. We have an application that we submitted in March of 2023 that's currently we know has been received and has not been assigned a project manager yet. There are other projects that we have submitted and completed development on in a year -- not completed development but gotten through the disposition process. So it really varies from initial submission through actual

disposition versus others that sit without any kind of feedback.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: And is there a contract or an application manager that is the same person that you've been dealing with? Like in the past you submit an application, is it the same person or is there a person that you reach out to specifically and is that person the consistent person for your application or do you have to go through multiple people? And if so, what is their response time?

MR. McCOLLY: There have been changes in the staff there over the years. And I will say that once a project gets assigned a project manager they're very communicative. So the staff the project managers have been communicative and helpful, but that's once the review has been completed. So I'm not sure of the process prior to that assignment to

a project manager on their end.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: And do you believe that some of the issues that we're experiencing with the Land Bank have to do with staffing or just communication? Because we've been having this conversation for 10 years, right. I came to City government in 2008 and 2010 Land Bank was created. We have people in this room who have been working on Land Bank and it's been an issue since the beginning.

And so, I'm just trying to figure out how do we move past the problems and the draft stage that you mentioned, Mr. Gonzalez, to an effective process, right? Because while we're trying to figure this draft stage out and this process and all of these delays and all of these staffing changes and now an Administration change, there are people who have been caring for

land out of pocket, right.

And so, I'm not -- I think my concern and my advocacy is less for larger for-profit developers or even for nonprofits, right. My concern is for that Eddies Brown, that Marian Mantia, the Jose Santiagos who have applied for land and have been taking care of land to prevent negative activity from continuing to happen in their community and they're still waiting, right.

And so, how do we get them beyond the lack of communication or the ineffective processes that are in place? How do we do that? What is your recommendation, and have you shared these recommendations with others?

MR. GONZALEZ: I think it's sad that after 10 years what we're looking at is trying to fix something rather than how do we keep

propelling it forward. I think we need to have the will to change, the will to do the job. I mean, right now it's more the Turn the Key operation literally than the Land Bank. And so, that's why I'm hopeful that with this new leadership on the Board that that will -- because it has to come from there, right, in terms of how organizations are set up, right. The Board has to assert itself. The Board has to be empowered and we see that that is a chance.

I think -- my colleague too talked about legislation coming from City Council and you guys control the power of the purse. You're the legislative body. I mean, this is a great start, starting to look at what needs to be tweaked and addressed. And of course we're anxious to get involved as well. We could do more and we

will, especially with this opportunity.

And I think the most important thing is that there be a recurring opportunity to engage with the Land Bank in terms of a strategic plan like any other organization. And so, we're hoping that that comes out of this. Because again, the idea that now it favors one part of the housing development, private developers, is something that is not good, right. And so, addressing their own shortcomings will also address that. I don't know if I answered your question.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Vice --

MR. SAUER: Can I just add one thing. I think you raised an important point. There's

probably a a different experience if you're a more experienced developer that has a track record working with the Land Bank before, you know the staff there, et cetera, you would probably get a better response, quicker response. I wouldn't say it's necessarily across the board, but a general rule.

It's a different story if you're a resident that just wants a side yard or something else and don't really know how to navigate the bureaucratic process and you need a little bit more help or education around how that works. So I think what's really key is having sufficient staffing so that there can be a help to those residents that have been living in the neighborhoods that have been most severely impacted by the blighted and vacant properties that have been tending to those lots over the

years, and we want to make sure they can benefit from the reuse of that vacant land directly, whether that's as a side yard or community garden use or even being eligible or prioritized for one of the new homes that are built there.

So I do think, you know, it's tough. If you have limited staff, there's lots of requests that come in. There's lots of work that needs to be done. This is not an easy process to navigate. But if you're just less experienced or sophisticated as far as knowing how the City bureaucracy works, you're at a further disadvantage.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you.

Vice-Chair Landau.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: I thank you all so much for your testimony. I have a few follow-up questions. One is you talk about

delays that could be months going on a year. It's disturbing to hear about your application that's been pending since March of 2023 and hasn't yet been assigned to a project manager. Is it your belief that it is the same slow speed when it's the larger developers?

MR. GONZALEZ: Again, I speak for my CDC partners who do the brick-and-mortar work. Yes, they have a feeling that it is different and those who do joint ventures with private developers see that their project with the joint venture goes faster than the -- but again, that's why we need the tracking.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: Sure.

MR. GONZALEZ: The tracking will give us a real sense and stop talking about perceptions and deal with reality and fix things.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:

Anybody else want to weigh in?

MR. SAUER: I mean, the Turn the Key program was referenced earlier and clearly they're having a very effective track record at getting properties out the door to support new home ownership opportunities for residents, including employees of the city, so that's an important success.

I do think sometimes other more community beneficial uses maybe don't have as streamlined of a process, especially if you're utilizing other public capital subsidy and affordable housing deal, that can make for a lengthier process or a more thorough review than otherwise might be the case for a project that's not getting a direct capital subsidy from the city.

So whether it's clear as

just, you know, for-profit, nonprofit versus neighborhood resident versus community gardener and what their experiences are, I do think they figured out how to do a good pipeline to get property out the door for Turn the Key. What we need to do is figure out how to be more effective in doing that for other types of venues as well.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: Last joint question is, you stated that they don't tell you why you were rejected. Do they tell you who was approved, who got the deal and why?

MR. SAUER: I can't speak as a direct applicant, but as a former Board member the recommendations that would come to the Board when I was there is from staff. We wouldn't necessarily know who the different competing people were for the same property or who

scored what in the application process or why they were selected over someone else.

We were either told that they were the best scoring or the most highly qualified or whatever it was. I think they're putting some changes into place now to better review proposals before they come to the Board that will help address that. But that was always a concern. And again, on the back end if you don't know why your property wasn't selected or it's not made clear what the deficiencies were, then that raises, you know, it raises questions and people start to guess why that may have been the case or not.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: Thank you very much.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: If you all submit an application and there's information that could be

missing from that application, how often is that communicated by the Land Bank to you all to be able to make corrective action and are you given enough time if that is an opportunity?

MR. McCOLLY: We've always received communication if there is something missing from our application or needs clarification, we have received that feedback once there is, you know, again, that it has been assigned a project manager. Once there is a staff person associated with the application who can kind of communicate that, that is something that we have had successful relationships with, the project managers at the Redevelopment Authority and the Land Bank. But for us the stall is kind of getting it through that initial review and assignment phase.

MR. GONZALEZ: From what

I've been told, there is communication. It's the speed of that communication and how long it takes. That's (inaudible).

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: One more question for these testifiers and then we actually have -- I think we have one more panelist.

Specifically on the topic of affordable housing where the housing prices better match the needs of our most vulnerable residents, what do you think can be done to get the Land Bank's disposition numbers higher towards this end use?

MR. SAUER: Well, if you're trying to do an affordable rental housing development that needs to apply to the state housing finance agency for low-income housing tax credits, which is the most typical funding source for a

publicly subsidized deal, that process can take multiple years. So there really needs to be a reservation of land in some cases where the opportunity still exists to have a larger enough developable site to preserve that site for more deeply affordable housing in the future.

Yes, it might not be able to put that land back into use within one year. If you're just doing something quicker, that's easier to get done and get out the door. But if you're really trying to meet the affordable housing needs of the residents that live in that community again, many of them will not be able to afford higher cost units being built in those neighborhoods.

And so, there needs to be intentional strategies put in place to make sure that we're reserving

that land for more deeply affordable housing over the longer term before those opportunities are lost.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Which takes us back to the need for a plan or a vision, yeah. Go ahead.

MR. McCOLLY: Sorry. I think what Rick said would be -- one thing that's a challenge for I think us and other nonprofit developers is we don't have the same access to a revolving capital for construction the way many private developers do. A lot of our development is funded philanthropically. And so, we are not able to necessarily represent at the time of application that we have the capital available. It's we sort of will fundraise towards the project. And so, it's an obstacle for us in terms of being able to I think compete with some of the private developers that are going for the same land opportunities.

MR. GONZALEZ: Yeah. Dealing with the housing supply issues, it's good to see that there's a focus on it now. Obviously a private developer who doesn't use government subsidies does not have to pay prevailing wage may not have to have some other safeguards in place. And so, affordable housing developers on the on the CDC side that receive public funding and subsidies to really make it affordable, because even with Turn the Key that's not affordable.

100 percent AMI in Philadelphia you know is not -- the Philadelphia AMI is based on the county of Philadelphia, surrounding counties and a county in Cecil Maryland is crazy. So to get the true affordability, we need to go to 30, 40, 50, 60, maybe you go up to 80. But to get that affordability there's a lot of subsidy. And so,

having the land is important.

I think also what do we want and where do we want that affordable housing. And I may be speaking out of her turn, Councilwoman Lozada, but the southern part of your District there's been enough private development there. There's still some land available for affordable housing.

And so, we hope that that land with that understanding can be preserved for that as well as the gardens and farms. With global warming coming, I'll let my colleague speak about, that's no longer a luxury or a cute thing. It is a necessity. And so, we need that.

(Applause.)

MR. GONZALEZ: And last but not least, this issue is not just a Land Bank issue. It has to

do with the financing that the gentleman said. We need to hold our banks accountable through the Community Investment Act. We need to see how we can squeeze more support for the CDCs so that they can do the work. And last but not least, the CDCs -- and I'm biased, right -- but we are the Be Team. We be there before and we be there after, right.

And also, we just don't put brick and mortar. We provide social services. There's some great projects that some of my colleagues are working on which is how do we put someone in an affordable housing unit and have them move out three, four, five years to homeownership, right, because we intensify and do better the work, workforce development, other types of social services. So I don't know if I answered your question. But we need

to fix the Land Bank and do more.
Thank you.
COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:
You did. Thank you for being there and thank you for your testimony today.
Mr. Matos, are you going to testify today?
MR. MATOS: (Inaudible).
COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:
Well, sorry. You have to come to the --
(Witness approached Witness table.)
MR. MATOS: I apologize --
COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:
Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony. Good morning.
MR. MATOS: Carlos Matos, 19th Ward. I had a discussion with the Councilwoman about a lot of the things that they're talking about.

And so, basically what I wanted to do was kind of lay back, listen to everyone talk and then maybe kind of contradict some of those folks or whatever. And so, I asked if I could speak but not, you know, but wait until the last minute. Okay. And so, my apologies.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: That's fine. I wanted to give you the opportunity. Thank you so much.

MR. MATOS: Thank you. Thank you, Councilwoman.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: The Clerk will please call the next panel of witnesses to testify on the resolution.

THE CLERK: Sari Bernstein, Jenny Greenberg, Mike Moran.

(Applause.)

(Witnesses approached Witness table.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Good morning.

MS. GREENBERG: Good morning.

MR. MORAN: Good morning.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MS. BERNSTEIN: Good morning. My name is Sari Bernstein. Good morning, Chairpersons Gauthier, Lozada and members of the Committees. I am a staff attorney at the Public Interest Law Center where I focus on housing, including preserving and increasing affordable housing in Philadelphia and environmental justice.

I work on the Law Center's Garden Justice Legal Initiative and help facilitate the newly formed Philadelphia Land Justice Coalition, comprised of stakeholders focused on preserving

gardens and green space threatened by land insecurity. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

A decade ago the Land Bank was created to make it easier to transform the City's privately-owned land, abandoned land into revitalized use. The mission was laudable, the vision was grand and that's because the size of the problem required a massive vehicle for change.

The Law Center joined many others in calling for the creation of the Land Bank and helping to flush out its policies. Fast-Forward to today and we've seen a slow-down and productive reuse of City-owned land as the Land Bank has yet to reach its full potential.

Thus, while today of course my testimony is focused on problems and proposed solutions, I really want to underscore that this

feedback has with it a recognition that the Land Bank is a crucial partner in achieving shared goals. Preserving gardens in open space have always been a core part of the Land Bank's mission, in part because community members who shaped the Land Bank's creation knew the importance of urban agriculture.

City Council has long acknowledged what is now backed by scholarly research, community gardens are vital elements of thriving communities. They reduce actual and perceived crime on blocks in which they are located. We've heard the stat already today that they also include reducing gun violence by up to 29 percent. They mitigate climate-related environmental hazards like stormwater flooding and heat island effect and have a profound positive impact act on physical and mental

health.

Yet despite these known benefits, complex and inefficient bureaucratic processes within multiple City land-holding agencies make the process of securing City-owned land opaque and difficult. All the more so for Philadelphians without access to vast resources and insider connections, including the hundreds of urban gardeners who maintain green spaces with their own time, money and tremendous dedication.

The City asks everything of these stewards who tend abandoned land and transform it into green resources for their neighbors sometimes for decades and in communities needing the most support, and then it fails to offer clear guidance to permanently protect community assets that they foster.

This frustrating truth is borne out by the numbers. According to the Department of Planning and Development's Land Management dashboard, between 2017 and 2023 the Land Bank has only conveyed 13 gardens and open space properties, but do not get the false impression that this is owed to a dearth of applications.

Indeed PHDC cites 59 partially or fully approved applications that are awaiting settlement in 2024 alone. The Land Bank must prioritize clearing the backlog of these pending garden dispositions. But the status quo need not continue. A prosperous Philadelphia depends on the Land Bank meeting its mandate to return abandoned land to productive use.

And City Council should consider the following priorities in addressing this urgent need: First,

the efficacy of the Land Bank relies in part on executing a strategic vision. To that end, City Council should hold the Department of Planning and Development to its legislative mandate to complete a public strategic planning process every three years and yearly performance reporting.

As you've heard already today, the 2019 draft strategic plan which involves a thorough public engagement campaign was never formally adopted. It's also out of date in a city that has seen tremendous change in land development in the last five years. But a robust strategic planning process provides crucial opportunities for input and oversight.

It also helps to ensure that competing neighborhood interests are considered when

prioritizing acquisitions and uses for dispositions. Without a strategic framework only the most politically savvy end up determining land use policy. Local stakeholders must have a seat at the table to ensure an accountable, collaborative process that results in equitable use of surplus land in all of Philadelphia neighborhoods.

The Land Bank's failure to meet its drafted goals underscores the need for this kind of stakeholder input and accountability. What was the Land Bank's Fiscal Year 2022 goal for gardens and open space dispositions? 50 Parcels. How many went to settlement? 5. What was the Land Bank's Fiscal Year 2023 goal for gardens and open space dispositions? Again, 50 parcels. How many went to settlement? Seven.

Strategic planning goals

are empty without an accountability process. Regular public input would highlight that gardens in open space are lagging other development initiatives. It would ask why, and they'd propose solutions to meet the community need. Second, the acquisition and disposition policy should be included in these public processes so that the policies can be revisited and refined to meet community needs.

As Council is well aware a community garden is rarely, if ever, one parcel or lot unless you're talking about a specific side yard. Rather community gardens are almost always spanning multiple parcels of land owned by different public and private entities. Effective acquisition and disposition policies need to consider strategic options for keeping these complex assemblages

together. This way pre-existing community uses like gardens are preserved and the City regains its control over land that is frankly being lost at sheriff's sale.

For example, a revised disposition policy might include a formal process by which land recently acquired by a speculator or a developer at sheriff's sale could swap for other land of equal value in the Land Bank's inventory in order to preserve a land specific use on the purchased property, like a community garden.

Finally, yearly granular performance reporting is necessary so that the public can measure the successes and the failures of the Land Bank policies and know that public dollars are being used in a manner most effective to meet strategic needs. The Land Management Dashboard is a start but

it contains obvious holes. We need reporting on all approved, pending and denied applications on a parcel-by-parcel level, the date applications are submitted and closed, accurate numbers showing parcels acquired and disposed each year and for what use, among other important insights.

And on top of this land, the Land Management Dashboard cites data that is inconsistent with figures published by PHDC, calling into question what reporting is actually accurate. Of course, and we've talked about already today, these and other reporting requirements are already required by statute.

The City's commitment to a more transparent and equitable, efficient Land Bank is commendable. We are glad to engage and work through solutions with City Council,

PHDC, DPD, the Land Bank and all relevant partners. Thank you so much for holding this important hearing.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you for your testimony and your work.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MS. GREENBERG: Sure. My name is Jenny Greenberg. Good morning, Chairmembers Gauthier, Lozada and Joint Committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Jenny Greenberg. I serve as Executive Director of the Neighborhood Gardens Trust. I'm also an appointed member of the Board of Directors of the Philadelphia Land Bank.

I'm testifying today with my NGT hat on wherefore the past 10

years I've worked to expand protection to Philadelphia community gardens and green spaces threatened by insecure land tenure. As a land trust, NGT works to acquire title or long-term leases for community gardens so these vital green spaces and all the benefits they provide are preserved and sustained for years and generations to come.

I'm also a part of the newly formed Philadelphia Land Justice Coalition. Across the city for decades, self-organized groups of residents and nonprofits have responded to abandoned properties in their neighborhoods by transforming them into vibrant community gardens, farms and green spaces that serve as places of nourishment, strength and resilience.

Close to 70 percent of these gardens and farms are in high poverty neighborhoods, providing

healthy food access, green space, relief from summer heat and respite from the stresses of urban life. Yet upwards of 200 of them face an existential threat because the people caring for them lack legal land tenure.

Since the Land Bank was created a decade ago, there's been a clear message from the public that community green space is a priority along with affordable housing. Green space has been identified as a priority in each iteration of the Land Bank's strategic plans and the PHDC disposition policy, which allows for the nominal fee disposition of gardens to non-profits for open space protection. This is a good policy. However, it's not being carried out efficiently or effectively to accomplish its intended outcome.

I want to address two

major concerns today: The first is the backlog of disposition applications for garden protection, and the second is the lack of accessible and transparent process for groups to gain information, express interest and secure leases or ownership for gardens through the Land Bank.

Between 2015 and 2019 NGT acquired 44 parcels at 13 gardens from City land-holding agencies. Since 2020 we haven't been able to go to settlement on any parcels, although we've had 10 pending applications for 29 land parcels for more than five years. There is a breakdown in the system for garden disposition, made evident by NGT's firsthand experience and in a recent PHDC report, which noted a backlog of close to 60 garden applications. This bottleneck needs to be fixed because it's hurting Philadelphians.

Gardeners who've been caring for land for 40 to 50 years live in fear that one day they'll find bulldozers in their gardens. For NGT's pending garden applications rather than five years, we could have spent supporting gardens and investing in their infrastructure. We instead were forced to spend advocating for solutions to policies standing in the way of their permanent preservation. The lack of ownership has a tangible impact on garden production. We see elders hauling water down the block from the hydrant because we couldn't get permission to install a water line.

At one garden there's a dangerous tree dropping limbs. We can't pay for tree work because we're not the property owner and calls to 311 have gone unanswered. In other instances gardens have been

damaged by adjacent construction, but they do not have the standing to demand repairs or compensation from the builder because they don't hold title.

I want to emphasize that this roadblock is bigger than the Land Bank alone. Surplus land is also held by Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority and Department of Public Properties. Interagency coordination is essential and the Land Bank needs effective public partners and streamlined processes to transfer deeds with support from the Law Department and Public Properties.

When the Vacant Property Review Committee, VPRC, was eliminated, NGT could no longer acquire lots directly from Public Properties. Lots were supposed to be conveyed from Public Properties to the Land Bank and then the Land

Bank was tasked with coordinating settlement, but that isn't happening. So gardens held by Public Properties have been stuck for up to eight years even after Council approved their disposition.

We need a functional efficient system to transfer property from one agency to another, especially after Council acts to approve the transfer. The second area of concern I want to raise is the need for accessible and transparent processes for group seeking leases or ownership for gardens.

NGT receives calls regularly from community members who are often referred from PHDC for help navigating a system that feels like a black box or at the point where all we can think to do is refer them to your Council offices.

As a starting point, here

are three recommendations to make a system that's more fair, accessible and functional: First, to create an application process for members of the public to secure license or lease agreements for short or midterm legal access for gardens. We've been told the Land Bank and Redevelopment Authority no longer provide leases or urban garden agreements because of insurance requirements.

I know we can figure out a solution to this. There are other Land Banks, including Pittsburgh's which provide garden leases. Furthermore, NGT could hold leases for gardens under our insurance that meets Land Bank's requirements, but our requests have gone unanswered.

Two, create a place on the PHDC website where the public is directed to apply for surplus property that includes a simple,

straightforward application with clear instructions specifically for nonprofits seeking garden dispositions. The existing purchase application is designed for real estate development deals and it's very confusing. Most questions are not applicable to gardens and people don't know how to respond. Many applications get rejected on technicalities.

We spend countless hours providing technical support on how to complete this unnecessarily complicated application. Further, PHDC's website searchable map should provide users with all available surplus property and should indicate why surplus property may be unavailable. Interested parties should have an accountable avenue for expressing interest in available property and in property the Land Bank could acquire, not merely an

email address disconnected from Land Bank staff.

And finally, PHDC needs adequate staffing to process and respond to the applications that come in to respond to questions from the public and to provide updates on the application process. It would be helpful to have a project manager specialized in reviewing and managing green space applications.

I want to note that the wait times for gardens to get assigned or a response is even significantly longer than what we just heard from the community development corporations. In closing, this past May you voted to appoint me to the Board of the Philadelphia Land Bank. And I'm honored by this appointment, which signifies Council and the Administration's desire to solve these issues. I thank you and look

forward to continuing to work with you to expand Philadelphia's network of thriving, protected community green spaces.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you and congratulations on your appointment to the Board.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MR. GONZALO MORAN: Sure. Good morning, everyone. My name is Michael Gonzalo Moran. I just wanted to start off by thanking that first panel for their insightful testimony. It was great work. And also, just commend the supportive Councilmembers here. Thank y'all.

All right. So I'll begin my testimony. As individuals, we all have many roles in our daily lives. And today I present myself as a father, an environmentalist, a

lot steward, a gardener and a member of the Iglesias Community Garden. In this statement prepared in collaboration with members of our Collective, I have only a few minutes to summarize parts of my life as it relates to land and security. So for clarity, I will immediately describe a portion of my agenda today.

Philadelphia has a land and security problem and the systems currently in place to manage the available land are inadequate and broken. The land is readily available for opportunity as land developers but very restrictive to lot stewards and community gardens. Gentrification disguised as affordable land development is fueled by current broken bureaucratic conditions.

My presence here and what I'm about to share include my own

experiences but they are not unique. Many citizens and organizations have similar experiences, and that's indicative of a wider issue. However, I wouldn't come to City Council just to critique on how the current system is dysfunctional. I also wanted to provide some context and present solutions to the issues at hand.

Everything I'm about to detail occurred in a one-mile radius and it's a quick summary on my life experience. In the '90s I was raised in a neighborhood in North Philly referred to as the Badlands. This neighborhood, like many others in Philadelphia, had an abundance of vacant lots.

I grew up in a house that my mother purchased when the City had a dollar house program. I joke with my mother that she overpaid because that place needed everything

from stairs to toilets. But with some help from the community and family members, my mother turned that shell into a home.

While the interior of the house was not comfortable, the neighborhood outside was however was going through the worst of it, open air drug markets, shoot-outs and so on. My mother realized there's only but so much peace that she could secure for us on the inside, so she began her work to secure the exterior of our home. She focused on our front steps and the vacant lot next door to us.

She was threatened and harassed to stay out of that lot, but she persevered. As an 11-year-old I remember traveling to whatever office she was sent to, to help her translate letters received in the mail as well. As a teenager, that side lot would eventually become a

small sanctuary for myself and other neighborhood kids. It kept us off the street and out of harm's way for many nights.

Several years passed and fast-forward to my late 20s. At this time the Land Bank had been operating for a few years now. And my family was hopeful that the resolution for this lot was near. We went through the process of filling out forums and attending meetings but after a few years of efforts, in the end the only resolution we received was a surprise posted notice that the lot was going up for sheriff's sale.

To me a piece of my childhood and my mother's effort was up for sale. I was fortunate to have won that auction, but I went up against a speculator who in the same day had just bought five other lots in my same neighborhood.

Financially I was drained, but it closed out a saga that went on in our family for over two decades.

As I began my own family in my 30s, my wife bought a fixer-upper not far from where I grew up. This house became our family's nest, but this property too was also situated next to a vacant lot and very similar to my childhood experiences. The family that lived there prior to us spent decades trying to secure that lot. But once we moved into the property, my family began that process as well. It's been eight-plus years and that lot has not been secured.

Unfortunately the cycle of land insecurity continues because my son is now growing up with an unsecure vacant lot next to him that his mother also has been attempting to secure for many years. As a family, we're up against the City,

the Land Bank, shady developers, L&I policy changes and our own resilience.

While community organizations are pushed aside and have been disregarded, misdirected, dealt with hostile engagements and forced to navigate confusing paperwork. As a collective of gardeners and lot stores, we're not anti-development, but this current form of rampant development is unsustainable and very anti-community.

Unaffordable housing mixed with cheap construction creates transitory communities and uproots longtime residents. Recently a proposal was made that were granting a single out-of-state developer 40 lots in my neighborhood. As I mentioned before, I currently sit on the Board of Iglesias Community Garden, a

nonprofit that for over a decade has been attempting to secure land for lot stewards and community gathering spaces.

It was 2021 when City Council passed legislation to dispose of 14 lots to our nonprofit and we have yet to finalize transfer of ownership of that land. But just yesterday we received a purchase and development agreement for our lots. But we know from our work with the Philadelphia Land Justice Coalition that our situation is not unique. The issues that are affecting Iglesias Garden are also affecting other garden parcels all over Philly.

There are dozens of garden parcels in the backlog stretching back to the summer of 2020. Frequently the only way for community groups to engage with Land Bank staff are to attend the monthly

Land Bank board meetings. No one in the city or the Land Bank has ever offered us to navigate this process. The applications are complex and when we submitted our original applications, they were rejected due to unspecified technical errors.

What would have benefited gardeners and lot stores trying to protect community spaces are project managers and processes designed for community members who just want to save their side yards and gardens. Iglesias Gardens has other privately-owned lots that are endangered and other neighbors do as well. To this the garden has responded by aggressively raising funds to secure some lots in our use, but we have been purchasing them at market rates and that often strains our ability to contribute to the communities we aim to serve.

A few months ago we lost

a memorial garden when an adjoining PHA building was demolished. We have been stewarding this lot for five years which also served as a memorial for our neighbor who died. But because we do not have yet title to this land, we had no recourse to prevent this from taking place.

Part of the delay has been blamed on the process of drafting complex mortgages that will give the City some reassurance that the land won't be sold or profited from. Iglesias Gardens and many other garden groups agreed to these mortgages earlier this year.

The Urban AG Plan, a comprehensive planning document released by the City last year, identified land insecurity as one of the key obstacles preventing community-supported agriculture from working in Philadelphia. The plan specifically recommended that the

Land Bank Board and the PHDC work to remediate their broken process to better support community gardens.

The land insecurity is a huge problem for community gardens like Iglesias. It prevents a meaningful investment and improvements and it limits the structural ability of gardens to manage things like insurance and grant revenue. As one small example of how this impacts Iglesias, the Land Bank properties we are waiting for have been disregarded by the City for more than a decade. Maintenance, cleaning and improvements have been ignored. The sidewalks of North Lawrence Street, where the garden is located, are impassible for citizens using wheelchairs or assisted walking devices. In response several years ago Iglesias began a process of making improvements at our own great

expense.

In 2022 we installed an accessibility plaza to accommodate wheelchairs. The next improvement required is for a full replacement of all of our sidewalks. It's hundreds of feet of sidewalk that will need to be paid out of our own pockets or getting support from City Council for things of that nature.

Getting bogged down in bureaucratic morass impacts gardens as much as it impacts developers. Fundraising for capital improvements on land we don't own is difficult. Pulling permits for improvements is out of the question. We have privately fundraised hundreds of thousands of dollars to preserve adjacent land but it isn't enough.

We began our capital campaign in 2021. We did it under the assumption that the City was going to continue to partner with us

to preserve this space. No one at Iglesias could have ever guessed that we would buy five properties at full market value from speculators and wholesalers years before the City would honor its commitments.

The mortgages we agreed to are onerous and difficult. They would probably prevent us from ever receiving grant funding from the state. They introduced an organizational liability in the form of long-term mortgage, but we agreed to them because our organizational bylaws have stated since we were created that our goal was to preserve the open space.

It's unfair and it's dangerous to mismanage community needs and prioritize developers. It tells everyone in Kensington, Fairhill, the Badlands who have found refuge in Iglesias Gardens that their needs aren't important.

It says to the kids coming back for the back-to-school events that their needs aren't important. It says to the elders who rely on our bodega libre, our completely free bi-weekly farmers' market that their needs are not important. It tells community groups to rely on our free outdoor kitchen that their needs are not important. It tells everyone who has volunteered their time, energy at the garden as a commitment to keeping the neighborhood safe and intact that their needs are not important.

I'm here on behalf of lot stewards and Iglesias Gardens, but we know that there are hundreds of other communities basically at risk because the Land Bank has not prioritized their needs. It runs in the face of Mayor Parker's reported pledges to clean and green Philly. It also runs in the face of City

Council by saying that the land use legislation that was passed wasn't important enough to get the disposition done.

Iglesias Gardens are the first in line, but there's a huge queue of community groups waiting to gain their own land security and move on with the important work of serving our communities. Let's fix this broken bureaucracy so that everyone else who has been intimidated away from attempting to secure land from the Land Bank understand that the sole objective of the Land Bank is not just disposing land for housing development.

There's a handful of people here in support of community spaces, but this has been a work of many others before us. And I sit here because there's a lot more to go. Data also shows that the public

is uniting under this cause and are mobilizing and willing to achieve it with the proper continued support. I'm encouraged and confident that community gardens and side lots align with the current Administration's goal of a greener city and intentions to produce more intergenerational wealth for low-income communities.

We have come a long way. A few years ago we gardeners couldn't get these types of meetings so I want to acknowledge the current Administration and supportive City Councilmembers before us. We appreciate the progress being made today because including us, the lot stewards, gardeners, community members is part of the solution to an equitable land distribution. Thank you again for the time. I look forward to our collective progress.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you for your testimony and for your advocacy.

This question is for anyone who wants to answer. What is it that the Land Bank doesn't seem to understand about gardens that makes working with them so difficult?

MR. GONZALO MORAN: From our perspective, I guess, as a civilian, if you will, it's a money thing. There's no money to be made in gardens from their perspective, but there's countless other benefits from our perspective that we see, so there's a contrast in a sense, the benefit.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Anybody else want to comment?

MS. GREENBERG: I would just add that the difference between stewarding a land-insecured garden

that's threatened and a preserved garden is dramatic. Not only are we able to secure grant funding and make sure gardens have access to water lines and safe good soil and fencing and tool storage and that they're more ADA-accessible and things like that, we just see a difference. It's like everyone can let out a deep sigh of relief and start to vision the future, and we see gardens really thrive in that transition from being in jeopardy to permanent preservation that the benefits extend beyond the garden to the greater community.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you.

The next question is for Ms. Greenberg, but anybody can comment as well. What is your opinion about the 30-year mortgage as a property restriction for garden and open spaces? And do you see the

revised version as harmful? And if so, why?

MS. GREENBERG: I'm actually going to defer to Sari on this one. Public Interest Law Center's been representing us.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Go ahead.

MS. BERNSTEIN: So I think on the 30-year mortgage, for those in the room who aren't aware, it was a document that was new that was put forward by the Land Bank in early 2022 as a necessary to be able to close on gardens. It's a 30-year self-advertising mortgage. And the original version of the mortgage contain some really concerning language for gardens, having to do with some being recourse, having to do with some very broad language around when a mortgage could be taken back by the City.

For example, a garden

needed to be free and clear of debris. But a wintering garden to one person might look like it has debris and to another person might look as if it is exactly the way it's supposed to because it's a wintering garden. So having notice -- there were no notice and cure periods there. That was something that we really needed to address.

And there were some concerns as well around valuations of gardens that has to do with whether or not for a nonprofit that's stewarding the garden high valuation could have some impacts. And so, the Land Bank, I think the garden surprise, this was new. This was not the way things had been done before, said we need to enter into a 30-year mortgage with a community garden that's seeking to preserve land. And there were obviously

legitimate concerns.

And so, the garden community came to the table immediately and said we want to work through these concerns. The way we were able to sit down is to come to numerous board meetings and make it clear that this was going to be prohibitive for gardens, and we did sit down with the Land Bank. But over the course of the last two-and-a-half years we have been able to come to terms that are better and that gardens have since stated now for many months they'd be willing to accept.

That is a good thing. But I want to just take a step back, if I can, from the details of this particular issue to talk about something else. And that's that for situations as complex as land disposition can be, it's not to say that there will never be changes,

that there will never be new documents that maybe need to be signed, that administrations won't change.

What we're looking for is a creative partner in the Land Bank to come to the table to say, what are the issues, to come to some resolution and to do that efficiently. We're now talking about two-and-a-half years and it is not because the gardens have not come to the table quickly, efficiently and been able to work through these issues.

So we're glad that we're at a place where we can say that we've come to these favorable terms. But I think that the bigger lesson to be learned from this is again this partnership piece rather than putting forth paperwork that could seem to be more of a barrier than anything else.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Thank you so much.

Co-Chair Lozada.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: I think I would agree with you that we need a partnership, but I think it needs to be a fair process and a fair partnership, right. I've been very honest. I've talked to my colleagues. I've talked to many folks and I support community gardens because I was raised in a community garden, right. My grandmom took care of --

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: My grandmom took care of five or six lots for over 30 years. My grandmom struggled for over 30 years to try to get disposition of those lots. My grandmom took care of her neighbors with everything that she grew on her lots. She brought people together in those lots.

And so, I'm frustrated that as a city we still have not recognized the importance of community green spaces, right. Not every parcel needs a structure on it, not every space needs to remove positive community activity from it. And so, what do you think we can do to help speed up the process, right? How do we make that partnership not just a partnership that's healthy but a partnership that is fair, a partnership that is going to include ensuring that the Donya Eddies (inaudible), the folks from Iglesias Gardens and others who have taken care of green spaces receive their fair share of what they've invested into these green spaces over the course of many years, right? What do we need to do to be able to get there?

MS. BERNSTEIN: Thank you for the question and for telling us

a little bit about your experience with gardens. I think for community gardens one of the most important things we can do coming to the table is to recognize that they're land-dependent. They sit where they are for a reason and you can't pick them up and move them easily.

So I think a fair partnership would come with some of that understanding and understanding what the garden has already done for the community, the ways in which the garden may have transformed the community, the effort that you discussed putting in. And so, there's two main pieces that we're getting at today.

One, it comes out of the Land Bank's office and that has to do with more staff and more resource to be able to hire staff that is dedicated for gardeners, who as I mentioned in my testimony, not all

of whom may be familiar with this process, someone they can go to and hear back from on a very timely basis. There's other kinds of suggestions that we've put forward in that manner such as a streamlined garden application, something that is specific to what gardens are doing, not broad for anything that comes through the Land Bank which can be very confusing.

The other piece of it that I really can't stress enough is the need for public stakeholder input on a community level and that's where the strategic planning process comes in. And I think if we have this robust yearly reporting, then folks will know what's happening and they'll know what's not happening. And when you know what's not happening, it's much easier to come to the table with the evidence you need to say this is why

this is important here, especially coming up against whatever else is very important such as the need to develop truly deeply affordable housing and anything else in that community. So those are two important pieces. The stakeholder input piece has been something that we have organized as a collective to come together to have a voice, and that is wonderful and we should and we're here and we are glad to have that voice. But the voices were here before this too. They have been for the decades that the gardeners have been stewarding the land. So those voices need to be heard.

MS. GREENBERG: I think Sari covered a lot of it. There are a lot of stewards and a lot of community gardeners in Philadelphia and I can imagine if I were a staff member at the Land Bank that it

could feel overwhelming the amount of interest. And so, it strikes me that we need to figure out what the resources are and how you operationalize a front door that feels fair and respectful and accountable for community members who come with questions and are trying to figure out where they fit, and it's not going to be a one-size-fits-all answer.

There are going to be situations where it's a year-to-year license agreement, which used to be called an urban garden agreement. That doesn't seem to be an option anymore. In other cases it's going to be a midterm lease for a garden that's kind of going through a seasoning period, and in other situations it's going to be permanent land protection. But there needs to be clear pathways that not just Neighborhood Gardens

Trust, but a small grassroots effort on any block in the city can understand and navigate.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Thank you.

MR. GONZALO MORAN:

Again, just coming from like the citizen perspective, if you will, being involved in this Iglesias Garden is down the street from my house. The ideal situation for me would be to just visit that garden and just kind of relish in the space. I haven't done that in 10 years. I've been securing land. Every once in a while we get a glimmer of hope, right, or a moment where we celebrate something and we get to see what that space can do for the community, for individuals even.

And it's moments like that that help me realize there's something missing here, whether it's

City Council, whether it's a Land Bank. There essentially has to be a sort of department where we support green spaces, right, that has been mentioned, right, or staff or a collective, if you will. It's great that Councilpeople are in a sense supporting the community gardens, but we're still here, right. We're still having these conversations.

I'd like to think that this would be a turning point but we'll leave that for tomorrow, right. And I guess this might come off as a bit of comedy. But once the position opens up, I'd apply for that job. Like, I'm here, I'm ready for that kind of thing.

(Applause.)

MR. GONZALO MORAN: And a few other people too as well, right. But in saying that, it absolutely involves the people on the ground, the citizens, right. This is a nice

hall. It's kind of easy to forget what's going on outside once we're in here for too long. And in that kind of way, yeah, I'd recommend and support bringing in people from the ground, bringing them into these spaces.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much.

Vice-Chair Landau and then Minority Leader Brooks and then we'll move on to the next panel.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: I promise to be quick too. Thank you. Thank you all for your testimony. Mr. Moran, I'm very struck by your saying what could be a delay or people not getting a piece of land and it came back, you said it's money, and it's about a developer versus land. And I really hope the City can now -- we have a new Director of Planning and Development, new Board members of

the Land Bank.

I would really, really hope that the City can see what the cost of not doing this is, right. We know that there's a human financial and earth cost of not maintaining these lands. We know there's an increase in crime. There's mental health issues and whatnot. And I would hope that we can put the money and our priorities on the forward end so we know that we have this money savings on the other side. So I appreciate that.

I want to just make sure I didn't miss something about the difference between land for development and land for gardens. So, Sari, you were talking about notice and an opportunity to cure. When an application would be rejected for technical deficiencies, are people notified ahead of time here's what's wrong with your --

here's a technical deficiency in your project and give them an opportunity to fix it?

MS. BERNSTEIN: So this is what I have heard anecdotally because I haven't put in the applications myself, and perhaps the other panelists can speak to this, but I've heard stories where an applicant will write, for example, N/A instead of checking a box that says no and the entire application will be rejected.

MS. GREENBERG: Just this week -- well, last week we submitted six additional applications and I think we made that exact mistake or what we used to do was acceptable and now it's not, but I did get an email from a staff member just yesterday asking me to correct it, so we did get helpful feedback on an easy fix.

MR. GONZALO MORAN: In

the past or I guess in our initial early days of the garden when we started the process, it was a batch of, I'm not exactly sure, but let's say it was like about 30 applications that were sent back, whether it was because we didn't check a box or there was a term in there that -- there was something in there, I don't remember the exact portion of it, that we didn't understand and we asked for clarification and it never got back to us.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: One last quickie. Sorry, I'm kind of new to the application process here. Are you doing these on paper or electronically?

MR. GONZALO MORAN: At that time we had handed them in on paper and they were mysteriously lost or something along those lines.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: Is

there an option to do --

MS. BERNSTEIN: It's a fillable PDF, yeah, an online option.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Minority Leader Brooks.

COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS: So one of my comments to Mr. Moran. You mentioned money was a thing and the first thing comes to mind is money saved is money earned. And when I hear all the stories, whether it's from Councilmember Lozada, the various stories I've heard around community gardens around the city, is that the investments around whether it's food insecurity in areas that don't have quality food in the areas, whether it's safety for young people and our seniors and something for them to do, and just wellness and out-of-school-time

programs, right, those are all tangible items and the work that you're doing is saving us money as a city providing safety in neighborhoods that have been far left behind for years. Every community that you named have been communities that have been left behind.

So I want to applaud you just having to be bold and say money is the thing, but the reality is money saved is money earned and we need to make sure that we keep these investments going. And another thing, I have been traveling around the city, I've been to many gardens. I've been to secure gardens and gardens that are insecure. And we know scarcity brings about more work in scrambling. So what I see the difference between the two is that when the garden isn't secure you don't have the freedom to thrive

because you can't plan 10, 20 years out.

So I've seen gardens with beautiful landscaping outside of the -- the garden itself naturally is beautiful, but we're talking about built-up gardens for people that are wheelchair-users clear paths, water and all that, those gardens have the ability to thrive and far too often they're not in the communities that you're talking about. So we need to make sure that we're giving people equity. This is not about equality. It's about equity for gardeners all over the city.

And another thought I had is -- so my question is those are from my experience as a Councilmem -- oh, another thing. Councilmember Lozada, one of the things I brought up here is that when we initially started this fight

four years ago that we thought would be over by now and it's not, we still haven't secured the land that we wanted. The initial fight included lots. So I just wanted to be clear that as soon as Councilmember Lozada came on board she was like what about the side lots, right, and has been very adamant about that.

So as we talk, I just want for clarity the things that are moving forward are primarily gardens. The things that are kind of on hold are some of the lots, and we need to find a way to bring both of those conversations together because to your point, your grandmother 30 years serving on a lot, Mike's mom and now Mike's wife and Mike. Doing this work together we need to make sure that we're bringing this all together because a lot of land is moving through the

city really quickly, how can we make sure that folks are getting this. So I want to thank you, Councilmember Lozada, for being on it from the beginning and just allowing us to kind of do this together. So that's my perspective.

What do you think is the number one barrier, number one barrier for us to move this forward? I mean, you said money. But what is the one thing because between the gardens -- we got you the money so I don't even know what else to do. We got the money put aside to do all the things we need to do and it's still not moving. So what else can we do to make sure that we're moving on the gardens but also how we can bring the lot conversation into it because it's not the same conversation?

MR. GONZALO MORAN: No.

COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS: And

I just want to put that on record that we're talking about it as one, but the lots were left behind, if I'm correct.

MR. GONZALO MORAN: Yeah. I mean, eight years, you know.

COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS: Right.

MR. GONZALO MORAN: Well, thank you for that. I appreciate, you know, again the insightfulness of this. I almost feel heard here, right. I mean, I am. I'm on a loud speaker, right. A lot of what we do there has a sense of kind of reframing or changing the perception of what land is. Sometimes people just kind of -- it's either, you know, for growing or for building a house. And a garden space or a community space kind of serves as sort of like an in-between space between that, right, where people come -- I spent days out there. And

what I'm saying is I've been out at the garden for 12 hours at times. I spent the whole day out there.

When I say money, it's not so much just the lack of resources but it's also the perception of what is wealth. Through the programs that you've mentioned we're enriching our community. Everyone leaves out of there at least mentally wealthy you know. And in that kind of way, that's something to hone into, right, that these spaces serve for the betterment in a sense of humanity, as a collective, as a city, et cetera.

Now, going into I guess the more traditional form of money, if you will, and -- I'm also in real estate, right. And so, I come in with that perspective of, well, yeah, there's land, what can it be used for, what can be built on it

and so on and so forth. And property values are going up so that's something that I'm also aware of.

And it seems like the more property values increase the harder it is to get these lots, right. And so, in that kind of way understanding I guess for sake of simplicity, the two forms of welfare where it's a human enriching process or form or way of looking at it, but then there's also the traditional land and speculation and et cetera, that comes with that.

I think again to kind of come back to the question, yeah, just focusing on the people on the ground, rather prioritize community members, prioritize community gardens, prioritize side lots because developers are already -- they're already winning. They won, you know. As I look out and see 20

houses built while -- and I haven't mentioned this but I will now since I have the opportunity. I'm going to need a little help with L&I. Some of y'all have seen what the front of my house looks like, right.

It was a terrible developer, terrible work and damaged the facade of my house, the front side of my house, right, and I've been dealing with that for five-plus years at this point. And now, I'm at the point where L&I is about to fine me. All right. That's not putting a citizen as a priority. You're putting an entity, you're putting again a developer over someone that's just trying to garden and raise their family in their house.

So in that kind of way, yeah, the approach of what is in a sense essential or important, even when we talk about a place like the

Land Bank has to involve citizens, has to involve the people on the ground. Thank you.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: I appreciate everything that you guys are saying. I think that as a city I agree with Councilmember Landau, right. We just need to figure out how we better tell the story of community green spaces and how important they are to neighborhoods and how they work towards improving quality of life in many neighborhoods, right.

In the city of Philadelphia we have neighborhoods that have the highest heat index. Some of these green spaces can help us mitigate some of that heat that would in turn improve the health and well-being of our residents, right. We need to do better in telling that story.

And so, I'm going to look to many of you who manage some of those green spaces to help us tell the story from that perspective, right, and how much it's going to cost us and how much it saves us in different neighborhoods like Hunting Park and the southern end of the District.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much to all of you for your testimony today.

MS. GREENBERG: Thank you.

MR. GONZALO MORAN: Thank you.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Will the Clerk please call the next panel of witnesses to testify.

THE CLERK: Iris Santa-Carter, Elise Hanks, Noelle Carter, Joe Davila, Abdul Rahim Muhammad.

(Witnesses approached

Witness Table.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Thank you so much for being here. I'm so glad that we have so many diverse testifiers, but I am going to start using a timer to try to move us along. So everybody, if you could summarize your testimony, you have three minutes to do that. When you hear the timer, just know you got like 10 seconds to kind of wrap it up so we can get to the next testifier.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MS. SANTA-CARTER: Hi my name is Iris Santa-Carter. In 1996 I first moved onto my property. At this time the property was covered with overgrown vegetation and I, along with members of my church, improved the property as well as the land around it. We had to remove

tires, trash, mechanical debris, needles and many other dangerous and unsightly items from the property.

We also installed fencing around the property to prevent any more dumping on it, including cars and trash. Since then I have consistently and diligently maintained and cared for the property. I've planted trees, apple tree, pear tree, cherry tree as well as many other different flower and plants, irises, rose of Sharon, tiger lillies --

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Please silence your phones. Thank you.

MS. SANTA-CARTER: I have kept the grass groomed and made sure no unsightly weeds or unwelcome vegetation popped up. I've leveled the grounds and set up swings, seats, picnic tables and benches. Since 1996, more than 28 years have

passed during which time I have consistently maintained this property. I have been requesting this property around my home since I moved onto it.

In 2007 I received notification from the City that I was finally being granted the property pending property market assessments, after which things were put on hold again. I have continued to touch base with the Councilperson's office, State Reps, nonprofit organizations and various community meetings.

I requested EOIs in no less than four occasions and participated in various committee meetings to no avail. As instructed by the City, I have sought legal counsel to follow the adverse possession of the property directly behind my house. Please note that I had to prove this in court that I

have possessed it and maintained the land continuously for over the 25 years. The court granted me this request in 2022, but the pro bono lawyers were not able to assist me in requiring the following properties because there was a conflict of interest with the Land Bank.

I only mention this as proof to my continuous presence. I cannot afford to pay a legal team to file petitions nor do I wish to go that avenue. Next steps I have been instructed to consolidate the two properties. Okay. I've submitted everything. I've put everything to the city and I've done everything that has been asked of me for these 28 years.

I just want to add, keeping this as a green area also helps people who live in the area. It adds more beauty to this already

concrete jungle. It also helps, however so slightly, to improve air quality and decrease stormwater runoff.

Additionally, every year my neighbors with my permission have used the fruits from various trees to make apple cider compote pies and smoothies. I even have a web page where you can see a harvest with no visual faces because I respect people's privacy, but you can also see that.

As evident, by my petitions, letter of support, I have been at these properties for more than 28 years. I have the backing of my community, local organizations and community of church, as the attached documents can show you. Here I stand in front of this panel asking for your assistance in this matter. Please help me give get the properties.

I do want to add that if the layout of my land was different I wouldn't have had been jumping through so many loops. If the property that has the adverse possession claim was on the other side of the other ones, I wouldn't have had a problem because I can actually get approved through my EOAs. But because of how the layout of the property is, it caused a problem. I'm sorry. That's --

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Please wrap up your testimony.

MS. SANTA-CARTER: That's it.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MS. CARTER: Sure. Good morning, everyone and happy Wednesday. My name is Noelle

Carter. I'm a local realtor and small business owner based out of South Philadelphia. I'm here today to share my experience with navigating the redevelopment process within the city.

I do want to take a moment to thank and acknowledge City Council for creating a space for this conversation. As a realtor I work with a lot of first-time homebuyers. And one of my clients purchased her first home in March of 2023 in the city. Unfortunately, within a few months she started to have really big issues, overgrown grass, eventually infestations including termites, rodents and even at one point a raccoon living in the ceiling of her living room, all caused by the dilapidated property next door that is owned by the City.

Initially I advised her to contact 311 to have the grass

cleared. But after the third or fourth issue, it was clear that we were just putting band-aids on a bigger problem. In March I reached out to the local Councilwoman basically asking what more could be done here and she put me in touch with the Department of Equitable Redevelopment. After some back and forth I was able to apply to redevelop the property and fully submitted my application in May using the online portal.

I was also told there was a 60- to 90-day review period. July I followed up with that Redevelopment office contact because I didn't have a way to actually follow up regarding my application and I had not heard anything back. In August I was told that my application was actually never received and there was no record of it on file. Obviously this was very

disappointing to hear.

I reapplied essentially by email and that process was fast-tracked so I was told at the end of August that my application was denied. After some additional back and forth in September I was told that the initial threshold review was completed and they were essentially just waiting for a project manager to be assigned. After multiple follow-ups, voicemails, phone calls, emails, again I heard nothing back.

I ended up going back to other departments to just figure out the best way to get any type of feedback or update regarding my application. After having this escalated, I did hear from the project manager about two weeks ago and we were able to successfully schedule a site visit which took place on Tuesday. The house needs a

lot of work. The inside was outside. The upstairs was downstairs and it's unfortunate that it's taken six months to see the full magnitude of the work that needs to be completed.

I can also absolutely see how some investors would get to this point in the process and just back out because of how much work is needed, especially when I'm probably looking at another six months to get the property and begin construction and at least another six months of construction work as well. I appreciate that equity and inclusion is a priority, but it's very difficult for a small business owner like myself to successfully navigate this application process because of the hurdles, lack of transparency, extended timelines and delays. Most people would have given up by now. But it's also really important to

acknowledge the community aspect of this project as well.

These homes could be developed into affordable housing, which is another major priority for the City, but instead they're empty, dilapidated eyesores. While we were there that morning, three different neighbors came out asking if I was the owner of the property and I let them know then that I wasn't, but hopefully something was going to be done with this property.

With all that being said, I'm not through this entire process just yet. But I do get a -- so in closing, these projects are important for many reasons and I'm fully committed to completing them successfully, not only for the benefit of a new homeowner but for the people who live there currently like my client and the communities that they've invested in. So thank

you again for listening and I look forward to continuing to work alongside the City on future projects.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much for coming to share your story with us today.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MS. HANKS: My name is Elise Hanks and I'm a small business owner and urban flower farmer. My first experience losing access to green space in Philadelphia was in 2022 after having spent many years managing a community garden space in Fishtown. That fall all members were forced to vacate the property to make way for development project. Two years later, however, there has been no progress. What was once a biodynamic garden is now a languishing lot.

Luckily in the fall of 2022 I was given the opportunity to take over the management of another green space, a thriving flower farm in Norris Square. This unique project on North American Street is and still remains one of the only publicly accessible flower farms in Philadelphia in walking distance to the El.

According to neighbors, this lot was covered in trash for years until 2012 when a community member used her own funds to turn the lot into a garden. From 2012 to 2019 she attempted to contact the City many times about obtaining legal use. For those seven years she received little response.

For one year she was able to secure a garden use agreement with the City. However, when that ended, she was unable to connect with the City to extend this

agreement. After reading through her email communication with the City, I understand her frustration, never having obtained meaningful, long-term use of this land.

Despite this insecurity, this space became a fixture of the neighborhood not only bringing beauty to its human neighbors but creating a safe space for pollinating insects and local bird populations. Being in the space is like a breath of fresh air in the otherwise commercial corridor of American Street.

Over the last two years I've seen the impact this farm has had on the surrounding neighborhood. In March of 2024 I began attempting to contact the Redevelopment Authority about attaining legal use of the lot via email and phone call with no response. It was not until this month I received any reply from

the Land Bank with a curt response and no meaningful information about how to proceed.

Since 2022 I've not only managed the space by coordinating trash clean-up days and fixing broken infrastructure, but I've begun building a thriving farming business. My goal is to offer fresh flowers and medicinal herbs for sale, providing high-quality, affordable crops to the community while also offering educational workshops and chances for folks to get outside.

My ultimate goal has been to obtain legal use of this lot through lease or ownership so that I can begin implementing long-term farming plans. Without a formal use agreement, my business misses out on getting a USDA Farm No. which would qualify us for federal loans, grants and other resources that would

support our farming efforts.

Additionally I want to open up a portion of the space for other neighbors for community gardening, but I worry about doing so without a lease, as I know the pain of putting time, effort and money into a gardening project that can be taken away. After reaching out to nearly every organization I could think of, I was finally connected with Mike Cameron, the Legislative Director from Quetcy Lozada's office who gladly took the time to hear my story and began helping me navigate the land disposition.

When I explained my vision of a for-profit farm alongside a community gardening space, he was given the guidance that I should apply for ownership of the lot through the community gardens and green space application.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Please just summarize the rest of your testimony.

MS. HANKS: Oh, shoot. I have so much more to say. Overall I've just been really disappointed at the lack of prioritization given to green spaces and farms. I really believe that for-profit farms can do so much for this community. The City is missing out on huge economic opportunities for lease agreements.

And I also just wanted to mention that the city of Atlanta has implemented a really wonderful program called Atlanta Grows a Lot. It's a program that invites entrepreneurs, nonprofits and residents to apply for five-year renewable license agreements for greens space and they have a really wonderful website that I think could be a really great resource to look into. They have lots of examples of

licensures and different things that people can apply for so I think that's a great website to look into.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much for sharing your story here.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MR. VASQUEZ: Yeah. Hi. Excuse me. Before I proceed with my testimony, how long did you say we had?

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Three minutes.

MR. VASQUEZ: Okay. So I just want to start off by honestly saying I think that is very unfair, that this last panel only gets three minutes per person when we saw other people here from nonprofit organizations, who technically the board of those organizations still get paid money with that nonprofit

funds, so I think it's very unfair that the normal citizens who are here who wasted their time, who couldn't go to work, who had to leave their children with other people to testify about real-life situations that are not just affecting community gardens, which I'm not saying those aren't the important things, but I think that it's very unfair that -- what we're saying is that the normal people have a time limit to testify but everybody else doesn't.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: I understand. I'm just trying to move us through the rest of the hearing.

MR. VASQUEZ: Yeah. I mean, I get that you are, but the fairness, right, we're seeing in front of everybody here --

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: I understand and I heard your point. Please state your name for the

record and proceed with your testimony.

MR. VASQUEZ: Okay. So my name is Josio Vasquez. I did submit also an affidavit with Mike from City Councilwoman Lozada's office. So I live on Leithgow Street and the lot next to my house is the lot that my son plays in. My son has Noonan syndrome. So for people who don't know what Noonan syndrome is, essentially my son has body and bone deformities and he also has blood cell deformities. My son cannot play in the street.

There aren't other kids that are in our neighborhood that my son can play with safely so his only safe haven would be the lot that is next to our house. All right. So despite all these challenges, my son still remains a very happy kid, right. It's not like he's a -- nothing really bothers him. The

worst things can happen and he still just smiles.

So I'm here as a father and as a community member to say that the way that the Land Bank has been treating us, me and my son specifically, I think it's unfair. We've had four instances where we've submitted applications. Two of those instances the applications were nowhere to be found, right. They didn't find the applications. They said they didn't receive them.

Another time I submitted an application they told me that the land was not available although it was on the Land Bank's website showing that it was available. Then another time I submitted the application they said, okay, well, X, Y and Z is missing from the application, but it was not missing from the application. My Social Security number was on the

application where they said that it was missing. It wasn't, it was on there. Then they continued to say that I didn't submit a plan, a drawing-up plan for a lot. So I now have to spend money to find somebody to draw up a plan for how this lot is going to work for just a space for my son to play.

I think that this is one of the most unfair things. I prepared for you guys a whole list of recommendations that would have helped other people like me also. But since I'm on a time limit, I'll just submit my testimony here and I'm done.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: You still have time if you want to summarize some of your recommendations.

MR. VASQUEZ: It's okay. I'll use my popular blog to just explain how the normal citizens here

are treated differently than other people.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you for coming today.

Good afternoon, Mr. Muhammad. Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MR. MUHAMMAD: Well, thank you for having us here. Well, before I even make these few comments I want to make, I want to make everyone aware that I have a hearing impairment and then the acoustics in this particular space here is terrible, so I'm more than sure I'm not going to be able to answer any questions if you have any questions for me because I don't feel like putting you through a challenge of trying to help me understand what you're saying.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: That's totally fine. Just please

give your testimony. You don't have to answer questions.

MR. MUHAMMAD: Okay. Well, the ICPIC New Africa Center is 501 --

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Mr. Muhammad, please state your name first before you start.

MR. MUHAMMAD: My name is Abdul Rahim Muhammad and I'm the Director of the ICPIC New Africa Center located at 4243 Lancaster Avenue. And I was here to talk about our community development and our efforts to acquire property through the Land Bank and my relationship and experience with that. Okay.

So the ICPIC New Africa Center is a 501(c)(3) arts and culture, education and community service nonprofit organization founded here in Philadelphia in 1992, and we registered with the

state of Pennsylvania and the IRS and all that good stuff. Our mission is to preserve the African American and Muslim history and legacy to pass on to future generations.

The ICPIC New Africa Center has designed a new Freedom District tour brochure in 2016 and have rebranded this community as the New Freedom District to put our footprint in this community. So this is a sample of our brochure and we wrote this to preserve the legacy of the African American community and we've identified over 40 historic sites right in this lowest section of West Philly, right. But with all the gentrification going on people aren't going to know about this legacy and history unless we preserve it. So that's a number one mission of our center.

So as part of our

mission, the ICPIC New Africa Center has formed a partnership with Mosaic Development Partners LLC, which is one of the nation's leading African American developers. In 1920 we developed this partnership with them and the idea and the work of our partnership is to build two mixed-use buildings at 4237 through 4243, which is four spaces and where our center is presently located and 4234 through 4240, which are four spaces across the street from our center. And we're looking to expand our New Africa Center and to create 41 affordable housing units and 3 commercial spaces for small diverse businesses.

Our goal is to transform the 4200 block of Lancaster Avenue using arts and culture history and neighborhood identity as an economic engine to rebuild our community and to also serve as the anchor for our

New Freedom District. We plan to actually begin construction this April of 2025 so we have renderings of our work and everything. I'd be happy to share them with you if you'd like to see them.

The ICPIC New Africa Cen --

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Maybe just summarize. Take a little more time to summarize just your experience with the Land Bank and then we'll move on to the next panel. Thank you so much.

MR. MUHAMMAD: Did she say summarize?

MR. VASQUEZ: Yes, she's saying to summarize so they can move on with the next panel.

MR. MUHAMMAD: Oh, okay. Yes, ma'am. The underlying reason I'm here to speak with regard to the Philadelphia Land Bank is that we have applied to the Land Bank in

November of last year and we reached out to them over a dozen times through emails, phone. I've gone to their meetings, and the most of our responses have just been no response at all. And then when we did get a response, the response was, well, we're still reviewing it.

But luckily, October 17th two weeks ago we heard from them. And then they're saying our reservation letter and a manager Mr. Brian will be our manager. So hopefully we'll be able to keep moving forward and produce this development project we want to do.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: That's progress. Thank you so much, Mr. Muhammad. And good luck with the New Freedom District. And thanks to all of you for sharing your stories. We really appreciate it.

MR. MUHAMMAD: Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:
Will the Clerk please call the next panel of witnesses to testify.
THE CLERK: Mo Rushdy, Anthony Bright, Orlando Brown, Tyanne Clarke, Tayyib Smith.
(Witnesses approached Witness table.)
COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:
Good afternoon to all of you. Thank you so much for joining us today. As a reminder, you have three minutes to summarize your testimony. You'll hear a timer. When you hear the timer, just try to take an additional 10 to 20 seconds and wrap it up. I'm not trying to be mean. I'm just trying to get us out of here by 5:00 p.m.
MR. RUSHDY:
Councilmember, you are not mean. So I have my testimony starting with good morning so I'm going to say good afternoon. My name is Mo

Rushdy and I serve as the President of the Building Industry Association of Philadelphia. The BIA is a trade association of mostly residential developers working throughout Philly.

I want to thank Chair Gauthier and Chair Lozada and the rest of the Committee for allowing us or allowing me to provide testimony today on the Philadelphia Land Bank. Since its creation, the Land Bank has been one of these institutions that easily gets blamed for issues that have been unfairly construed.

For example, the current land disposition process has three required steps: First, submission of a qualified application as determined by staff; two, approval by the Land Bank Board of any qualified application; third, introduction of a resolution to

transfer the property to the applicant by the Councilmember in whose District the land is located.

Only the first step is completed by the Land Bank staff in accordance with Land Bank laws and procedures. Staff must determine if an application demonstrates that the required financial viability, affordable housing component, project experience, tax compliance and other qualifications are met. I repeat financial viability, affordable housing component, experience, tax compliance and qualifying documents.

The second and third steps are where the process would historically get stuck, which had nothing to do with the performance of efficiency of the Land Bank staff. Recent changes to the Land Bank Board have streamlined Step No. 2 approvals. However, the final

required action remains the responsibility of City Council.

Please review the Land Bank Board meetings in the last 12 months prior to the new Land Board. Over 30 percent of the meetings did not meet quorum. Some of them lost quorum during the meeting. This is the problem. For the first five years of its existence the Land Bank had a very different and more arduous process.

At the time, the RFP approval by the Vacant Property Review Committee, also known as VPRC, were required which slowed down the process tremendously with unnecessary bottlenecks. VPRC was a City Council Committee that oversaw the sale of vacant and surplus property-owned properties. Fortunately, in 2019 City Council passed an ordinance eliminating VPRC and streamlined the process for

disposing public land. Bill No. 190606, open public land disposition to unsolicited applications, providing a 51 percent affordability component is included.

In regards to the Pittsburgh Land Bank, which was mentioned earlier today by some of the panelists, facts are important. In 2023 they disposed five lots. This new disposition process brought in hundreds of millions of dollars of private equity and commercial lending to affordable housing. The impact of this investment was further enhanced when the 1 percent construction tax or what's known as the development impact tax, DIT, was passed. And the Neighborhood Preservation Initiative $400 million Fund was created to help hundreds of affordable housing buyers.

The BIA supported the DIT while many other real estate

business organizations opposed the initiative. We are forward-thinking, understands the City challenges and seek practical and effective solutions that are scalable. I repeat scalable. We have a serious racial wealth gap in the neighborhoods.

Turn the Key is one of the best programs in the country to change that. Now, we're focused on making the Turn the Key program a success. We're leveraging the current land disposition policy and the creation of the Philadelphia Accelerator Fund to bring in Black and Brown developers to execute these projects to build Turn the Key homes. You will hear from them today.

The Land Bank -- Angel, Andrea, Todd, Brian, Mathen, Shelvia, Ashley and Christina -- has helped each one of them through the

process, whether through BIA, UDA, Black Squirrel, the Enterprise Center or PHDC's own MDP, we will soon have over 40 Black and Brown 100 percent developers of affordable housing in our city. The Land Bank staff makes it happen. We are now scaling up the production of affordable homes.

In conclusion, the BIA's testimony shows that once the VPRC was removed from the Land Bank process, legislation was passed that provided the proper tools, the Land Bank became successful. Now, Philadelphia has a groundbreaking or ribbon-cutting every two weeks with hundreds of happy homeowners, some of whom are here to testify today. The Land Bank stack is doing a tremendous job to advance affordable housing and specifically affordable housing homeownership in Philadelphia's neighborhood. The

system is working and we wish that other elements of City government worked as well. Thank you for your consideration.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MR. BRIGHT: Hello. My name is Anthony Bright from Seamless Development, and I'm the managing member of a three-person company where we have built and constructed 100 homes in the last five years. And I'm just speaking on what these opportunities provide for my business, my family, my community. It gives us the opportunity to scale and we want to be in the space where some of these other developers are.

And this PHDC program the City with giving us the land at a reasonable price gives us the

opportunity to bring some of this access to capital. Okay. Seamless is one of the companies actively pursuing vacant land in our city aiming to establish itself as a key player in the development and affordable housing for our local residents.

We aspire to build in the same communities we actively live in, the 7th District, and promote confidence within the community that we are able to work together and implement positive change. Stalling or terminating this program aimed at supporting minority developers deprives us of the opportunity to inspire the youth. Instead of pursuing community development and making positive contributions, they may feel pressured to follow the status quo, which often glorifies careers as professional athletes, entertainments or at worst even drug

dealers. We must advocate for these programs to empower the next generation to envision a brighter and more constructive future. That's it. Thank you. Thank you guys for your time.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you. Nice to hear about your company.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MR. BROWN: My name is Orlando Brown. Good afternoon. Thank you for allowing me to testify on Resolution 240288 on the performance of the Land Bank. I am the owner of 2229 William Street, a home. I'm here to speak about my experience as a buyer and recent homeowner. I'm in an affordable, single for-sale home that was built on City land disposed by the Land Bank.

And in short, I'd like to say that my experience was unbelievable. It was flawless. It was seamless. It was very professionally handled. I'm very happy with the home that I got. I'm very happy with the process and I don't think that it could have gone any better.

I think -- one of the things I wanted to say was that in less than a week we may be electing a white supremacist, fascist, misogynist as president of this country and you know how he feels about cities like Philadelphia and Chicago and New York and Baltimore, and they're going to be trying to dismantle the administrative state messing with our monies that go to the cities, and we need to support programs like this that are very efficient and who are treating your citizens with dignity and respect

and building quality homes.

I'd also like to talk about some of these sort of back and forth that's going on in here between the developers and the gardening people. We need to cut that out. We all need to do better. We all need to make a commitment to work together. It's not either or. It's both. And given the threat to our democracy that we have on a national stage, we need to cut all of this out.

Stop demonizing each other and work together. The process that I went through, which I am so happy with, is a process and is a process that could benefit the people who are advocating for the gardens in the city. The developer here, Mo and Riverwards, they have developed a process that is very efficient, very effective and they can be helpful.

All sides need to start working together and stop demonizing each other and I think we can make some progress that way. All right. That's all I have to say.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much for your testimony. And for the record, I and I think all of Council think that Turn the Key is a wonderful program and we congratulate you on your new home and thank you for sharing your story.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, but there's also this kind of low-key criticism of Turn the Key. These corporate guys coming in here doing all of this and that and the other thing and don't care about the communities. I don't think that's the case. I think we need to stop demonizing each other and start working together and learning from

each other and see how we can make all of our lives and all of our communities a better place.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: I understand. Sometimes important conversations can be a little uncomfortable but I understand.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MS. SHELLIE: Hi. My name is Janique. I am a new homeowner for Orlando's neighbor. I also stay at 222 -- well, I stay at 2223 East Williams Street. My story to sum it up was totally different. I kind of feel awkward sitting here because I have a really, really bad green thumb. My best friend came over yesterday and said it looks like Jumanji a little bit in my house. So I understand where they're coming from as far as the landscaping.

Also, I'm not from Philadelphia. I was raised in Florida, Georgia. My parents own 10 acres of land so I get it. I can plant pretty much everything. But I kind of think that the people who's been there needs to welcome these new homeowners, you know, to make them feel welcome and kind of help us to adjust and adapt.

So now, I hydroponic grow certain things in my little backyard and it's good for me and mine. As far as being a homeowner, it was a very viral moment. I had to move back, relocate to Georgia because when me and my kids' dad separated, I couldn't afford it as a single mom.

I still work with the same company. I actually work for affordable housing on the rental side for eight years. My coworker told me about to Turn the Key

program because I wanted to come back here because I saw my kids suffering because they were far from their dad. I'm trying not to get emotional.

So when the process -- I literally started in December. They were so hands-on, Janique, do this, just do this and do that. And I'm just like, oh, it's not going to work, I can't afford it. And they was like, yes, you can. Because I feel like this program is good for people who stuck in between making very little to making too much. So it meets you in the middle to be able to afford something.

So it was a viral moment for me because my mom is also a realtor. And again, she didn't want her daughter going to a whole other state blindsided. So they walked me through it. They helped me with everything. I purchased my home and

then to be a leader from my kids and to leave a legacy for my kids and also to show my parents that they did a great job with me not only with the looks but everything else, it was just so welcoming.

And also, with me living in affordable housing I'm actually about to lease up a new property in North Philly that's 229 units. So my goal is to teach these people -- because it's tax credit, so to teach them, yes, you can do the programs like Turn the Key program. Yes, listen you're going to be here for two or three years and you're out of here and that opens the door for the Housing Authority to not have a waitlist for 10, 20 years.

Because at the end of the day, you want to grow. So I feel like programs like this also helps the future of the whole Philadelphia just do better. And I'm so for it

and it was a smooth process. I'm thankful. And again, I get to be a leader for my kids and to prove to my parents that they did a great job and to help others.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you. Can we get a round of applause for these new homeowners?

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Those are great stories. Thank you so much for coming today.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MR. SMITH: Good afternoon. My name is Tayyib Smith. I'm a partner in a company called Smith & Roller. My partner Jacob Roller couldn't be here today because he's having a medical procedure. Councilmembers, I appreciate you having this hearing today. This is a long, overdue

conversation.

Councilmember Gauthier, I particularly appreciate your support over the last five-and-a-half years. My partner and I won an RFP in 2019 prior to you being a Councilperson in partnership with Mount Vernon CDC, People's Emergency Center and Habitat for Humanity who was here earlier to do a holistic, affordable housing project with both nonprofit and for-profit partners coming together for this vision.

My experience with the Land Bank has been horrendous and I've been unapologetic about that. I've spoken to current Councilpeople, past Councilpeople, the prior Mayor's Administration, the new Mayor's Administration, some Board members who are here today, some Board members who have left. I'm an experienced entrepreneur. I'm also a board member at the

Kensington Corridor of Trust. I have projects in West Philadelphia, Kensington, Center City and I have never worked with any public-private partnership or municipal organization and dealt with more ineptitude.

The communication is opaque. I wanted to read -- you have my testimony, but there's a couple things I just want to tell you from my heart. All right. I have spent more than $130,000 on this project. All right. I'm not a wealthy man, right. I might be more resourced than many Black and Brown entrepreneurs in the city, but I cannot afford to waste money with no end date on a project.

The Land Bank has asked us to do everything to maneuver -- at one point one of the parcels that was in our RFP we found out after two years the City has not had

control of since 1983. After spending money on architecture plans, we had to redo that and create a smaller unit footprint.

Whether it's legal, whether it's man hours, whether it's contractors, community meetings, we have gone through every hurdle that's been put in front of us and asked to actually come up with a solution to moving forward. Just recently we were told that our project was no longer viable by L&I with some unexplained excuse, right.

And again, you have the full testimony for me. But I have to say to you, communities are struggling. We have not just a local housing crisis. We have a national international housing crisis and people cannot afford this level of ineptitude, and dare I say malfeasance in regards to public land disbursement.

Small businesses, nonprofits, community members all have gotten up in front of you and I've heard some of the very same experiences that I've had, but it's virtually impossible to get through this opaque system even as a resourced entrepreneur. I beg of you, the system needs to be blown up, reimagined and we have to come up with holistic solutions to getting people in the housing, to taking care of gardens, to making our community safer.

But what I've been through is horrendous, absolutely horrendous and there is no excuse. I greatly appreciate the support you've given me, Councilmember Gauthier, but this is outrageous. And we cannot keep moving forward with this level and ineptitude in the city of Philadelphia. Thank you.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Thank you for your testimony.

Vice-Chair Landau.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: I just wanted to comment real quick and to echo what Chair Gauthier is saying. We're in no way saying that the Turn the Key program isn't great and isn't working. What we're saying is that the system is not working for everyone. And with over 7,000 properties, vacant properties here in the city of Philadelphia we should be able to move these quickly into the hands of nonprofits and other folks in order to make sure that we are serve -- and to gardeners to make sure that we're serving everyone.

MR. BROWN: I don't disagree with that. All I'm saying is what I'm picking up here is that -- what I'm trying to say is

that we need to support programs like Turn the Key and expand them maybe to include some of the ideas that you just mentioned. But we don't need to be -- you don't need to be going into this kind of dichotomous thinking that it's either our way or nothing. We need to work together. We need to come together, especially given what's going on nationally.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much. Just to be clear, City Council created the Turn the Key program and we support it.

MR. SMITH: If I may because I wasn't asked to comment on this, but our current Administration has a goal of 30,000 new units within this Parker Administration. We cannot look to the Turn the Key as a fix-all to reach 30,000 units. Now, this is no disrespect to anybody in the Turn the Key program

or Council or the people who funded it, but the Turn the Key program cannot be the catch-all solution to reach 30,000 units.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: I think we agree.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: Yeah. I mean, I was getting ready to say the same thing, right. That can't be the only solution. And I think that what we are looking for is a response from Land Bank and others where they're getting communicated with, they're getting updated. There's a process that is given in some way and others in a not so supportive way.

And so, I think that this conversation today should lead us to making sure that, number one, everyone is informed appropriately about Turn the Key and its benefits. In communities like mine, there has not been a clear conversation about

Turn the Key and what the benefits are.

In districts like mine, many people live in an income of $15,000 or less so Turn the Key is not going to be able to help and support them. And so, I don't want you to think that we're fighting Turn the Key, right. We're not supportive of Turn the Key. I think we've not as a City done a good job at being able to inform community residents, CDCs and others about how Turn the Key works and how it can help us, right.

Mo mentioned in his testimony that the staff of the Land Bank is very responsive and they're very supportive and they've helped along the process. But you heard from community residents, that's not the same response that they receive. And I think what we're trying to get to is everyone should be

communicated in a fair way. Everyone should be updated in a fair way and the process needs to be the same for everyone regardless --

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: -- regardless of who you are and where you are. And we're not debating your testimony, right. We appreciate you coming here. We hope you continue to come back and continue to be a part of the conversation. But it is obvious that there are different demographics of groups and people that are not responded to in the same way that Mo and others are. And that's the reality.

(Applause.)

MR. RUSHDY: Councilwoman, if you would allow me just for 30 seconds if you don't mind?

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Yes.

MR. RUSHDY: One of the structural issues that we find -- there's a lot of nonprofits and we have a lot of nonprofits in our own BIA membership. One of the main struggles with nonprofits is that we have an application process that demands you being qualified. And by being qualified, if you have a 10-unit project that costs you $3 million, you have to show your ability that you're going to be able to fund the job, right. And this isn't anything bad about nonprofits. It's just that their traditional ways of funding takes time, right.

On the for-profit end, we have zero fees. I repeat, zero fees. We don't get salaries. Okay. So again, I might be a nonprofit ED and be making $200,000, $300,000, $400,000 a year and they are, okay, building 20 homes and 30 homes a

year. That is not how the private sector works.

So even though you might look or others might look at the for-profit developers and see a profit that's at 6 or 7 percent. It is just reclassified on the other side of nonprofits as fees. That is the reality. This is how the numbers work. The issue becomes the emergency that we have on getting affordable housing on the street. People are hurting.

We go to the housing fairs for the Land Bank and (inaudible). We have one on the weekend. We've got thousands of people that are coming in saying we need homes. Even though we say 100 percent AMI, the average buyer is at $22 an hour, $22 an hour that is coming into a house with less than $3,000 down payment and $1,100 a month less than a studio. They can

use vouchers.

I was in North Philly with a presentation yesterday two days ago sitting in front of 70. I had someone that left, was leaving and he's saying, I'm leaving, this is not for me, I can't afford it. I said, why don't you listen. He was a young guy. He was about 22, 23. He said, I'm on vouchers, it's not going to work for me. I said, it will work for you, just sit and listen for an hour. He was so happy that he found out that he could qualify for that. We need to do a better job on getting the message out to the communities of the benefits of it because there is a misconception of what it represents. Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much. I would just respond that if a big goal of the Land Bank is deeply affordable

housing and community spaces but our partners can't qualify, then that suggests that there's a big problem.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: And I'm going to move on to Mr. Smith.

MR. SMITH: Thank you, Councilmember. Just to speak to what Mo just mentioned, I still don't have site control for that RFP that was taken apart. All right. With $130,000 invested you can't finance a project without site control, right. So you're constantly going through hoops. To pay for architecture plans before you have site control and then be told that you have to do it again because of a City error, all right, you can't ever get to actually financing a deal if you don't have site control.

The system as I said is

opaque. There's no consistent follow-through. People are treated differently depending on their relationship or access and it's virtually impossible for small businesses to engage and attempting to do holistic real estate development or real estate development that has a positive impact on community with the system as it stands now.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much to all of you.

Will the Clerk please call our last panel to testify.

THE CLERK: Jessie Lawrence and Angel Rodriguez.

(Witnesses approached Witness table.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Good afternoon, Jessie.

MR. LAWRENCE: Good afternoon, Councilwoman.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: I

think this is your second week in your job?

MR. LAWRENCE: This is my third day at the job.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Your third week, okay. Wonderful.

MR. LAWRENCE: No, third day.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you for being here. I know you're still getting up to speed, but we also know that you have a really long history with the Land Bank and that you know a lot about this topic. So please summarize your testimony. I'm going to ask that both of you take three minutes to summarize so that we can get to questions and discussion.

MR. LAWRENCE: Roger that. Good afternoon, Chairperson Gauthier and Lozada and members of the Joint Committee on Housing, Neighborhood Development and The

Homeless and Public Property and Public Works. My name is Jessie Lawrence and I currently serve as the new Director of Planning and Development for the City of Philadelphia.

I'm here today to testify on Resolution No. 240288. Before I get into my testimony, I want to thank and acknowledge everyone and thank the Parker Administration, thank City Council, thank the Joint Committees for their regard and their attention toward housing needs, stabilizing communities and efforts to review and improve the systems that provide such.

Prior to holding my current position, I served as the Parker Administration's Associate Deputy Mayor for Planning and Strategic Initiatives. And prior to that, the Director of Real Estate for the Philadelphia Housing

Development Corporation.

My testimony comes from my hands-on experience as one who has worked directly with the current Administration as well as a former staffer working in the queue of the Philadelphia Land Bank. As you know, the Park Administration envisions a Philadelphia that is safer, cleaner and greener with economic opportunity for all. Housing has been, remains and always will be essential to that economic opportunity and generational wealth-building.

One of the many but crucial goals of the Administration is a forthcoming housing plan that aims to increase access to housing for both renters and homeowners, ensuring vibrant and equitable communities all while helping build intergenerational wealth. Working- and middle-class neighborhoods are

an important piece of that population of this city and our communities will thrive best where affordable housing opportunities can be accessed.

In pledging to enable increased housing production and preservation that will support homeowners and renters at all income levels, the Administration is charged with the Department of Planning and Development with the responsibility of leading four housing initiatives. These include the creation of one front door, creating a clear definition of affordable luxury, developing a Housing Appraisal Task Force and, more importantly, here the comprehensive review of the Land Bank to enable a much swifter return of vacant and tax delinquent properties to productive use.

To date this review has

been formalized through many meetings, conversations and discussions between several public and private stakeholders that are part of the disposition process. The ensuing announcement of new Land Bank Board members soon after that review started was a major step taken by the Administration as part of the Land Bank's top-to-bottom review.

Given the interdepartmental cooperation needed for the Land Bank to thrive, the Administration is committed to taking steps deemed necessary for the Land Bank's success. The Department of Planning and Development remains at the center of leading this effort. But fundamentally, the review and streamlining process must remain a collaborative partnership amongst the Administration, City Council,

the nonprofit sector and the developer community.

This approach will be most vital to any uniform strategic plan that this process yields. I truly thank you for the opportunity to testify on Resolution No. 240288, and I'm happy to help answer any questions that you may have.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much for your testimony.

Good afternoon, Angel.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Good afternoon, Councilwoman.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Thank you. My name is Angel Rodriguez. I am the Executive Director of the Philadelphia Land Bank. Good morning, Chairpersons Gauthier and

Lozada and members of the Joint Committee on Housing, Neighborhood Development and Homeless and Public Property and Public Works. I'm here to testify on Resolution No. 240288.

The Land Bank and the Administration recognize and acknowledge the impact of having an effective and high-performing Land Bank. The Administration in its first days launched a formal review of the Land Bank to identify and develop policies and processes that will expedite the return of vacant and tax-delinquent properties to productive use.

To date preliminary meetings have been had with CDCs, minority developers, community garden advocates, related agencies such as L&I, Zoning Board, Water Department and Planning and Development. From these preliminary meetings, the Administration has

appointed and Council announcing new appointments to the Land Bank Board. Also, new legislation Bill No. 240187 was introduced in City Council on behalf of the Administration related to the Land Bank's priority bid.

Currently the Land Bank and the Sheriff's Department are working out operational issues for the Land Bank to return to exercise its priority bid at sheriff's sales. Also, the Land Bank has developed a curriculum for CDC boot camp. And we held our first boot camp for CDCs in July of '24.

The Administration is also working on formal changes to the Land Bank disposition policy. The Department of Planning and Development will be reissuing requests for qualifications for drafting a uniform strategic plan and hosting public hearings.

The Land Bank has enhanced its existing efforts to engage more minority developers to the Minority Developer Program partnering with Urban Developers association and Black Squirrel, Philly Rise and the Collective. To date 235 units of affordable housing have received Land Bank Board and City Council approval with an additional 126 units moving through the approval process. That is a total of 364 units of affordable housing being developed under the Parker Administration by certified MBE and WBE firms.

Year over year the Land Bank has made progress disposing of parcels for development of affordable housing despite experiencing operational challenges through the four years of the global COVID-19 pandemic. From 2017 to 2024, the Land Bank has approved the

development of 826 units of housing.

748 are for affordable housing. 268 units were 50 percent of AMI and below. 309 for 80 percent, and 171 at or below 120 percent of AMI. In 2023 and '24 the Land Bank undertook working on the Turn the Key program. To date we have approved the development of 901 affordable housing units across seven Council Districts as part of the Turn the Key program.

460 units or 64 percent of housing units are either complete or under construction. Currently we've sold 123 units. We have 29 homes under agreement and 52 are sold to City of Philadelphia employees. Just to give a better idea of what we're talking about, Turn the Key homes before grants and buy-downs, they're typically sold for 280.

At the closing table

homebuyers are looking at $183,000 with an interest rate of about 6.6 percent. The typical mortgage is about 1361 --

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Can you take maybe 30 seconds and summarize?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Sure. Just to give a better understanding, a typical homebuyer's annual income of $45,000, 59 percent of Area Median Income and they all receive at least six hours of housing counseling. Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much for your testimony.

I want to start with a few questions for Jessie. Since Planning and Development is a City umbrella agency for the Land Bank, it is referenced in the code multiple times as the department that is required to create both

strategic plans and performance reports on its behalf.

These documents with set goals evaluate success and provide a level of transparency into Land Bank operations that frankly hasn't been there since it was created. In practice DPD has produced neither a strategic plan nor the annual performance reports. Will you commit today to hiring a strategic planning consultant and submitting your first performance report to Council by the end of the year?

MR. LAWRENCE: That is the absolute intent of this Administration to commission a strategic planning process and our target is to provide a report by the end of the year.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: All right. That's really good. Thank you for that.

I know that Mayor Parker has cared about the effective administration of sheriff's sale since her time on City Council. It seems like there are two things holding the Land Bank back on this front currently. One is the multi-agency MOU that requires the Land Bank to pay up to the OPA-assessed value for any property it wants to acquire.

The other is compelling the Sheriff's Office to allow the Land Bank to exercise its new priority bid process, which was approved by Council in June and still hasn't been put to use yet. To your knowledge, has Mayor Parker considered getting involved in either of these negotiations to change the Land Bank from a worst practice to a best practice when it comes to acquiring new properties?

MR. LAWRENCE: So what

we've learned in even initiating that process is that there are some intricacies that the Land Bank is much more familiar with. There is a series of processes that historically have been in place for in-person sales but might not necessarily be conducive to the new method of going about these. But I will defer to my colleague to my left to speak to the status of those discussions at this point.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: I think my question for you was given the length of these discussions, to your knowledge is the Mayor considering getting involved to negotiate on either of these items so that we can move things faster and acquire the properties that we need?

MR. LAWRENCE: I can't confirm the Mayor's position on that at this moment.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Thank you.

Did you want to add something?

MR. RODRIGUEZ:

Certainly. To date because of the new legislation that allows the Land Bank to exercise its priority bid with new standards for notification, that issue has been taken off the table. Currently right now what we're looking at is the agreement that the Sheriff's Department has with bid for assets.

There are a series of fees and schedules that are attached to that. Our issue is to, you know, have it streamlined so that the Land Bank is exercising it as an agent on the City's behalf to acquire properties. Right now what we're doing is -- and just as a footnote, City Law is involved with this and so is the Revenue Department in

these negotiations. So at this point we're fine-tuning what that agreement is and how the Land Bank would utilize that new platform to start acquiring properties.

In the interim we have been working with all the servicers, the City Linebarger and GRB to put all properties on hold that have been identified for acquisition, so we're trying to push that out so that we don't lose those properties.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Can you expound on what has been taken off the table? I'm sorry. I didn't understand that.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, there's one issue of the priority bid, does the Land Bank have a priority bid based on the Supreme Court decision. So with working with the City Law Department we've come up with a solution. That bill was introduced and passed, so

therefore in that Supreme Court decision it was about notice.

So at this point under the new legislation that was passed, additional notice is made to property owners of the property going to sheriff's sale but also that the Land Bank has determined to exercise its priority bid affording them an opportunity to notice the Land Bank and then have that pulled from that priority bid.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: In your estimation what is the timeline in which we will be able to use our priority bid again at sheriff's sales to acquire properties?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Optimistically I'm hoping by the end of this year.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: By the end of the year?

MR. MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yeah.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Thank you. I would say if we are not able to figure this out by the end of the year on a policy that we've had since June, we should consider bringing in a third party to see what the problem is.

Back to Jessie. You, yourself, have seen the inside of the Land Bank up close and personal for many years. What are a couple of things that you would change and what would you start with first?

MR. LAWRENCE: Well, I think that today was helpful in seeing that folks do understand how collaborative and how much of an interdependency there is amongst the agencies. What I have seen and what I still can see is that there is a need to look at how we do communicate steps to different constituencies.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Okay.

MR. LAWRENCE: I understand that what I've certainly been a part of and still do understand to be the key factors that the Land Bank operates within a certain series or bound of policies and regulations, and that might not always match how people receive information nor how people expect to do business with the Land Bank. But this conversation is particularly important because it highlights what the reception is on the outside, whether it's the nonprofit community, development community, constituents that are just looking for side yards.

I think one of the things that the Administration is taking the lead on in its top-to-bottom review in addition to repositioning the Board, we are looking at what that front page of the Land Bank

looks like, understanding that the website it is important, how people understand what is available and what is not is important.

So I think that we're clear on the fact that the Land Bank itself needs to live in something separately online than it does under PHDC's page, and that is a process that we have begun to start collaboratively with not just the IT folks here in the City of Philadelphia but to the Land Bank staff themselves.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much.

Vice-Chair -- I mean, Co-Chair Lozada.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: I want to move my attention a little bit to the garden space conversation only because we heard earlier or you heard earlier that my family experienced some challenges. And,

Angel, you and I have had conversations about this garden space and my frustrations around it.

We heard earlier that people have been applying for green spaces that they've been taking care of for many, many years. And we've seen that the most that we can dispose of land related to gardens is maybe three, four a year. Can you tell me what is the hold up? Why can't we move green spaces that we know people have been taking care of for many, many years often times investing money out of their own pockets to make sure that their neighborhoods, that their communities, that their blocks are safer? Why can't we dispose of that land much faster and how, what do we need to do to be able to change whatever is holding that up in the process?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: So I

think what I'll do is lead off with quoting Minority Leader Brooks. We can't lump in green space and open space. There's the side yard issue and then there's the garden issue. And underneath all of that is the legislation that was changed in 2020.

So you have gardens on a larger scale where you have nonprofits such as NGT looking for contiguous gardens or large garden spaces and then you have individuals who are looking for gardens or open space that's across the street, right, and they're individuals, they're not nonprofits.

In the legislation it states that a nonprofit is only qualified to get a garden. That's --

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: I'm talking about garden space for a resident, not a nonprofit. I want

to talk about a resident --

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I'm talking about --

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: -- that has applied for a garden space, because I came in 2008. I still have people back from when I was Chief of Staff who applied for a garden space, had an urban gardening agreement, now don't have an agreement. We're in VPRC. Now, we're not in VPRC. Didn't know that they were in VPRC, didn't know that they had to reapply. And now, they reapplied and still don't have land. So I'm trying to figure out what is the hold-up in the process.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: That's what I'm trying to identify.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: Break down the techni -- don't give it to me in technical terms. I want to know the why.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: The issue

is the legislation states if you try to acquire a garden, you have to be a nonprofit. Individuals are not nonprofits. So you have to be a nonprofit to apply for a garden. We no longer do individual garden agreements because of the insurance issues. We are not self-insured like the City and there are limited number of insurance brokers.

Over the past four years, the number of brokers that were or I should say insurance companies that will deal with a Land Bank or PRA that have or -- well, the City is self-insured -- there are limited numbers of insurance companies that will insure us year-over-year because we have vacant surplus property at such a level so they're looking at it from a risk management position.

They will not -- we would not be allowed to do individual

garden agreements, right. That was the tool that VPRC utilized and that was initially prior to a change in our insurance coverage, so that option was gone. So side yards, which is another way for people to acquire open space, requires adjacency.

It means that a homeowner has to own and occupy that property and that parcel has to be adjacent to their house either on the side or the rear. So if you're not adjacent, then you don't qualify. So that's a matter of the legislation and the Code. So if you live across the street, you don't qualify to get it. You can become a nonprofit, but that's a high bar for an individual as what you're talking about. So the way it's written there's no space for that person to acquire that property.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: So

why is it taking so long for -- what was the young woman, the lady who testified here that manages a bunch of different garden spaces for residents. Why has it taken them so long, they're a nonprofit, they're trying to help folks manage their space and they're still in the same bottleneck that everybody else is in?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: So several years ago NGT was attempting to acquire three large gardens. There was an issue where in the previous Administration two things happened. 2020 legislation changed, right. It was conditional language. It was a declaration restrictive covenant or you could put a 30-year mortgage on it. There was an executive order -- oh, really. I've never heard that before. Okay. Can everybody hear me now?

(Yes.)

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Previous Administration issued an executive order which required us to be able to revest the properties. In talking to -- and let me just put a a fundamental piece. The Land Bank, because of the pandemic we have not acquired any new land through the sheriff's sale, right. So the vast majority of how we acquire our land is through deed transfers. So executive orders directed to the Department of Public Property and all other landholding agencies was issued.

It stated that we had to do other safeguards to be able to revest the property should there be a default. In talking to the multiple legal departments, it was determined that a mortgage had to be attached, and that's where we're at. So then the mortgage came up and then there was an issue where the

garden group was advocating that they did not want the mortgage and that's where the negotiations have been happening.

Recently at I believe the last PRA Board meeting those properties have finally gone through. And Land Bank has followed suit. We have uniform documentation now across the board so we hope to be moving those out, new agreements. But part of the issue in the chain of title is that those terms have to be through the chain of title. So each agency has to -- whoever the disposing agency is has to comply with that and make sure that we meet those pieces. So really what I'm doing is negotiating between three fundamentally different departments to make sure that we all have the same documentation.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you.

I have a question for Jessie and then a few more for you, Angel.

Jessie, your testimony references a housing plan that is forthcoming from the Administration. When can we expect to see that and what role does the Land Bank play in achieving those goals?

MR. LAWRENCE: So right now we're expecting something early next year at this point to roll out. The Land Bank is crucial to that because the Land Bank represents -- well, I mean its existence represents the public ownership of land here in Philadelphia. The inventory itself that is publicly owned isn't the end-all be-all for where units will be built in that plan. But it's crucial to -- the Land Bank's crucial to that particular effort because it will -- the betterment of the Land Bank is

crucial to that because that process of getting land out of publicly-owned inventory into the private sector is crucial to fulfill that 30,000 unit effort.

So for the sake of, you know, we're trying to target multiple different affordability bans, low-income, middle-income working, workforce housing and even some transitional housing, supportive housing. We're looking at all opportunities, affordable homeownership, rental preservation. Again, the Land Bank being the conduit for publicly-owned land coming out of the public inventory, it needs to be better for that to be happening at a very expedient effort.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you.

This is for Angel. The PHDC website says that the Land

Bank's mission is to return vacant and underutilized publicly-owned property to productive use and thereby to assist in revitalizing neighborhoods, creating socially and economically diverse communities and strengthening the City's tax base. Can you speak to the concrete ways that you're delivering on this mission? And how do you measure your success in the absence of a strategic plan?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Good question. I think in some ways we are fulfilling that mission. In some ways we are not. I think with the fundamental legislative changes that were in 2020 it's pretty much stipulated what we have to consider to dispose of land, so we end up being 50 percent compliance-oriented and then 50 percent we are advocating for disposition of land. So there are multiple hands in this

and then negotiating trying to transfer properties into the Land Bank for disposition. So first, we have to get the person qualified and then move it through the approval process.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: What metrics do you use to determine the success of the Land Bank and if you're delivering on the mission?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: What we've relied on is extrapolating from the previous strategic plan. I will be the first to state that we do need a new plan.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: What particular metrics do you use?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: There were housing categories and categories such as side yards, open space business expansion, housing, housing in different levels, 30 percent to 60 percent of AMI, 60 to 80 percent of AMI, 100 to 120

percent of AMI.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Thank you.

The Parker Administration has been very clear that their goal for government is one that Philadelphians can see, touch and feel in terms of customer service. We've heard a lot of testimony today that speaks to the agency's struggles to offer responsive customer service, particularly related to long delays and response times.

What does your data say about the average length of time it takes for a nonprofit or community-based application to get from the application submission to Board review?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: It depends on the type of application we get from a nonprofit. If it is for low-income housing tax credit

projects, the review is one such as -- we understand what you're trying to build, we understand where you're trying to build it, do we own the property, can we issue a reservation letter, but it is not one where we're going to transfer title, in which case there is no -- it's more of a project review. It's a conversation with the Council office and then as long as we're all on the same page, a reservation letter is released, that's relatively fast in which case obviously we're following a clock and a timeline set by the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency or Division of Housing Community Development for fundraising or the Federal Home Loan Bank system as how nonprofits receive their money. So we will issue those reservation letters. That's not really a full-throated disposition.

I will tell you that typically that happens within two to three months of getting an application and then it's more conversations with that respective Council District office.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: So are you saying that the average time for a nonprofit or community-based application is two to three months from application submission to Board review?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: For a low-income housing tax credit project. If the application -- and I think this is something that was mentioned in the previous disposition where we're looking for deeper affordability where they're not using tax credits, but the nonprofit is -- I mean, let me just put this out there.

There's a fundamental problem for nonprofits to compete

with commercial financing or the timing of certain properties or developments if you're talking about homeownership projects, endfill homeownership projects. There are not a lot of options for nonprofits to bridge that gap on the equity side. So you need equity and then you need debt financing.

So typically because the Land Bank does not provide subsidy most of those applications are reviewed fairly quickly, but they are unfortunately rejected because there are not a lot of options for nonprofits to fill that gap.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: What do you think about some of the testimony that you've heard today about how long it's taking people's applications to move through the process?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I think in some cases I agree with others.

I think there are a little bit more details that are not offered in their testimony.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: What details would you like to offer?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think there are certain issues where there was one about acquiring a property. Again, there's a legislative piece about adjacency as I mentioned before. It's required that you have to own and occupy your property so you have to consolidate lots. So if you acquired on the VPRC process, which I will say we don't have it anymore because there was such a low threshold of compliance and oversight. I think we should all pay attention to the article that just was published on Monday about somebody who received VPRC properties where they flipped that property.

Now, it's a little bit more difficult. The disposition policy requires adjacency so you also have to be owner-occupied, so you have to consolidate that lot and then you would be considered to do that. That again is a high threshold. It's a lot of effort for a single family homeowner to do. So some of those things are a little bit of details.

I think also that we get confused with PRA's process. So PRA is subject to urban renewal law and it's a lot more involved to get properties out. But again, under the last Administration there was one, you know, the marketing was this one front door, so everything lands at the Land Bank.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Co-Chair Lozada.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: I just want to follow up on a question

that the Councilmember just asked. We've heard today about a lot of the challenges that people, developers and community residents, gardeners all experience when dealing with the Land Bank and trying to get disposition of land and you've done this for many years.

If you were to be able to share or would you be able to share three very quick recommendations that you believe would change the process and make it more effective, more transparent and fairer to be able to get this land into the hands of folks that have been taking care of it or that have applied for it, what would those three things be very quickly?

MR. LAWRENCE: Well, I mean I think that one of the first things we need to look at is this disposition policy. I want to be very clear again that the Land Bank

does business within a certain box of allowances. In my time at the Land Bank I spent a lot of time explaining to people how that was a legislated process. I couldn't redo the order of operations that the disposition policy spelled out --

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: Did you just say the legislative process?

MR. LAWRENCE: I couldn't redo the legislative process that's associated with creating the disposition policy. The disposition policy is legislated. So there's just a bound that we just could not change. And I don't think that -- I think we heard it earlier that there's an opportunity to look at that policy, how we can make that more conducive to current market trends at this point.

It was created in a time pre-COVID. You know, it was

enacted, brought into law pre-COVID, but it was conceived of in years before that. So I think that we live in a different world right now. I think we recognized that in earlier comments. And I think it is an opportunity to look at that.

With that said, as we're looking at the housing policies I think that we also need to look at ways that -- when it comes to the interdependency amongst departments there are certain steps that are spelled out. How we look at interagency transfers, that's another thing that I think is a key component to how expedient land comes out of the inventory.

And then again, I spoke on it earlier I think our website needs to be updated. I really think that the Land Bank needs to be able to market itself as something that lives -- the entity itself lives

separately from PHDC even though it's staffed by PHDC. The order of operations that create the Land Bank are different from PRA. It's not the same process, so folks come in with an understanding of something being one way or properties being available to a certain extent. I think that we need to be very upfront and very clear about what's in our inventory, what's available and what process is subject to and who exactly or where exactly the Land Bank falls into that process.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: I think one of the most frustrating responses I get, and I get this often from talking to Angel and some of the staff there, is that it's always about the legislative -- it's always about the ordinance. It's the ordinance. You guys fix the ordinance and you're going to make this process better. When what we

really should be talking about is our customer service to community residents. There needs to be a better process --

(Applause.)

MR. LAWRENCE: Oh, absolutely.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA: There needs to be better communication. There needs to be a more transparent process. There needs to be better communication, better follow-up and, quite frankly, more support in order to be able to keep some of this land in the hands of or put this land in the hands of people that are going to create real affordable projects, number one, or be able to maintain some of these garden spaces that they've been taking care of.

People just want a more fair process. People want the same process that you give to others who

are closer to folks in Land Bank than they are, right. And so, let's start thinking about that.

MR. LAWRENCE:

Understood.

COUNCILWOMAN LOZADA:

There is a real problem here with how we communicate with everyday residents who are just trying to figure out how to protect the land that's beside them in order to keep their neighborhood safe when you compare it to others who have better access than the (inaudible) Eddies from the block and a private developer, right.

And so, I think that people are just looking for a solution or a commitment from Land Bank on a more fair transparent process and in writing and just follow-up. That's all people are asking for.

MR. LAWRENCE:

Understood. Understood.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Vice-Chair Landau.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:

Thank you so much. Thank you for being here. It's my first time in this capacity talking to you --

MR. LAWRENCE: Same.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:

Right, exactly. Thank you, Jessie. I appreciate your willingness to hear our constructive feedback to hear the constructive feedback from folks who have been engaging with the Land Bank or attempting to engage with the Land Bank and to hear it in a way that there might be recommendations for a positive change.

I oversaw two City agencies for 12 years and a transition plan report was not glowing when I got there. And so, there was a lot of change that had

to be made and it's hard, but it's really important to hear the feedback because these are the real folks that we're working with on the ground. So appreciate that very much.

I wanted to talk about a couple of things. I'm the Chair of the Tech Committee. And so, I've really been hearing everybody's suggestion of creating an online system similar to eCLIPSE similar to 311, something that would help track the process and wanting to know what your thoughts are on that?

MR. LAWRENCE: Well, I mean I'll be brief. I think that we're embarking on that process and that conversation, like what I said earlier, it's an all-inclusive conversation. We know what we want to do, what we want to accomplish. We know that we need to be better on delivering information as far as

steps in the process and also the availability of assets. But that conversation is, I promise you it'll be a comprehensive conversation. It will utilize the City's IT Department which has already began to think about or look at precedence from across the country about how other folks actually market out the Land Bank. But that process will be informed by all the things that we kind of have saw that worked and have not worked. This particular session is a crucial component to that conversation understanding that whatever we do and however we refine anything it needs to be all inclusive of any kind of stakeholder input. But we are going to utilize a very talented IT team that we have here to make sure that we deliver something that is reflective of our ability to do business in a way that's efficient.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:

Okay. And just to be clear about what you do now so, Angel, a question: Do you utilize a case management system internally now?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: For home sales we do. We have several databases. And I think to your point that you were asking about on the technical side there's the front-facing user experience, so how does that work. I know that since the Land Bank was started the conversation was about how do you realtime track your application.

So with a lot of people, and I'm assuming you do understand this, if you have multiple databases are they talking to one another.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:

Yes.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Who are the users of those databases. We have one major database that several

City agencies utilize, can we move that, change that database. Then we have a customer service database that deals with home buyers and developers. We also have one that was created internally for sheriff's sales, so where is this all going to reside. And then the conversation with OIT is where does it reside, behind what firewall.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: Right.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: And how will people do that and also how will we be also compliant with the open data requests that happen. So those are all issues that come in there. Right now I have four databases.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: Okay. That's a lot, four databases. But I just want to ask a very specific question then. When I went to my City agencies, a very

antiquated database and it took me nine years to get something newer, but what we could see even from the old one or the new one was the last action taken by staff. Are you able to see that in a way?

And that's a question, but I also want to leave a comment with you, that one thing you might want to do is your own internal review. I heard a lot today about people saying they've been waiting for years, they never had any communication, they don't know the status of their application. You could see the touchpoints of are the staff calling people and saying it's been three months here's where you are, it's been six months here's where you are. Anything like that you could kind of do your own internal audit first to see where you're seeing maybe some changes that can be made now even before you

get to the larger database.

MR. RODRIGUEZ:

Definitely. We know we have not done that internal audit so if that's the question.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: Do you know if you keep that information? When was the last time -- when I had a staff person who called a complainant or respondent, they noted it. Do you track it?

MR. RODRIGUEZ:

Unfortunately it's not in the database, but we do track it, yes.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: I would say that would be Step 1 because I think that's really helpful. And then the last thing I wanted to say for now is that I heard that you want to make the land disposition policies and processes good for all levels of income. You talked about low income, moderate

income, working, however you want to categorize the income levels going forward.

I would suggest that what I've learned through my career and my time here on Council already is that the large companies that do create affordable housing, meaning "affordable," the higher level affordable housing, they are likely going to do it anyway. They're making a profit on it. We're glad they're filling that lane. Somebody has to do that. I am so happy that they're doing that.

But what the City has the possibility of doing is filling the void that nobody else is touching the lowest-income housing, making sure it's accessible housing for people with disabilities, making sure that we focus our Housing Trust Fund money, our Land Bank money. All the things to our lowest-income

folks and taking care of them because I think the rest of it's going to be taken care of and everyone will be happy --

MR. LAWRENCE: We wholeheartedly agree with you. Part of our, you know, as we're preparing a comprehensive housing plan, part of that involves us looking at where the barriers are and that type of thing. So we are looking at and assessing why it's so hard to produce those types of applications and not just to the Land Bank, but to the state level and federal level to be able to apply for those funding components. But I hear you loud and clear, welcome the feedback and would definitely consider it or am considering it going forward.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: Excellent. Thank you very much.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: I wonder if some of the issues that

we've been hearing about are a question of not enough staff. How many clerks, project managers and attorneys does the Land Bank have on staff and how does this compare to how many staff were processing vacant land applications pre-2020?

I'm trying to see if the reason that things might not be moving so fast is because we cut a lot of staffing. Also, could you talk about the last time you've done a comprehensive review of how many staff we have and how many staff we need?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: So I'll start with the last question first. We have been level funded since the creation of the Land Bank and the same staffing complement, so we have begun the new budget process and we are looking for that. If you're asking me what we need in terms of this upcoming budget, I need more

attorneys, I need paralegals. Also, I need more money for property management, also external legal services and an updated website which is going to cost money. I think those are the big issues that we have.

I've had the same number of clerks. All of these are bargain positions. And so, I have five clerks. I have five project managers. They're carrying about 30 projects per person. And I think my biggest concern really is on the legal side because our legal team is stretched and we end up doing a lot of work. Real estate disposition is a legal process and without that contract and without that deed transfer, everything gets held up. So I can issue a contract, but if I don't own the property yet I can't take you to settlement.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:

Real quick, are these in addition -- do you have vacancies right now or you need additional staff?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I have one vacancy for a project manager, one vacancy for a real estate director and that's really -- the new positions would be an additional attorney and paralegal.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Did you all come to Council to ask for more staffing resources in the last budget process? I don't remember having that conversation.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: No, we did not. Part of the issue, and you have to understand the last four years from the pandemic, there's the allocation towards the Land Bank, right, and also what the volume is. So I fully agree. You know, I understand what the Councilwoman said about Turn the Key.

Turn the Key ramped up in

2023 where you saw that spike. We started in 2022, so the staffing hasn't really, you know, there hasn't really been a need. And also through the pandemic there hasn't really been a need, and that's evidenced by the numbers in terms of everybody was dealing with operational issues on that set.

Typically, and also I think prior to getting the surge of federal dollars, there was no conversation about increasing the budget primarily. And just to clarify this, I want to be very clear, we typically get $3 million for operating funds. That's staff, health benefits and all that and legal fees and all that, and then we get 3.5 million in terms of acquisition, and that's to operate in the sheriff's sale.

So if you've already been allocated 6.5 but you know you're

not going to have a sheriff's sale, you just reallocate. So there hasn't been really a need to ask for more money on the operational side.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: If those staffing needs are not in your testimony, can you get that information to Council?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: We're in the process of putting together our new budget for 2026.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you. Two last questions from me and then we'll see if there are any -- then we can move on to public comment.

These questions are for Angel: Your written testimony says that the Administration is working on formal changes to the Land Bank's disposition policy. What are the changes being discussed and how will it be updating the policy document?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Talk

specifics.

MR. LAWRENCE: Well, I can't provide any specifics right now. But what I've gathered here is that there is a clear kind of -- there is a threshold review that has kind of been uniformly applied and it just might not be able to be met at certain levels. And I think that, one, looking at what a qualified application is for certain things is probably where we should start, but that is the extent that we've even thought about that. But it's a matter of just -- a lot of people when they apply for things my understanding is that they go for what makes sense and what makes sense isn't always compliant with the disposition policy. So it's trying to find where those disconnects present themselves.

I do understand again funding, the need to represent the

access to that is something else. Maybe there are ways we can think about how we look at that, but there are things that we've thought about on the front end. It would be more refined as we go forward though in our thinking.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: What's your timeline and how will you involve various stakeholders in that process?

MR. LAWRENCE: So I think that again this is all kind of in tandem and parallel with whatever housing plan we produce and we're looking at again how we can do overall policy reforms. So if that means that we need to figure out how to be able to -- where there might be possible ways to position folks to be able to qualify in ways that they have not been able to qualify in the past, that's an opportunity. But that's over the next few months

or so as we work on policy reform and things when it comes to the forthcoming housing plan.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you.

My last question is for you, Angel, as the Executive Director of the Land Bank. With all that we've heard at the hearing today, what do you think is the answer to these problems and what do you think has to happen with the Land Bank for us to be able to do the variety of things that we need to do, not just Turn the Key, but more deeply affordable housing, garden dispositions, all the things that we need to have successful and thriving neighborhoods? How do we do multiple things instead of just one?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I think more importantly having a clear communication plan that is the Land

Bank's communication plan and targeted education and communication about the process as it stands today. I think the other issue, I think we already have that formula to improve things.

I think if you're talking about affordable housing, and we started that with the CDC boot camp. But when we started addressing how do we increase the number of MBE or Black and Brown developers in the city, we understood what those choke points were, where the weak spots were and we strategically went after that try to get all those negative spots taken care of. I think we need to do that when we approach looking at a deeper level of affordable housing. It's a different type of development, requires a different type of pro forma, different type of subsidy whereas what we're doing with Turn

the Key requires no subsidy. It's all about leverage.

We're discounting land and we're bringing in money from private capital markets so it's a leverage thing. We're just really maximizing the one asset we have at the Land Bank because we don't have money to give out. On the other hand if we're trying to do deeper affordability, that's a different piece depending on what different models and what you're looking at. So those are the two things I would focus on, right now is just really what's our marketing plan and getting out there and doing more communication and education, and then staffing and tracking.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you to both of you for your time and your testimony. We look forward to continuing to work with you both on these issues. We look

forward to a strategic plan by the end of the year and having our priority bid back in place by then as well, and just thank you.

Is there anyone else here to testify on the resolution?

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: Angel, real quick before you leave, I saw you had a community event at the bottom of your testimony. Can you announce that?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yeah.

COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: I can't find it. Announce it please.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: So this Saturday we are having a housing fair. And this will be from 12:00 to 3:00 p.m. at Deliverance Evangelistic Church at 2001 West Lehigh Avenue. We have about 1300 people already committed to showing up. So as you heard testimony today, a lot of people don't believe

they can buy a house. Yes, you can. We invite you to come out and see what services we offer. It's not just about Turn the Key. But PHDC does have a litany of projects and programs that can assist people staying in their homes and also improving their quality of life in their home such as BSRP, Adaptive Modification, Restore, Repair, Renew and those types of programs. So if you really want to, you know, there's a lot of services in the City and we are more than happy to share with you this Saturday.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Thanks so much.

THE CLERK:

Councilmembers, our first five speakers for public comment are Erika Rosario, Mandy Katz, Andy Sweizer, Elizabeth Waring and Adam Hill, please step up to the podium.

(Witnesses approached

Witness table.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Good afternoon. Please state your name for the record and proceed with your comment.

MS. ROSARIO: Good afternoon, Councilmembers of the Housing Committee. Thank you for allowing me to testify on Resolution 240288 on the performance of the Land Bank. My name is Erika Rosario, partner of Rosario States, a minority development company that has dealt with the Land Bank over the last year.

First, I would like to commend the Land Bank for its commitment to making vacant and abandoned properties available for redevelopment. My company has successfully navigated the acquisition process which has allowed us to invest in and revitalize neighborhoods. This has

not only improved the aesthetic appeal of the areas we work and live in but also has created jobs and provide affordable housing for residents.

My experience with the Land Bank has been mostly successful. I had (inaudible) as my project manager for PHDC who reviews some of the applications. Unfortunately, I was declined twice. But of course with their help I was able to get through that process of understanding how to fill that application.

Since the beginning of the process as a minority developer we have been supported tremendously and have had the opportunity to be mentored through some of the process. If you drive around the city where these homes have been developed, you will see the change of our neighborhoods, less illegal

dumping, cleaner streets.

As a minority developer who lives in the community, we know what our community wants and we should be the ones continuing to build them. As a minority-owned business, I appreciate the Land Bank's effort to promote diversity and development and changing the current policies will decrease the opportunities to better our communities. Keeping the current policies by having additional resources and program specifically tailored for minority developers could further help the playing field and ensure the diverse voices are included in our neighborhoods.

In conclusion, I hope you continue giving minority developers the opportunity to build homes for our own community. I, Erika Rosario, a minority woman, a Hispanic woman and developer will

continue pushing for our community to have more affordable housing. Let's decrease gentrification in our neighborhoods. As a woman who lives in West Kensington, I'm tired of seeing drugs on the floor. I'm tired of my own properties being dumped on.

I'm tired of calling 311 and I feel like we should all be working together to build these homes versus having random drugs on the floor, trash and then random cars parked on these empty lots. Let's build homes for our community and our people. And that's that.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much for your comment.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your comment.

MS. WARING: Good afternoon, Council. My name is

Elizabeth Waring and I'm the steward for the Holly Street Neighbors Community Garden in West Philadelphia. So the process with acquisition, started back in 2016 and it is now 2024 and we are in the same position. And even though it's a complicated four lots that comprise this garden, I don't understand why it's taking so long.

Councilwoman Blackwell at Winnie Harris', who started a garden, demise said that the parcels would always be a community garden which hasn't happened. It has been vandalized by one developer who wanted it. That has been resold. It has been vandalized by a contractor working next door to the property. We do a very good job, the gardeners, some neighbors, a lot of volunteers, in maintaining the garden. We refuse to accept that it's not going to be a community

garden. Okay.

THE CLERK: If you could just wrap up your comment in the next 30 seconds please.

MS. WARING: We're in desperate need of water supply. Okay. And there was a water bill that came for one of those lots from the Water Department of course by way of the Land Bank. However, there's no water on that. It's just an empty parcel. So we need water. Hopefully yesterday was the last time for us filling up two barrels. It's nearing the end of the season and we just hope the process is done soon. Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you, Ms. Elizabeth.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your comment.

MS. KATZ: Good afternoon. My name is Mandy Katz on

behalf of the Viola Street Community Garden, which was started by my neighbors over 50 years ago in East Parkside which was subjected to deep disinvestment by the City. The neighbors worked together to create a garden in the abandoned lots that were spreading like wildfire.

For decades without any support from the City they took care of the land and each other and turned what would have been a source of blight into something that stabilized and fortified their community. They brought fresh produce into a zone of food apartheid, making a difference in countless lives through the years.

I moved to the block in 2012 drawn by this legacy of gardening. Around 2014 the gardeners were shocked to see notices on our fence from the Public Interest Law Center that our lots

were threatened. The upswing of interest by big private developers in transforming East Parkside had reached our garden and we were very afraid we would lose our beloved garden.

We reached out to the Neighborhood Garden Trust in 2014 and have been working with them for the past 10 years trying to stabilize the land. They have done much to support us and have worked very hard to procure the lots, but there have been many obstacles along the way.

Beginning in 2020 when Councilperson Gauthier took office she finally approved NGT's efforts to acquire those lots, so our lots from 4200 to 4204 Viola Street were then approved by City Council and are currently owned by the Department of Public Properties, but they still haven't gone into the

Land Bank to go to settlement and are inexplicably caught in what remains an impossibly clunky and mysterious process.

So the lots, though approved by City Council for NGT for years, remained threatened as far as we know. Once we knew that NGT would work to obtain our original lots we knew we had to act quickly to acquire the lots directly to the south of the garden as well. With the intense development pressure if someone were to build up on those lots, we knew it would end our garden blocking out the sun and our access to trucked-in compost and other materials. NGT has moved swiftly to acquire those lots as well.

One of the lots, 4203 Leidy has a US Bank lien, and we are tremendously grateful to the City for purchasing back the liens, and

need to stress the urgency for the Land Bank to act quickly to acquire these US Bank lien properties as soon as possible before they to get snatched up by a developer displacing our way of life. Thank you so much.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your comment.

MR. HILL: Thank you. My name is Adam Hill and I'm the Director of Community Gardens in Horticulture at the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. I've been working in urban ag in Philly for the last 15 years, and I definitely echo everything all the gardeners have said today. But I also want to talk a little bit about our Green Center in Strawberry Mansion, which

we've been working actively since 2013 with the community to develop as well as the community garden there. And this is a really unique space that offers a lot of space for community gardens to come together and gather and grow food together but also provides resources for growers across the city.

So we have the Green (inaudible) Center. There is a greenhouse and it grows over 990,000 seedlings for 180 different community gardens and farms across the city who share countless pounds of produce with their neighbors and also emergency food providers. And this space has become a core part of the neighborhood there and the community where over 40 families garden in the 52 raised by the community garden there, and they also work together, have events, you know, develop deeper social

connections and more.

Since 2013 we've invested about $350,000 in the infrastructure in the space, but we've been operating there without a lease for many years now. And it's really a hard situation where we're trying to invest more in the community. We want to do more. We want to expand the greenhouse space, but we can't get permits or anything without legal access to that area.

And so, this land is also not -- it's a little different situation because it is not in the Land Bank. It's owned by a mix of Public Property and the Redevelopment Authority, but we've been working with NGT since 2018 to try to secure ownership of the site or at least get an extended lease, which we had previously. I --

THE CLERK: You can just wrap up your testimony in the next

30 seconds please.

MR. HILL: Okay. But we really have struggled to make headway and we don't even know who to talk to at the City, and that's I think the big crux of the issue here. (Inaudible) is a pretty big organization. We have a lot of connections, a lot of resources, a lot of experience and we can't figure out how to navigate this process, so how do you expect these other smaller gardens and individuals to navigate this as well. Thanks.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: My office would be happy to help in any way that we can.

MR. HILL: Great. Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you.

Will the Clerk please call the next set of public

commenters.

THE CLERK: Would Jamir Hughes, Carolina Pina, Gloria Cartagena Hart and Terry Highler come up to the podium please.

(Witnesses approached Witness table.)

THE CLERK: And Malaika Hart Gilpin, if you're here please come up.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Good afternoon.

MS. CANTANA HART: Good afternoon, City Councilmembers. I appreciate -- I had good morning, but it's noon so --

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Please state your name for the record and proceed with your comment.

MS. CARTAGENA HART: My name is Gloria Cartagena Hart and I'm here on behalf of Kensington Corridor Trust, a nonprofit

organization committed to fostering community-driven development in Kensington. As the nation's first neighborhood trust we currently store 28 assets on Kensington Avenue. Collectively owned by residents of the Kensington neighborhood, we have the privilege of stewarding a third space among those assets. 11 of those 28 represent a native pollinator garden, vital green space for residents and promotes an urban biodiversity.

Our garden is a convening space, a healing space and most importantly a representation of collective power of community reclamation. It showcases the beauty of community efforts transformed previously abandoned and neglected spaces and make them their own. A feat is now unnew to many of the gardeners and land stewards here

as today.

We are here in solidarity with our fellow gardeners and land stewards. The fight for land justice must happen for collective benefit of all neighborhoods and all Philadelphians. While our garden is not in immediate risk, we recognize that many of our gardens across Philadelphia do not have the same security.

The Land Bank supports the critical for the survival and growth of these community gardens, farms and other green spaces which provide essential benefits like fresh food access, environmental sustainability and safe community gathering places. Despite these undeniable benefits, the current rate of land access for the garden has been slow.

Over the past four years only 12 community gardens have

acquired land through the Land Bank, while 59 applications remain in limbo as of March of 2024.

THE CLERK: If you could just wrap that up in the next 30 seconds. Thank you so much.

MS. CARTAGENA HART: Got you. The backlog is not only (inaudible) for the individual gardeners but also sympathetic heart of community seeking and maintaining (inaudible) green space, we urge the City to take steps to clear the backlog to reproduce garden licenses and leases that allow growers to secure land more efficiently.

Moreover, we need dedicated resources, staff for the Land Bank to fill (inaudible) acquisitions along with the streamlined application process is that's accessible online. As we reflect on the Land Bank's 10-year performance, we have an opportunity

to implement changes that can significantly enhance its impact.

Partnerships and collaborative efforts are essential to the fight for land justice in Philadelphia and we are committed to being part of this ongoing work. Thank you for your time and I urge you to support these measures to strengthen the Land Bank's role in securing land for community gardens and green spaces.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much for your comment and for your work.

MS. CARTAGENA HART: Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MS. PINA: My name is Carolina Pina. Good afternoon, Madame Chair Gauthier and

Councilmembers of the Housing Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Resolution 240288 regarding the performance of the Land Bank. I am the sole owner and a certified minority and woman-owned architecture studio and real estate development company.

Over the years I have dedicated myself to building the experience, skills and track record necessary for one day to qualify to acquire lots from the Land Bank. The past year I was fortunate enough to work closely with the Land Bank gaining firsthand insight into the values they place on affordability, quality and community impact in each project.

These experiences underscored the importance of creating developments that generally uplift neighborhoods they serve while also addressing the critical

need for accessible housing. Throughout my experience, the Land Bank staff were highly attentive and responsive, providing clear guidance and support as I navigated the requirements of the application process.

I'm specially thankful of the commitment to fostering clarity and collaboration, which has been invaluable helping small business owners like myself understand the path to achieving these important community objectives. As I continue this journey, I look forward to deepening my partnership with the Land Bank, using my knowledge and expertise in architecture, real estate and construction to bring high quality affordable housing to Philadelphia.

My hope is like me more business owners and small developers will have similar opportunities to

keep the positive impact going. I envision a thriving ecosystem in which more people have access to their stability and pride of owning a home at an affordable price and where local job creation is at the heart of the projects --

THE CLERK: If you could wrap up in the next 30 seconds, thank you so much.

MS. PINA: By supporting this initiative, the Land Bank can play an instrumental role in generating meaningful employment for people within our communities and fostering economic empowerment at the neighborhood level. Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much for your comment and wonderful to hear about your company.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your comment.

MS. HART GILPIN: Hello and good afternoon. I am Malaika Hart Gilpin and I am the co-founder, co-creator and Executive Director of One Art Community Center. I want to thank everybody even our audience folks. Thank you for your patience. And I'd love to just invite us all to take a deep breath, a collective breath together.

These green spaces and gardens that we come here to protect are a place for us to breathe and literally a fresh breath of air for our neighbors, the communities we serve and for our city. In such tumultuous times as these, the gardens and these places are those much needed moments of peace. They are sacred spaces. They are the spaces that we collectively heal, we go to ground, we go to grow in community and breathe and just endure in these difficult times to

mourn and even find joy together.

Just yesterday a dear neighbor texted while outside the courtroom during the sentencing of the man who murdered her son. She texted in urgency, I need to come and sit in the garden. She left the courtroom and came right to One Art, leaving the court, entering into the sanctuary of the garden. I consider it such a tremendous honor to be the steward of such a place of refuge.

We have over 50 high schoolers that come to One Art every day for their apprenticeship programs to see their collective sense of relief when they make it on site and they make it to safety and have a place where they can just breathe. When there is such an immense need for these gardens and healing spaces, I have to question why it's so difficult to protect them and why we're having to

travail.

We're celebrating 22 years on our land. One Art was once a junkyard and has been transformed into a nourishing, vibrant community's campus. I've been here. I've shared testimony multiple times at the Land Bank hearings. So many of you know our journey and we're still on land that's insecure. Although I do want to share that at the last Land Bank hearing we were finally granted the Land Bank transfer, the land swap, yay.

(Applause.)

MS. HART GILPIN: Yes, so we continue to celebrate those victories. We're so grateful and there's so many more pieces to go.

THE CLERK: Thank you. Just 30 more seconds.

MS. HART GILPIN: What did you say?

THE CLERK: Just 30 more

seconds.

MS. HART GILPIN: Okay. Thank you. So this is four years in though. We were in this process. Councilwoman Gauthier, you guided us, you stayed with us even when our land -- we were moved out of your District. So there was this sense of fear of, oh, no, we're not with you anymore, but you guided us, you made sure, you ushered us into the protective council of Councilman Jones.

And thankfully, the developer that we were working with hung on with us through the process and didn't pull out. But, yeah, let me see what's important here. Yes, these farmers, gardeners, land stewards you see in here have been doing the work. They are actively growing, and we're doing it. We are creating that cleaner, greener, safer Philadelphia by cultivating

these sacred green spaces. We are here for the wellness of the communities we serve.

We're also here for you when you need a moment to breathe and when you all need -- we're here. We want you to come out. Land Bank staff, Board, come out, come breathe with us. Come be on the land and experience that healing that we all need. Thank you all so much.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you, Malika. We appreciate you. Thank you so much.

MS. HART GILPIN: Thank you. Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thanks to all of you.

Will the Clerk please call the next set of public commenters.

THE CLERK: The next speakers are Lawrence McKnight, Isaac Singleton, Brennan Tomasetti,

Shusha Moore, Jeff Carpieneta.
Please step up to the podium.
(Witnesses approached
Witness table.)
COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:
Good afternoon. Please state your
name for the record and proceed with
your comment.
MS. TOMASETTI: Good
afternoon. Thank you for hearing my
testimony today. I'm Brennan
Tomasetti, resident, avid gardener
and co-founder of Civetta Property
Group. Our company has been
developing workforce housing in
partnership with the City of
Philadelphia since 2017.
By far the most rewarding
part of the work that we do is
witnessing first-time homebuyers
exit our office with the keys to a
brand new home. Our buyers were not
able to be here today, they had work
commitments, but with their

permission I will share a couple words on their behalf.

Rashida Lockett,

Brewerytown: I'm not used to having a permanent place to live. I used to always live with other people. Now, I have a place that I can call my own. We both get to have our own room. My daughter is usually sharing a room with me all the time. When she first walked into the house and when I saw the look on her face, it was like she was just happy and really excited. She felt free. I felt free. My current mortgage payment is $1348. It's less than what the rent would be.

Shadequa Smith Spann,

Grays Ferry: I bought a Turn the Key Home. I'm very excited, shocked that I'm a homeowner. I can't put words to it. My heart is just filled with so much joy right now. $1,312 which is good for new

construction and three-bedroom. It allowed me to invest, to create generational wealth, just owning property, you know, being able to pass it down to my kids and hopefully they pass it down to their kids, so really just being able to invest which my ancestors would love.

I'm so grateful to hear so much support for the Turn the Key initiative here today. The Turn the Key program is a shining example of what can be systemic change, benefiting Philadelphians who previously would not have access to such opportunity. This is how you change the landscape and future for hardworking individuals.

Last week I was fortunate to meet mayors from four other cities along with our own Mayor as they came to visit our homes and see the work that the Land Bank and the

City of Philadelphia is doing in the affordable space. They were extremely interested and wanting to know more in hopes that they can build programs in their own respective cities.

THE CLERK: Thank you. If you could just wrap that up in the next 30 seconds.

MS. TOMASETTI: Yep. The fact that this program has been executed at the level that we are today is all thanks to the team at the Land Bank. They work tirelessly. It's not always timely. They are I believe understaffed, but it's always with the focus of the citizens at the forefront, precisely as it should be.

I just also want to comment on a personal note that I agree with the gentleman. I think it was Mr. Bloom, who spoke earlier that says we can and must do both.

Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much for your comment and your work.

Hi, Isaac.

MR. SINGLETON: Hi. My name is Isaac Singleton. Good afternoon. I'm a partner at Project IV Development and I'm an employee of The HOW Group. Over the last year my experience with the Land Bank has been largely positive. Most recently I had the opportunity to apply for lots in the 3rd Council District, and I work closely with Todd Hestand and the Land Bank team.

The application process was straightforward and the support I received from Todd and the team was invaluable. This has allowed us to focus on our actual goal of creating luxury affordable housing for hardworking City residents who are often neglected.

Since this new policy was introduced, hundreds of luxury homes have been built and sold at affordable prices. And in the next nine months, hundreds of affordable homes will be sold and some of those homes will be homes that I develop. Halting this process will significantly reduce the amount of future affordable homes available, disrupting the progress we've made so far.

This current policy has allowed developers like us to make a meaningful impact, transforming vacant lots into quality homes and improving neighborhoods and also helping to address the Philadelphia housing insecurity issue. Beyond providing housing stability, we're creating opportunities for residents to build generational wealth through homeownership, which is the number one form of creating wealth in

America.

To conclude, I urge you to continue supporting the work, this vital work. Speaking as a developer and a housing advocate, the current disposition process from the Land Bank is both predictable and effective offering a critical pathway to meet the urgent needs of affordable housing in Philadelphia. Thank you for your time and consideration.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you for your comment and your work and I look forward to cutting those ribbons with you.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your comment.

MR. McKNIGHT: Hi. Good afternoon. Lawrence McKnight. My name is Lawrence McKnight with BMK Properties. I'm the son of a Philly cop and also the son of a Catholic

school teacher. So I'm here speaking to you both as a citizen, a lifelong citizen of Philadelphia but also as a developer who's building affordable housing in the city of Philadelphia.

In 2017 we delivered the first ever privately-financed affordable housing project on North Marshall Street consisting of 13 houses. In 2019 we then delivered the second ever privately-financed affordable housing project in Francisville of 12 homes.

In March of '22 we were awarded via RFP from PHDC land in Grays Ferry to develop 39 affordable units. On October 15, 2024 we held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for this wonderful project. So what happened in between the five years of our Francisville and our Grays Ferry Project? Well, obviously not a lot of affordable housing was built

either by us or by other developers or even the City itself.

During those five years we did submit plenty of applications for affordable housing. The problem we encountered was at the VPR disposition process. Fortunately, in 2019 PHDC was granted more power and control to streamline the disposition and turnover process. They have been --

THE CLERK: Thank you. Could you just wrap it up in the next 30 seconds.

MR. McKNIGHT: Wow. They've been instrumental in pushing more and more units through the marketplace in order for us to build affordable housing. Presently we're in the process of building over 100 affordable houses across the city of Philadelphia within the last two years of being awarded those projects.

The problem isn't the PHDC. It's the agencies in the City of Philadelphia, both L&I, PWD, Streets Department and their lack of I would say urgency into turning around approvals as it relates to affordable housing, but also the alignment of all of the City agencies and the City of Philadelphia itself. As you can hear by testimony here, there isn't a uniform strategy as to who needs what the most and there shouldn't be.

I grew up in the city of Philadelphia. I still live in the city of Philadelphia. My kids go to a playground that has green space. I enjoy green space, but there has to be some formal gateway or program -- not even program, just vision as to what the city needs. I think that's the biggest stumbling block right now. There's too many

cooks in the kitchen is the easiest analogy I can say right now. Thank you.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you. I think that's one of the most -- that's one of the clearest points that was made today, right, the need for a vision, the need for a strategic plan. I'm glad that we have a commitment on that. Thank you for your comment. And if you want to follow up with us about some of those other struggles and challenges that you mentioned with other City agencies, we're happy to receive that information after today. Thank you so much.

MR. McKNIGHT: Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Please state your name for the record and proceed with your comment.

MR. CARPINETA: Is this

on? Okay. Good. So my name is Jeff Carpineta and I am currently a Board member of the Arcadia Commons Project. That's a green space and garden kind of protection and creation project in East Kensington a couple blocks west of Fishtown. Thanks for the opportunity to be here.

I think -- many people have given snapshots of some of the deep problems that exist administratively with the Land Bank. I've been thinking what are some things that I would hope that your family would know coming out of today.

So just something that I think is important as we dig into this whole thing. When the Land Bank was being organized largely through the frontline work of WCRP and Nora Lichtash and Marcus Presley and all those folks, a little bit of

New Kensington in the conversation, myself and other garden activist preservation folks, green space advocates were pulled in heavily at that time. Dozens of meetings. Many hours of actually authoring language with Jennifer Kates from Maria's office. It was a blessing. It was early in my time of community leadership in the neighborhood. It was really special. But I want you to know, and this isn't just my feeling.

This feeling is shared among dozens of garden lovers and preservationists, is that we really feel like we were used to sort of birth the Land Bank. On the side, Mark Squilla spoke candidly and said, I don't have faith that this thing's really going to get where it needs to go, and that was interesting because Mark was a Councilperson who frequently would

decide and guide fairly about the decisions about open space in the neighborhood.

The push for the Land Bank was let's get away from Councilmanic control of the whole process, right. But a candid look at the last 10 years is maybe we would have done better with the old system because we had a Councilperson that was reasonable and was a good arbiter of things.

So just to quickly say, the Arcadia Commons Project, there's a couple different green spaces we're involved with and the journey with the Land Bank has been painful. Very little communication, years of, well, the new policies and we're going to get you new documents, and it's who does business like that.

And I do real estate and work with nonprofits in my day job and it's not acceptable. The

feeling is as if key files and things that are sacred to the people in the neighborhoods are just collecting dust.

THE CLERK: Thank you. If you could wrap it up in the next 30 seconds.

MR. CARPINETA: And not just for weeks or months we get that. Sometimes there's procrastination, there's lack of resource, there's overload, but we're talking years here. And I feel like today we never -- I feel like you didn't get clear answers about why Jenny Greenberg and the amazing folks at NGT, all that they've done they're heroes, and years go by and that's a repeating story.

So I'd ask you to keep in mind that history, we're feeling like things are really -- the state of the union is not well. And the

garden community has a clear sense that underneath all there is a little bit of disdain and lack of appreciation and respect from the Land Bank and Council behind them and PHDC behind them. That's not expressed today clearly, but we have a sense that actually we're not really that excited about what you do. We don't really think it's that vital for the neighborhood.

And I think -- so real quick, thank you for being patient with me. The one thing that I think needs to change separate than websites is there needs to be an overhaul of the culture, whether it's the clerks, the processors, Council, the Board leadership, everyone that's at that table and is lucky to be at that table to do that work has to be able to answer honest that they have a big picture on what matters in the neighborhood.

Development, they have to have a heart for development and they have to have a true heart and care for open space, right. And it's not that way now.

People come onto the leadership because they have fine expertise, sparkling expertise in housing. Those people also need to have a true heart for the open space thing and it needs to work both ways. The Philadelphia Land Justice Coalition also will need to stand before you and show that it has --

THE CLERK: 10 more seconds. Thank you.

MR. CARPINETA: -- and show that it has a care for development as well. All right. So thank you for hearing that and I hope that it's your legacy to help us finally get these spaces transferred.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Thank you so much for your comment.

MR. CARPINETA: Thanks.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: The gardeners deserve to be in this conversation and we're working to make sure that that happens. Thank you so much for being here today.

MR. CARPINETA: Thanks for the extra time.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Will the Clerk please call the next set of public commenters.

THE CLERK: David Langley, Jovian Patterson, Joshua Warner.

(Witnesses approached Witness table.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Good afternoon. Please state your name for the record and proceed with your comment.

MR. LANGLEY: Thank you, Councilwoman. My name is David Langley. I'm the Executive Director

of the Philadelphia Accelerator Fund. We are -- I'm happy to say we were recently approved as a CDFI, certified CDFI with just two people and already a loan portfolio well north of $6 million. We provide the most difficult to access financing for many of the developers you've already seen in front of you today, including Anthony, Isaac, Carolina, Erika and many, many more.

We've issued more than a dozen and a half LOIs for Land Bank affordable housing disposition development projects and we want to do more. We really want the development of Turn the Key housing specifically to both expand and to be more equitable. There was some talk earlier about a lot of folks -- when they think of developers, they think of the developer who came into their neighborhood, gentrified their neighborhood, built very high-end

900 $1.5 million high-end housing that changed the face of the neighborhood. That's one way to make a lot of money as a developer in the city.

Another way is to be on the very, very low end and be a bad faith actor and exploit the system, find ways to not make capital investment. Often times you get those out-of-town landlords doing this kind of work. Within that middle, this is where our borrowers are, folks who are trying to do the right thing, who work in good faith, don't make a ton of money on this process, it's true, but build quality affordable housing that the City needs.

Mo had mentioned earlier that the P&I, the principal interest payment on a Turn the Key house with a $75,000 buy-down from the City is around $1,100, $1,200. At today's

interest rates it can be even more affordable. If we go back to pre-COVID interest rates, you can have people living in brand new three-bedroom rowhomes in Philadelphia paying under $1,000 a month.

That will not solve every problem completely. Understand that for many Philadelphians $900 a month, $1,000 a month, $1,200 a month is still not deeply affordable enough. But I would urge support of Turn the Key, specifically with what we have so far and also as an expansion because it can be such a key piece of solving the City's affordable housing crisis. And I would really urge Council there are other ways of dealing with deeply, deeply affordable housing, low-income housing tax credits, housing choice vouchers, all kinds of programs that we support and

should be expanded.

But in terms of Turn the Key, we really must not make the perfect the enemy of the very, very, very, very good building this housing is essential and the Philadelphia Accelerator Fund is here to provide that financing to our many developers. And we look forward to continuing to do so in the years ahead.

(Applause.)

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much for your comments. Don't let it be lost here that we truly appreciate the work of the Accelerator Fund. For my part we're building 90 Turn the Key homes in West Philadelphia with all Black and Brown developers financed through the Accelerator Fund. What you do is truly amazing. Thank you.

MR. LANGLEY: Thank you so much.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your comment.

MS. PHULWANI: Good afternoon, Councilmembers. It's been a pleasure to hear you today. My name is Aleicia Phulwani. I am one of the events coordinators for the Philadelphia Beekeepers Guild. Please forgive me for having my notes on my phone.

So I'm really here to testify in support of the community gardens and to speak about some of the impacts of the lack of land security from the beekeeping perspective. Unfortunately, beekeeping has a reputation for being old, white and male for a variety of issues of getting into it, but not the least of which is land access and vehicle access. And this is a thing we've become very

aware of.

If you don't own the land, putting in beehives they are heavy, they require money. Minimum $1,400 start for two hives. That basic (inaudible) so we have these financial limitations already on people. But we also offer a class that we do to try to encourage people to be as good beekeepers as they can. We've offered BIPOC scholarships.

The problem is it's the next step, the access to land, the ability to just have everything you need stops. And we already have a more diverse club than average, but I'd like to see that continue. We just received a grant for a mobile honey extraction kitchen for $43,000, which I'm very grateful for. But the problem is we have to front the money and get reimbursed. And I know other organizations here

probably face that same issue with grants.

So when we're talking about capital, we're really talking about some serious issues. But for community gardens beekeeping can offer obviously not just pollinator services, but as we can bring our mobile gardens we can go to places where people don't have vehicles, where extraction would be much harder for them. And when they extract, they can distribute the honey to their community members. They can sell it to support their gardens to support small businesses and we at the Guild would love to support that.

We just obviously got this grant. We're looking forward to it. We want to talk about equity. We want to talk about racial and financial equity in the city and we can't do it with it --

we can't engage in these positive upstream effects until we manage to get land security.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much for your comment and what you're doing in the community.

MS. PHULWANI: Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Please state your name for the record and proceed with your comment.

MR. PATTERSON: Hello. My name is Jovian Patterson. I'm the Executive Director of Original American Foundation, a small nonprofit out of Southwest Philly. We have a community garden on the intersections of Paschall and Allison Streets. It's a lot of plots down there. We did get some of the land plots from the Land Bank. We got the resolution for them but it just stopped at the

resolution.

It's been about two years. It started in 2022 and we're still waiting on, you know, whatever contact comes after that. And I know we discussed this a lot, but we're still confused as what happens next. Also, we filled out another application for some other land in that area, because in that area it's a lot of open land. It's been a lot of dumping. It's like down power lines, it's down trees, and we're definitely trying to you know beautify the area and make it better.

With the resolution we were able to work with the USDA so we did get some things from there, but we don't have specific deeds or titles, however that works. And it's been about three months since we put the last application out, still no communications. But the

resolution was good. It didn't come from City Council, so that's a good thing.

So just trying to find out how the process is going to get streamlined or sped up in any kind of way. I know a lot of folks spoke on it, but it didn't seem like it was nothing etched in stone. So just want to just help beautify our community.

We teach children, adults from 6 to 60 years old. We teach them how to garden. We teach them how to farm. We teach them how to build, the raised bed boxes that we use so it's a lot of good going on in the community in our green spaces and we just want to make sure the process is better, because it's more land in that area that we're going to end up applying for and we're going to try to beautify as much as we can and turn it into one of the

biggest green spaces in the city.
So that's it.
COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:
Thank you so much for your comment and for the work you're doing in the community and we're willing to help in whatever way we can.
MR. PATTERSON: Yes, I appreciate it.
COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:
Thank you to all of you.
Are there additional public commenters?
THE CLERK: Yes. Would Cole Merriweather, Aleicia Phulwani and Jeremy Blatstein come up to the podium.
(Witnesses approached Witness table.)
COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:
Good afternoon. Please state your name for the record and proceed with your comment.
MR. MERRIWEATHER: Yes.

My name is Cole Merriweather. And I just want to say very quickly that I noticed that when Mr. Grossman and his people came in, they were bringing a lot of really -- they didn't bring anything that said, hey, this is what we need, this is the problems that we're having and they are the controllers of the Land Bank. So as such in 10 years of time, many things have not gotten done and all they're saying is that everyone else needs to bring more or come together, but they're not bringing their own plans of what they have seen in 10 years not going right to bring to this.

I would also like to say that I've seen a lot of the people who are defending the Land Bank are in suits and a lot of the people who need help from the Land Bank are wearing plain clothes. And I believe that if we start to connect

all the gardens together and pull their resources, any waste that they have, we compost and we give back to the gardens. Any food that they have that doesn't get used, again compost it or we can biogas that stuff.

There's a lot of different creative solutions that we could do that wouldn't take a lot of money that would help to secure our garden spaces, grow our garden spaces. I also believe that in the future we would want to take examples from places like Singapore who have integrated nature into their city and has brought back tourism and many people coming in to invest.

If we build homes that maybe in the basement grow food like vertical farms, they do it indoors, if we can start doing something like that and then pulling our resources

together as a city, then we can grow exponentially and protect all the people who can't do that individually. Because anyone who says people need to figure it out for food, water or shelter, they already have those things. No one who is fighting for those things and struggling for those things would never tell someone that they need to figure it out.

And last but not least, I would like to say that instead of investing money into police like the City has continually done for years and years and years where we've seen crime go up and down, how about we invest in these garden spaces like we already know that will bring down crime, that will give people a place to go, that can bring community and jobs and people who can then go out and build more. Because Pennsylvania is, I think, the third

largest state of organic farming --

THE CLERK: If you just wrap that up with the next 20 seconds. Thank you.

MR. MERRIWEATHER: Yeah. We make billions of dollars here in Pennsylvania and there's 53,000 farms and only 93 of those are Black-owned in all of Pennsylvania, so we really need some more resources to make sure that our Brown and Black populations and all people are able to be covered and fed. Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much for your comment.

Please state your name for the record and proceed with your testimony.

MR. BLATSTEIN: Hello. My name is Jeremy Blatstein. I am the Director of Finance and Design for Orens Brothers. I also have a Twitter account, NextPhillyMayor,

and I've also worked directly with Councilwoman Gauthier with transferring land from the Land Bank about almost a year ago.

I'm here to talk, though, about the process, right. And I've made it very vocal. I've come to City Council and I've been talking about Turn the Key since I first spoke at Council last March, right. And it's definitely what Councilwoman Lozada said earlier is actually probably true, right, it is a messaging problem. It's an information problem.

But one of the things that has been the issue is two things: One, as an experienced developer there's issues that we run into with the Land Bank, right. So that's something that I think can be approved on across the board, is the transparency and accountability of the tracking. Very good, good

point, Council Landau, when you're talking about the database, right. That should be something that should be laid out so that everybody can see.

The piece, though, that's missing that comes from the top down when it comes to legislatively is the qualification to get the land from the Land Bank. And if you want to change that process, then you have to legislate from City Council. And to put that earnest and to put that back on the Land Bank is not fair in my opinion, right, because you're asking them to do something that is outside their purview.

So the first thing they come in is looking at their rules of do they qualify because they don't want to get into the same problem they were before of giving land to people from the Land Bank and they weren't building the houses, right.

The last time they tried to do Turn the Key with 1,000 homes, they only got 116, right. I believe that was the final number under Councilman Clarke.

So we are here today and you get past the one point, qualification. But the point that was only said maybe once today, and you both are very aware of what I'm going to say next, councilmanic prerogative. It still exists. No land moves out of the Philadelphia Land Bank without the approval of that Councilperson.

THE CLERK: Just 20 more seconds on that. Thank you.

MR. BLATSTEIN: Thank you. And that's the piece that if you want to change from the top down, let's make it from City Council, right. The Turn the Key program was a program that each and every person on City Council passed

is the job of the Land Bank to produce those houses. They are following through on what was passed.

If you want to be more affordable housing, let's pass that and get the funding from City Council to actually make this feasible. And that's the only -- the last thing I will say is what is the priorities in each of the Districts. And I'm all for protecting the established gardens and ones that have a plan for the future. But for the lots that have no existing gardens or plans for gardens, housing should be the priority. And I do think that that needs to be decided.

If that's not the priority of City Council as a whole, and you're hearing it from soon to be hopefully President Harris from the top down of what's the housing

plan, that has to be part of it, right. We have to streamline the process to build housing. That's what is going to be and that's the only way that we actually see affordable housing happen in the city of Philadelphia. Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Thank you so much for your comment.

I do want to note for the record that in all of the testimony we've heard today about long processes and not getting responses on applications, we didn't hear Council, you know, the lack of a Council resolution being the cause of any of that, but thank you.

MR. BLATSTEIN: I do want to make one point of order on that point, right. And this is where the Land Bank --

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Quickly.

MR. BLATSTEIN: Land Bank

has a choice with limited resources of what to do. So what the -- and this is something that can be discussed and I didn't really hear it today. The Land Bank does not push through land that's not getting the approval and the support of that Councilperson. So the reason why you don't hear that is that it's a missing figure. It's hidden, right.

So if you want to streamline this process, then let's make it fair and transparent and completely open because right now it's not. And you can see that, right. So then let's be able to track how much land are developers trying to push through.

You've seen it in your District, Councilwoman Lozada, right, in the houses that you won't approve from some developers --

THE CLERK: Sorry. I got to give you 10 more seconds.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Thank you for your testimony.

MR. BLATSTEIN: And that's just the point that I want to make, so that's why you're not seeing that data point. So I just would track that.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Thank you so much.

MR. BLATSTEIN: Thank you.

MR. MERRIWEATHER: I'm really sorry. If Council would get a liaison to go to the housing Land Bank and also gardeners, allow some of them to be at those meetings so they can get the transparency that they say they can't provide you. Thank you.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

Thank you so much.

Are there any additional public commenters on the list?

THE CLERK: Chair

Gauthier, there are no other additional commenters.

COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER: Okay. Seeing no one else here to testify on the resolution, this concludes the business of the Joint Committees on Housing, Neighborhood Development and The Homeless and Public Property and Public Works for today. The public hearing on Resolution No. 240288 is recessed to the call of the Chair.

Thank you all very much for your attendance and thank you for your patience.

(Joint Committees on Housing, Neighborhood Development and The Homeless and Public Property and Public Works concluded at 2:40 p.m.)

C E R T I F I C A T I O N

I, hereby certify that the proceedings and evidence noted are contained fully and accurately in the stenographic notes taken by me in the foregoing matter, and that this is a correct transcript of the same.



TANEHA CARROLL
Court Reporter - Notary Public

(The foregoing certification of this transcript does not apply to any reproduction of the same by any means, unless under the direct control and/or supervision of the certifying reporter.)

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330:24

**10-unit**
196:11

**10-year**
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**11-year-**
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209:11

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210:5

**17th**
168:9

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**1920**
166:5

**1983**
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**1992**
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**1996**
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**19th**
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**2001**
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**2007**
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**2008**
57:9
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