



Mayor's Office of Sustainability
One Parkway Building
1515 Arch St., 13th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19102
fpac@phila.gov
www.phillyfpac.org

Good afternoon members of the Land Bank Board. My name is Leah Lazer. I am the Program Manager at Hazon, where I oversee food and sustainability focused events. I am testifying today in my capacity as an appointed member of the Philadelphia Food Policy Advisory Council (FPAC). Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today.

Through *Greenworks Philadelphia* and the *Philadelphia Food Charter*, the City of Philadelphia has committed to creating more equitable access to healthy food, improving the environment and public health, and stimulating the economy by increasing access to local, fresh, and healthy food. Mayor Michael Nutter established the Food Policy Advisory Council in 2008 to help the City be a better partner in the regional food system. FPAC members serve three-year volunteer terms and together represent various facets of the food system and reflect Philadelphia's diverse community.

FPAC believes strongly in the need for the Philadelphia Land Bank. Former FPAC Co-Chair Glenn Bergman was among those to testify before City Council in 2013 in support of the Land Bank, and FPAC members have been pleased to contribute to the formation and implementation of a Land Bank committed to equitable community development, open space initiatives and urban agriculture, and clear and transparent operations.

The Land Bank's 2015 Strategic Plan continues to be foundational in setting priorities and embracing an equitable and transparent approach, and represents input from a diverse array of stakeholders. The 2015 Progress Report and Strategic Plan Update appropriately affirms the Strategic Plan. That said, the public needs more information from this progress report and more transparency from the Land Bank and associated agencies.

Transparency

In its first year of operations, the Philadelphia Land Bank has made important progress to ensure that its operations are made accessible to the public. The Land Bank's new website is a helpful tool, and FPAC applauds the creation of the in-depth FAQ page and monthly public lists of properties sold by the city's land holding agencies. The Land Bank's property disposition and procedural policies, developed with stakeholder input, also provide additional means of ensuring transparency.

However, FPAC has concerns about the level of transparency evident in the 2015 Progress Report & Strategic Plan Update. We were disappointed that the Update did not include clear benchmarks or targets for acquisition and disposition released with this progress report. These benchmarks should be described in detail and made available to the public with adequate time for review and comment. Moreover, we want to understand the Land Bank's priorities and how resources (i.e. land) are intended to be distributed across different priority end uses and across areas of the city.

The Land Bank's pilot program to acquire vacant, tax-delinquent land parcels promises to jumpstart the flow of available properties. However, the process of vetting properties for acquisition is not transparent. And, since acquisition policies are not yet in place, the basis for decision-making is unclear. Overall, it is impossible for the public to know which property dispositions or acquisitions



are moving forward, or even the barriers that might be delaying properties from moving through the system.

FPAC would like to raise the following additional concerns around transparency:

- There is a lack of public understanding about how past requests (Expressions of Interest, or EOIs) to license, lease, or acquire property are being processed.
 - What steps will the Land Bank take to contact people who have already submitted EOIs?
 - How will the Land Bank make the EOI process clear to the public/potential applicants?
- Now that the labor negotiations are complete, the public has an interest in understanding of the Land Bank will be staffed.
 - How many new staff does the Land Bank hope to hire?
 - What positions have been deemed necessary to support optimal functioning of the Land Bank?
- The report says the Land Bank has begun exploring how best to make its data accessible and useful to the public.
 - What is the timeline for making this data available?
 - Is the intention to post such data on the Land Bank website?

Equity and Land Use

As an organization dedicated to increasing equity in the regional food system, FPAC applauds the Land Bank's commitment to equitable community development. With respect to land acquisition and disposition, we understand equity to include distribution across all City Council districts with a focus on the neighborhoods with the most vacancy. We also want to make sure that the Land Bank moves forward with its goal of giving priority to projects that serve a public purpose – affordable housing, economic development projects, and community development projects including urban agriculture and open space – by conveying property at a discounted or nominal price.

Given the Land Bank's commitment to equity, the public needs to understand through defined benchmarks:

- How the Land Bank intends to balance priority end uses of urban agriculture, open space, affordable housing, and economic development.
- How the Land Bank intends to distribute acquisitions and dispositions across Philadelphia's neighborhoods and council districts.

The Land Bank's 2015 Strategic Plan commits to “[preserving] existing community gardens and identifying opportunities for larger-scale food production.” FPAC fully supports this goal, but would like clearer explanation of the time frames granted for land use. Short-term land tenure is generally not ideal for gardeners, who often spend years investing in building soil health, garden infrastructure, and community relationships and leadership to make their gardens successful. FPAC asks:

- Once gardeners acquire an initial Community Garden agreement, what are the guarantees that they will be able to stay on the property for any length of time? Will such agreements be



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granted for longer than one year at a time? What is the commitment to allow gardeners to remain beyond the five year period referenced on the Land Bank's website?

- What can gardeners do to work toward more permanent preservation? Will the Land Bank or Parks & Recreation hold title to gardens and allow gardeners to lease the land, if gardeners are not yet in a position to purchase land or move it into a land trust?
- Is the Land Bank prepared to work with the community partners referenced in the Strategic Plan to find long term, systemic solutions for the preservation of community gardens and urban farms?

Operations

FPAC's concerns regarding the pilot program to acquire vacant, tax-delinquent land parcels are not just about transparency. We want to understand how the Land Bank is making decisions about acquisition and disposition, as well as to ensure those decisions are made in a timely matter.

At the very least, the Land Bank should make a decision whether or not to move forward with acquisition of each of the properties in the pilot by the end of 2016. The Land Bank's credibility depends on ensuring that these properties do not sit in limbo, once again, and to making the pilot program decisions available to the public.

We appreciate your consideration of our recommendations and the ongoing opportunity to engage in this process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'ALC', written over a light blue horizontal line.

Amy Laura Cahn
FPAC Co-Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Leah Lazer', written over a light blue horizontal line.

Leah Lazer
*FPAC Appointed Member
Urban Agriculture Subcommittee*