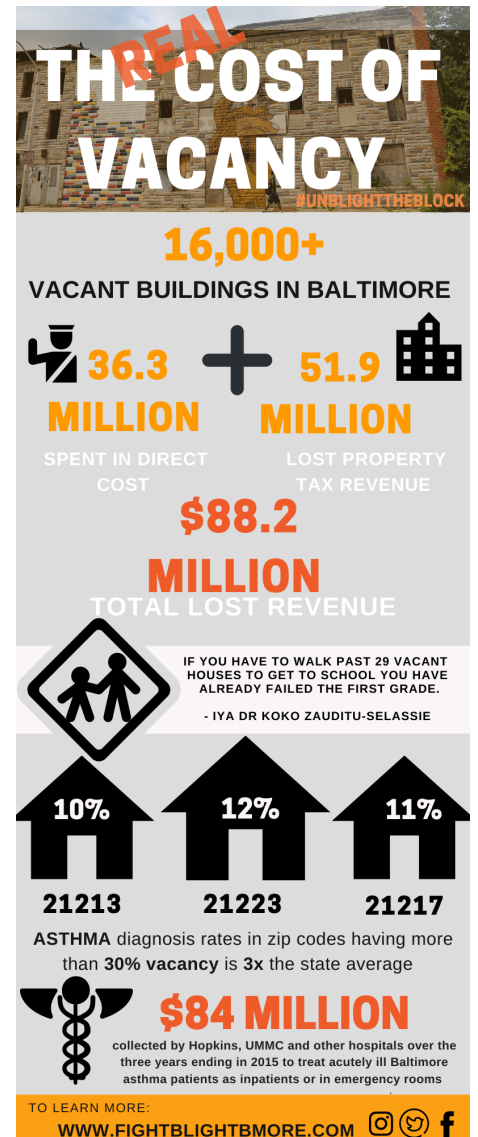


“You already know enough. So do I. It is not knowledge we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions.” This quote by Sven Lindqvist in "Exterminate All the Brutes" sums up the necessity for City Council Bill 21-0037R - an Informational Hearing for Studying Options to Rid Baltimore City of Vacant Properties. Its stated aim is “to discuss the feasibility of certain specific recommendations to more efficiently and rapidly improve the ability of Baltimore City to remedy vacant dwellings”. **What is known?** City government laws, policies and practices together with those of the state and federal government from ground rent to Ordinance 610 to restrictive covenants to tax sale collections to disinvesting in Black neighborhoods to over funding the police while under funding schools ... are major contributors to vacancy in Baltimore. Any effort to address vacancy that doesn't aim to repair the damage done to those residents and communities victimized by the city's actions will neither be equitable, just or sustainable. **What is understood?** The time for wrapping smallpox soaked bandages on burn victims actually never existed. Yet that is what the city has been doing in the Black Butterfly to try to cover up for its own participation in making our villages vacant in order to facilitate poverty profiteering and Neo Urban Colonialism. The scope and scale of vacancy in the city which is just one form of blight that we are facing will not be fixed with more of the same “punitive” measures that will never be fully applied to those who have conspired with local, state and the federal government to displace Black communities for now a third time: first out of Africa, second out of the deep south and now out of the city.

Where is the courage to draw conclusions? Right here, recommendations to address the city's ability to remedy vacant properties requires centering healing the people, communities and institutions harmed. Focusing on efficiency and speed measures alone will not do as we know those measures are rooted in plantation economics. The following recommendations for improving the city's ability to address the vacancy problem centers the health and wellness of communities without regard for respectability politics, harm reduction and repair, land sovereignty, food/water justice, housing security and sustainability:



Land Sovereignty

- Create a **Baltimore Neighborhood Reparations fund and Social Equity Bond** to support the development of housing, enterprise, infrastructure and institutions
- Create an Independent Condemnations and Demolitions Monitor
- Publish a clear and concise set of procedures to apply for and receive city owned properties for equitable and sustainable development
- Create program to support Co-Housing, Collaborative Workspace and Cooperative development, including but not limited to cooperative grocery stores and worker-owned cooperative ventures
- Create program to enable and support Black owned retail, agrobusiness, commercial and industrial competent spaces
- Advocate for an equitable property tax assessment and assessment process
- Create participatory funding and payment processes for real estate development
- Create a Ground Rent Redemption grant and ground rent map
- **Create and apply a measure to balance non profit property tax exemption against lost property tax revenues**

Water & Food Justice

- **Ensure every property with metered water is receiving an accurate bill and develop a dispute resolution unit**
- Implement a city-wide food and nutrition scan in healthy food priority areas (communities experiencing food apartheid within the Black Butterfly) every three to five years
- Develop and implement a goal for 5% of food needs grown within Baltimore for Black Butterfly
- **Create a path to ownership for Adopt A Lot licensees (participants) who live in the footprint of the lots**

Housing Security

- Support an appraisal gap tax credit focused on redlined communities
- **Abolish tax sale of owner-occupied units and enable installment payment plans.**
- **Ramp up the “in rem” foreclosure process — foreclosures that focus on vacant tax sale properties — using a new land bank for equitable distribution**
- **Fully implement state enabled waiver of estate administration fees for low income households**
- Reform the Side Lot program by streamlining the process and only applying the 10 year building restriction to owners not residing in community
- Implement a program to ensure all eligible homeowners are receiving all eligible property tax credits including but not limited to the Homeowner’s Tax Credit , Homestead Tax Credit and the Urban Agriculture Tax Credit
- Remove barriers to accessing housing ie security deposits by enacting policy to set security deposits based on income and creates a Security Deposit Grant Program

Enterprise Development & Sustainment

- Revamp the food retail strategy to include specialized focus on Black Butterfly communities providing technical assistance and funding to support community owned and controlled supermarkets and small retail shops
- Create a pipeline. with low and safe entry standards. for local producers through city fresh, value-added and prepared food procurement programs, including but not limited to City Schools, Health Department
- Create incentives for agencies, schools and organizations with city contracts to procure local food
- Overhaul of current programs for urban agriculture, like Homegrown Baltimore, and advance a land disposition process that prioritizes farmers’ land acquisition
- **Develop policy to return funds (call-back clauses and CBAs) on failed developments using taxpayer dollars**

- Policy with DPW creating a Agriculture Water Customer, a separate protected customer category for agricultural use of municipal water (affordable rate)
- Revamp the [Urban Agriculture Tax Credit](#) to benefit farmers

This list of recommended policy, programs and practices to address vacancy is holistic and innovative. Taking this integrated approach to addressing vacancy will disrupt the pattern of city actions that produces little change while often creating or worsening complex and compound trauma experienced living in neighborhoods with concentrations of vacancy or blight.

For example if a vacancy tax is going to be enacted **it must include an “heirs exemption”**. The exemption would cover heirs properties and those with tangled titles. It will protect generational wealth transfer and community continuity while allowing the legislation to address vacancy and blight supported by speculators and predatory investors.

I know there are those listening who really only care about the numbers, those folks should consider that more than 80 million in revenue to the city is lost annually in direct cost of vacancy and in lost property tax revenues. There are millions more spent in indirect costs like 84 million dollars collected by local hospitals from 2013-2015 for treating asthma cases which are 3x the state average in neighborhoods with vacancy rates of 30% or more. Vacancy is bad for the city’s bottom line, for real, for real. It's time to dismantle the structures and systems that support and enable vacancy. These recommendations are a platform for starting.

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