



WARREN COUNTY REDEVELOPMENT TASK FORCE

2018 REPORT



TASKFORCE PURPOSE:

To generate recommendations for Warren County to improve property management, property redevelopment, and housing availability. These recommendations will include actionable and achievable projects that can make an immediate impact on the efficiency of property related government programs and improve the aesthetics and economic viability of Warren County, Pennsylvania.



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INTRODUCTION

In June of 2017, Warren County Commissioner Jeff Eggleston was appointed to the "Blight Review Committee" which is the first committee, beyond the Township or Borough level, in the County "Blight Process" to review properties designated by a Township or Borough as "Blighted". After becoming a member of the committee, Commissioner Eggleston began talks with all of the members of the various groups involved in the Blight Process (Blight Review Committee, Planning Commission and County Redevelopment Authority) to get a sense of how the Blight Process in the County functions.

Through those discussions, it became clear that the Blight Process within the County was broken.

It's important to note, the Blight Process within the County was created roughly 10 years ago, in 2008 and 2009, via County Ordinance and has had no major revision in that time. The Commonwealth's laws related to property management and blight have changed, however, and afforded Counties with more tools to address blight and redevelopment within communities.

As Commissioner Eggleston learned about the various challenges related to the Blight Process in the County, he also began a task force for Marketing in the County called the "Warren County Marketing Taskforce". The group was made up of a seven-member board, and was chaired by Chuck Gray, who took the group through a comprehensive planning process called "McNellis Compression Planning". This group was able to look at multiple, disparate issues in a short time frame and put together very creative proposals to address those issues, eventually producing its own report. That group was so creative and successful, it essentially inspired Commissioner Eggleston to consider creating a similar group to focus on blight issues.

It was through his discussions on the Blight Process and the subsequent realizations of its need for change, that the concept of a task force addressing the issues with the County's Blight Process was first proposed. Initially, what was to become the "Redevelopment Task Force" was initially thought to be the "Blight Task Force"; however, during the preparation for a Blight Task Force, a myriad of other issues came to light related to property management in Warren County. Those issues included



Photo by Stratos Drone Services

the installation of a new Tax Claim Director in Warren County, Phil Gilbert, who made proposed changes to policies in the County due to updates in Commonwealth law; challenges related to public housing and the need for “transitional housing” for persons dealing with drug and alcohol issues; the existence of multiple commercial properties currently unoccupied, or in transition and in need of leadership; and finally complaints from Township and Borough Officials and private citizens regarding permitting and code enforcement and the lack of information, understanding and (above all) uniformity in the system.

It became clear, after reviewing all of these issues with property management and redevelopment in Warren County, that a more comprehensive effort needed to be undertaken. Therefore, when it came to developing the resolution authoring the Redevelopment Task Force, Commissioner Eggleston included language spelling out the five focus areas of the group which included Blighted Property, the Tax Claim Bureau, Commercial Property Redevelopment, Public Housing, and Permitting/Zoning/Code Enforcement.

The Warren County Redevelopment Task Force consisted of an eleven-member committee from a variety of public and private backgrounds including County Planning & Zoning, the Chamber of Business and Industry, the Housing Authority, municipal government, the Tax Claim Bureau, among others. Current appointees, approved at a November 22nd, 2017 public meeting of the Commissioners in which they also passed the resolution authorizing the committee, include:

Photo by Pam Matve



- Jim Decker, Executive Director of the WCCBI
- Paul Pascuzzi, chairman of the Blight Review Committee and Clarendon Borough Councilman
- Andrea Stapleford, solicitor for the Redevelopment Authority (RDA)
- Phil Gilbert, Warren City Council Member and Director of the Tax Claim Bureau
- Dan Glotz, director of County Planning & Zoning
- John Shreve, Solicitor for Warren County
- Reverend Matthew Scott, a board member for Warren Housing Authority
- Jeff Eggleston, Warren County Commissioner
- Julie French, a representative from the Warren County Board of Realtors
- Bob Raible, Executive Director, Warren-Forest Counties Economic Opportunity Council
- Terry Williams, City of Warren Building Code Official

There were several honorary members added to the group without an official appointment including:

- Tonya Mitchell-Weston, CEO of the Housing Authority of Warren County
- Pam Matve, Chief Clerk for Warren County
- Lorri Dunlap, Grants Administrator for Warren County Planning and Zoning
- Ken Hinton, Code Enforcement Officer for the City of Warren
- Jessica Roudybush, Code Enforcement Officer for the City of Warren
- Donna Zariczny, Inscale Architects

The Task Force had its initial meetings in the spring of 2018 and elected officers to serve and organize the committee. The Task Force selected Commissioner Jeff Eggleston to chair the group, with County Planning and Zoning Director Dan Glotz to function as vice-chairperson, and County Chief Clerk Pam Matve as secretary. There were five subcommittees created which were based on the five focus areas and chairpeople were selected to schedule meetings and draft report documents using the input from the subcommittee members. The subcommittee chairs were as follows:

- Blighted Property Subcommittee - Paul Pascuzzi
- Tax Claim Subcommittee - Phil Gilbert
- Commercial Property Subcommittee - Jim Decker
- Public Housing Subcommittee - Matthew Scott
- Permitting/Zoning/Code Enforcement Subcommittee - Terry Williams



Photo by Ben Kafferlin



After the Task Force's first public meeting in April, they separated and met with their various subcommittees and began to engage in S.W.O.T. analysis to discover the County's "Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats" which are discussed as a part of the strategic planning framework. After all the data was collected from those sessions the subcommittees used the analysis to generate projects and recommendations to research and develop as a part of the reporting process.

The process of producing initial drafts of the report took several months to generate and involved a great deal of research and discussion on the part of the subcommittees. While the subcommittees were meeting intermittently to form their ideas, the entire group was meeting monthly in open public meetings at the WCCBI offices to review the group's overall findings and share strategies and resources. The meetings were focused and it was clear the group took its task incredibly seriously, despite working as volunteers with an abstract goal.

Through that process, a great deal of collaboration outside of the Task Force began prior to even drafting the report, as Warren City Code Enforcement began working with both the Warren County School District and Northern Pennsylvania Regional College to attempt to address the lack of certified inspectors in the region. Commissioner Eggleston became an advisory board member of the County Redevelopment Authority. The seeds were planted for greater collaboration between the County, the City of Warren, and other municipalities in the region. This was another benefit of initiating the Task Force and bringing folks from different departments and backgrounds to the table to discuss redevelopment holistically.

In the end, what was produced is a comprehensive report, with a variety of recommendations, to address the very real challenges our community has with redeveloping and reshaping our communities. Those recommendations come in a range of forms, from very simple adjustments to policy and procedure to massive shifts in how we manage property and provide needed services.

It is not expected that every item in this report is carried out, but that it is revisited and the recommendations prioritized according to resources and personnel and that these recommendations are taken "a la carte". If Warren County utilizes this report to address even a handful of the issues cited in the report, it will be a truly successful effort, having cost the county no financial resources and having provided the catalyst for real change within the government structure of Warren County.

FOCUS 1

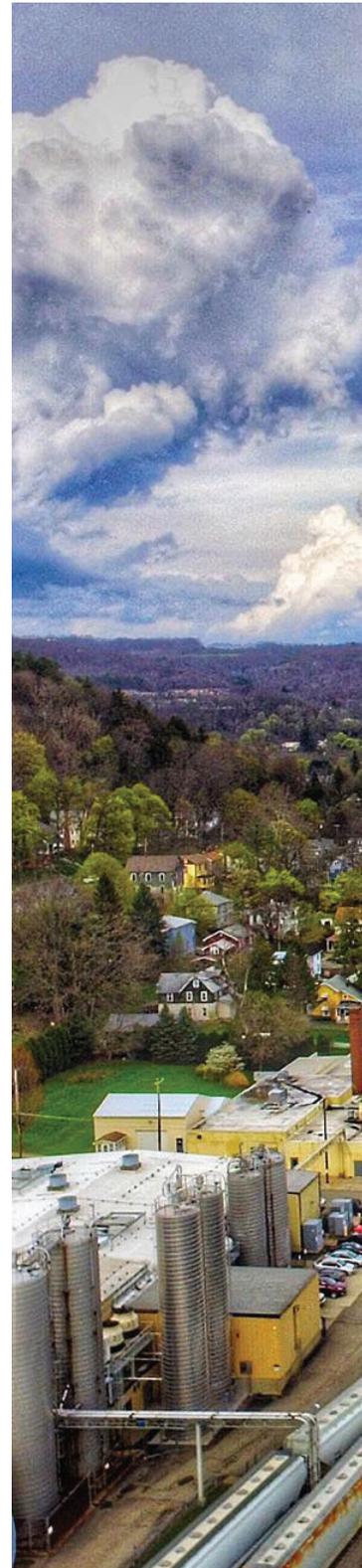
BLIGHTED PROPERTY

Introduction

As the issues with blighted property in the County were the impetus of generating this report, the first focus will naturally be "blighted property". No challenge is more daunting or pervasive in rural Pennsylvania than the issues with blighted property. As urbanization becomes more prevalent, and younger people move into cities and resources coalesce around urban centers, more houses will either be occupied by seniors with limited resources to maintain their properties or will be abandoned and left to decay. Warren is no exception.

In our County, as previously stated, a "Blight Process" was created around 2008 (via ordinance) and based loosely on the blight process created by the City of Warren at the time. Although the City's blight process has gone from active to inactive and been revitalized as of late, the County's blight process has continued to be active during that time.

Despite its continued activity, numerous issues have come to light in that time related to the County's blight process. First, there has been no review or major revision of the blight process in the County, despite changes in state law which afford Counties more tools to address blight issues. Second, due to few resources being allocated to address blight, there is a major bottleneck in the process. Basically, municipalities identify blighted properties, the properties go through the entirety of the blight process, and then sit in the RDA's repository with little action. Very few properties come to a resolution, and the biggest reason is lack of resources. The only funds the RDA really has any access to are CDBG (Community Development Block Grant) funds which are Federal funds and have an enormous amount of "strings attached" and make them difficult to use.



Downtown Warren/Allegheny River
Photo by Stratos Drone Services





Photo by Stratos Drone Services

Current Blight Process

For the purpose of this report, it's important to understand how the current County blight process works. Below is a step by step description of the process:

Step 1: Township or Borough Identifies Blighted Property

The first step in the process is having a municipality identify a blighted property. There is a list of requirements, identified in County ordinance, which have to be met for them to make that determination. Those include (but are not limited to) being a nuisance due to its physical condition, a property in total violation of building codes, an attractive nuisance and hazard to young children, an abandoned or unoccupied structure, any structure where utilities (plumbing sewage, electricity) have been removed, etc.

Step 2: Blight Review Committee

Once a municipality identifies a blighted property, it is passed on to the Blight Review Committee which takes a close look at the details of the property as they relate to state law and the blighted property ordinance in the County. It's important to note, the Blight Review Committee's only function is as a part of the County blight review process, and has no other responsibilities. During this time, repeated attempts are made by the group to contact the owners and provide opportunities to address issues with the property. If there's no way, at that time, to address the issues, the Blight Review Committee then approves the designation of "blight" and passes the property on to the Planning Commission for review.

Step 3: Planning Commission

The Planning Commission, which has other duties outside of the blight process, then does a review of all of the data related to a property, sends notices to the owner and meets to discuss any issues, and if the property still meets the requirements under County ordinance and the Urban Development Law as amended, then the Planning Commission passes the property to the Redevelopment Authority with a designation of "blight".

Step 4: Redevelopment Authority (RDA)

It is in the Redevelopment Authority's power to address property issues related to blight, and there are a number of directions a property can take once it is given to the RDA. Currently, the only funds regularly given to the RDA are related to CDBG funds appropriated specifically for blight. Generally, if the conditions are right, the RDA may take control (through legal actions) of a blighted property

and have it demolished and turned over to another utilization. This provides a benefit to the community but leaves dozens of properties unaddressed due to lack of resources.

The blight process can take a year or more. This is partially due to the legal need to give property owners time to address property issues without government intervention. It is also due to lack of resources, which puts the priority on "easy-to-solve" cases rather than strategic needs in the community.

Current Challenges

In reviewing the process and understanding the overall challenges facing Warren County, a few key points become clear:

Warren County needs to do a better job of managing and controlling difficult properties. Currently, Warren County has few tools to either intervene with challenging properties or to serve as a collaborator or steward when addressing issues with a particular property. Too often, properties are purchased off of tax sale or purchased while in transition by individuals or organizations that have no plan to address property issues. They, in many cases, sit on the property for extended periods of time and when a potential developer, whether private or public, comes along they arbitrarily increase the prices. We've also seen the emergence of "slum lords" that purchase properties off of tax sale, pack them with economically challenged residence, and then do nothing to maintain the property and in some cases, they pay no taxes until the property ends up in the County repository list. In all of these cases, due to faults in the system and a lack of proactive effort by the County, property ends up in the wrong hands, with little attempt to address real community needs, and the situation is further exacerbated.

Warren County needs to allocate resources to redevelopment. The problem of blight and redevelopment in Warren County is real, with every official involved in the blight process acknowledging that the 20+ houses bottled up in the RDA's repository representing a small sample of the properties that need to be addressed in the community. The County allocates roughly \$30,000 of CDBG funds to the RDA annually for work on these properties. It doesn't even scratch the surface of the problems with blight, especially when you factor in all of the regulations attached to the use of the funds.

Warren County needs to develop a cheaper method of knocking down problem properties. There are many properties that need to be removed in the County, but the cost of demolition and remediation are too great, especially when evaluating commercial structures which may have asbestos issues. Houses can cost thousands to tens of thousands of dollars to demo, which is a huge burden on taxpayers. A cheaper way of demolition needs to be developed.

Warren County needs to involve the community in the solutions to blight. Commissioner Eggleston, having met with all of the Township supervisors, township by township, over the course of the summer of 2018 was amazed at how aware and interested the community was in addressing blight. In many cases, community members at meetings said, "Just let us have it. We'll knock the building down ourselves." It's not always that easy, but the community's willingness to be involved is clear and should be capitalized on.

Warren County needs to provide more information and tools to the community to prevent houses from becoming blighted. There are many programs that currently exist to help homeowners with redevelopment, but many of them are difficult to understand or are under-promoted due to lack of resources or focus. With so many seniors and economically challenged individuals in the region, it is important to do what we can to prevent their properties from achieving blight where municipal costs then skyrocket in remediating the situation.

Photo by Ben Kafferlin



PROJECT | Create Comprehensive Blight Plan



Photo by Stratos Drone Services

The work of the Redevelopment Task Force has been to broadly review redevelopment ideas and then make general recommendations to the Commissioners and municipal leadership. What's clear, after much research, is that there needs to be a focused effort around the blight issue itself, to take the recommendations of the Redevelopment Task Force and flesh them out, and turn them into policy.

Below is a list of steps that can be taken by the County to generate a comprehensive blighted property plan:

1. Convene a group of leaders to research and develop a comprehensive blight plan.
2. Assess the nature and extent of blight in the community.
3. Create detailed proposals for prevention, remediation, and redevelopment.
4. Develop a comprehensive plan with geographic focus areas to make the best use of resources.

It's important to note is that we're not talking about a report or recommendations, but a plan with detailed instructions, ordinance drafts, census and research data, and budget and cost estimates as well as funding sources. This group would make the "rubber-hit-the-road" as they say.

Potential Allies/Collaborators

The Blight Review Committee, Planning Commission, The County and City Redevelopment Authorities, the County Commissioners, the County Planning and Zoning Department.

Action Plan

Step 1 - Convene a Leadership Group

This would need to span many disciplines, including local government, nonprofit, constructions, demolition, etc. Again, they are there to take the blighted property process a step forward and make concrete proposals to adjust policy.

Step 2 - Assess the Nature of the Blight

Currently, only active municipalities in Warren County bring properties into the blighted process. It is estimated that there are many more properties that could be considered "blighted" or targets for redevelopment. The County needs a detailed estimate on how many properties are potentially blighted and what the focus areas should be in the County.

Step 3 - Create Detailed Proposals for Prevention, Remediation, and Redevelopment

Some of these will be taken from the Redevelopment Task Force Report and fleshed out. Others will need to be generated on their own merits. The idea, again, is to have this group flesh out specific proposals, for instance reworking the Blighted Property Ordinance to incorporate changes in law, or generate the ordinance to create a land bank to help address blighted property.

Step 4 - Develop a Comprehensive Plan

After reviewing these details and being pushed in a direction, the group would need to create a plan that can be adopted by the County and participating municipalities. The goal here is to strategically address blight and redevelopment in a targeted way. What we know is that we do not have enough resources to address blight in a "global" fashion. We need to identify areas in the county which have a high priority as far as their impact on the economy, tourism, and business development and attempt to focus on making an impact there first. We also need to identify areas in greatest need, where there are dramatic social and environmental impacts due to blight.

Funding/Cost Analysis

Costs related to this initiative should be minimal, with only some printed materials to be developed. Mostly, costs would be relegated to County and Municipal staff time assisting the effort. There may be legal costs as some of the legal paperwork (ordinances, articles of incorporation, etc.) may need to be reviewed by a lawyer.



Photo by Stratos Drone Services

PROJECT | Document, Educate the Public on, and Promote the Blight Process

There is very little documentation or summary materials on "what blight is" or "how the blight process works" in the County. For individuals who find their houses blighted, there is no roadmap or summary to point them in a direction to addressing the blight or working with local officials. The community itself has little understanding of the challenges with blight or its remedies.

It's also important to note that not all municipalities are involved in the blight program within the County. Some of them are not involved due to misconceptions on how the process works. A concerted effort needs to be made to encourage them to join the County in addressing blight. To help with this promotional materials need to be developed to share with the township and borough officials.

Promotional materials could be a simple series of fact sheets and summaries that go over, step-by-step, how the blight process works and who the groups are that deal with it. Contact information should be included on the materials so that citizens can reach important individuals to discuss the process.

Another element to consider is researching blight in Warren County and putting together a comprehensive overview of the needs related to blight and redevelopment. That would include a review of the properties that are being held by the RDA, the properties that have been addressed, the estimated needs related to properties not currently in the blight process, a collection of the sentiments of elected officials and citizens related to blight in the community, etc. This overview, as a part of the overall documentation, would give the public a better sense of the needs related to blight, which can help build public support for increased investment in addressing blight in the community.

Potential Allies/Collaborators

Initially, the members of the Blight Review Committee, the Planning Commission, and the Redevelopment Authority would be the first group to work with on gathering and developing data to be formulated into summary documents. This could be expanded to interested township and borough officials and citizens. Internally the "blight group" needs to come together to address this need for more information though.

Action Plan

Step 1 - Bring Leadership Together

The leaders of the various governing bodies of the blight process need to come together and determine what information needs to be gathered and how.

Step 2 - Develop Action Team

Once the pertinent information is identified and prioritized, an "action team" needs to be developed to gather and "flesh out" the data into a digestible form. That could be single fact sheets that can be downloaded from the County website and printed out, or emailed to municipal secretaries, or other officials.

Step 3 - Circulate Documents

Final fact sheet documents need to be available on the County website as well as emailed and sent to Township and Borough Officials, and publicly available in various meeting locations.

Step 4 - Promote Blight Process to Elected Officials

After data is gathered, and fact sheets are produced, a concerted effort needs to be made to meet with and promote the Blight Process to the townships and boroughs that currently do not partake in the process. This can be done by one or two individuals. Many of the township officials have changed since the original blight process was initiated, and they may not know about it. It is a good time to re-engage the municipal governments about the benefits of the Blight Process.

Funding/Cost Analysis

Costs related to this initiative should be minimal, with only some printed materials to be developed. Mostly, costs would be relegated to County and Municipal staff time assisting the effort.

PROJECT | Initiate and Fund a Land Bank

Over the past decade, Pennsylvania has expanded the tools available to local governments to fight blight. One of those tools is legislation allowing for the creation of "land banks". A good summation of the concept of a land bank is as follows:

"Land banks are governmental entities that specialize in the conversion of vacant, abandoned, and foreclosed properties into productive use. The primary thrust of all land banks and land banking initiatives is to acquire and maintain properties that have been rejected by the open market and left as growing liabilities for neighborhoods and communities. The first task is the acquisition of title to such properties; the second task is the elimination of the liabilities; the third task is the transfer of the properties to new owners in a manner most supportive of local needs and priorities."

Frank S. Alexander in "Land Banks and Land Banking, 2nd Edition" published by the Center for Community Progress

Pennsylvania Land Bank Legislation was passed in 2012, so it is a relatively new concept in the Commonwealth. This has been a tool that has developed nationally within the past decade, partially due to the response to the housing crisis of 2007, despite land banks being around in various forms for multiple decades. In the Northwest region, few counties utilize the land bank model. Currently, counties in the Northwest operating active land banks include Venango, Crawford, Erie, and McKean, most of which have been created in the past two years.

The following text is a reworked version of text from the Philadelphia Land Bank Strategic Plan of 2015:

The design of a Warren County Land Bank would be to intervene, address issues of vacancy and facilitate vacant property recycling across the county.

Under the existing system, the owner of vacant property defaults on local taxes and/or municipal liens against the property and the foreclosure process is initiated, with the property put up for auction. Some properties are not sold and remain in the hands of the existing property owners. The reasons for this are numerous: the property is not in an area where the market is strong enough to support investment; the owed amount of the back taxes and/or liens is greater than what the property is worth; or, the title is not insurable, which prevents a

new owner from obtaining a mortgage.

Some vacant, tax delinquent properties are acquired by a local municipality agencies for specific purposes such as redevelopment or for demolition. Other properties are auctioned and sold to private parties. Many of these auctioned properties are bought by speculators anticipating opportunities to capitalize on the low acquisition cost of the property and intending either to redevelop or to “flip” the property to a new owner at a profit. Absent a real commitment toward investing in the property, however, the result too often is continued vacancy, ongoing tax delinquency, another auction, and the same cycle again. This cycle of vacancy is all too familiar to those invested in improving their blocks and neighborhoods.

A Warren County Land Bank would be designed to break this cycle of vacancy. Instead of placing private, tax tax-delinquent vacant properties into the auction, the Land Bank can acquire properties, clear the title, improve the property (if needed) and ultimately dispose of it for a productive use like housing, public recreation, commercial expansion, parking, etc. Through this process, the Warren County Land Bank could support the implementation of community-based neighborhood plans by providing land for planned uses already identified by residents and community leaders and considered critical to the future of their neighborhoods.

The Warren County Land Bank would function primarily as an acquisition and disposition tool. Today, vacant and tax delinquent property across the county come in many different shapes, sizes and conditions: an individual vacant building; a single vacant lot; a larger concentration of vacant land. Each brings different possibilities for its end use. In some cases, the Warren County Land Bank would convey property quickly because there is an identified end user. In other cases, the Land Bank may want to assemble a site and seek a capable end user. For example, if an organization is looking to protect a historic commercial property or valued public space, the property can be acquired by the Land Bank and provided to either an approved developer or an organization dedicated to redevelopment or perhaps recreation. Similarly, the Warren County Land Bank could help to assemble and ultimately provide parcels suitable for the development of affordable housing for economically challenged individuals.

Limitations of a Land Bank

It's important to note that the land bank's mission is not to address every single eligible property in the County. It is estimated that there are hundreds that could be addressed in Warren County; however, resources are limited and a County Land Bank would need to be strategic in its selection and actions on various properties.

As in other communities, it is important that the Warren County Land Bank be viewed as an implementation tool and just one of many such tools available to address blighted property. The Warren County Land Bank would have a limited but powerful mandate focused on making vacant land and nuisance properties available for new uses.

Potential Allies/Collaborators

In this case, there are many entities that would need to be a part of the development of a land bank. That would include the involvement of both the City of Warren's Redevelopment Authority and the County's RDA; the Council of Governments and multiple townships and boroughs willing to work on blighted property; the County government including the Planning and Zoning Department, Tax Claim Bureau, the Assessment Department, and others; the Board of Realtors and other organizations involved in property management; and finally various community members and neighborhood programs, which can partner with the RDA and Land Bank organization. This would have to be an expansive, community-driven effort with everyone acknowledging that the only way to address the current issues are through various collaborative programs.

Action Plan

Step 1 - Create a Land Bank Work Group

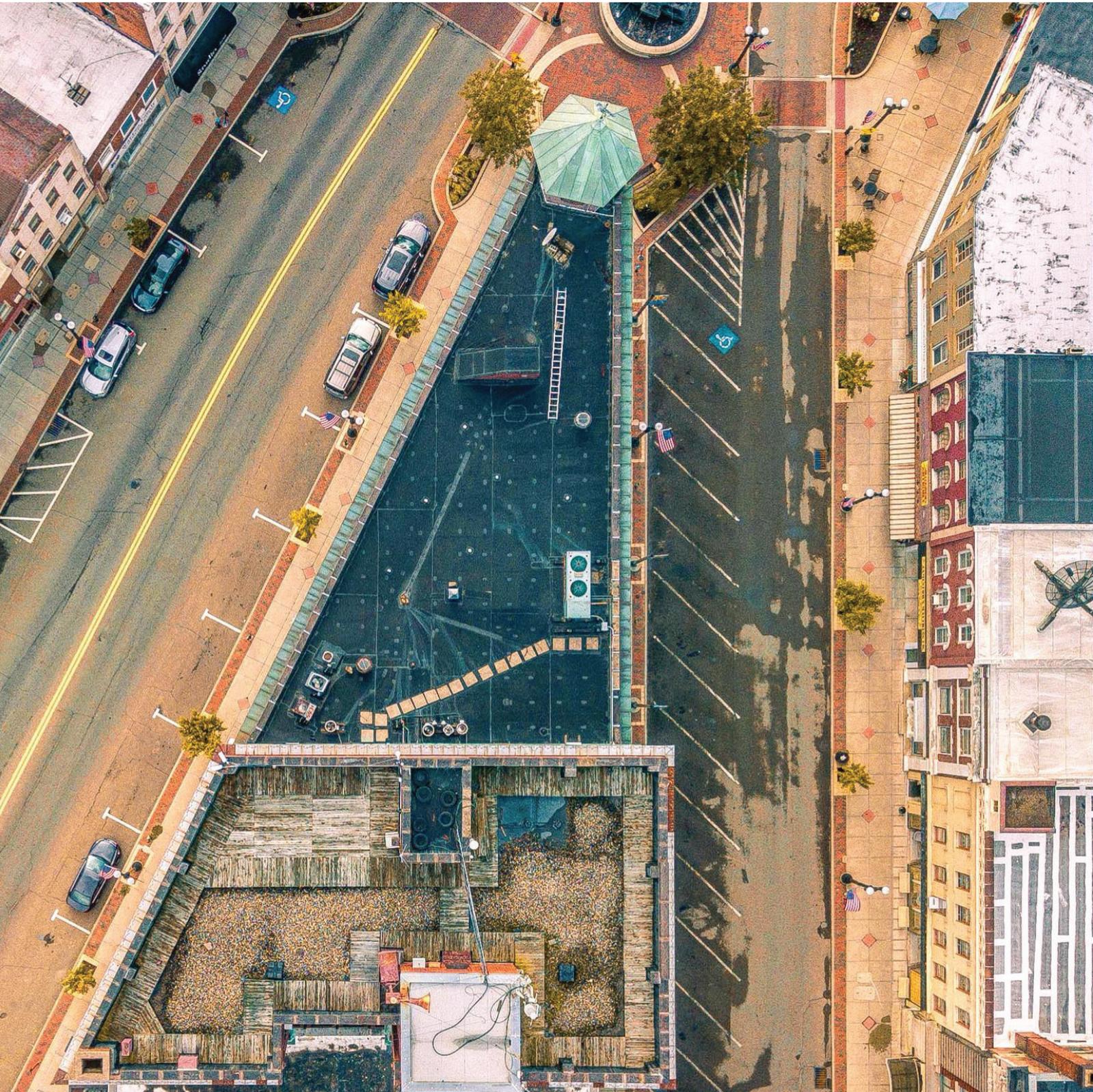
This might consist of members of the Planning and Zoning Department, municipal officials, the RDA, and others interested in blighted property and reworking County policies to create a land bank and other initiatives. This could also be the continued work of the Redevelopment Task Force. This group would be in charge of research, drafting of documents, and ultimately making detailed proposals to the County and regional governments.

Step 2 - Research Regional Programs and Best Practices

There are several solid regional examples of successful land banks. There's no need to reinvent the wheel, so the group, once formed, would travel to various areas and discuss their experiences and data related to setting up and operating their land banks. Examples would be Erie, McKean, and Washington Counties, which all have functioning land banks.

The general goal here is to gather info together that would include sample ordinances, policy documents, financial data, project examples, and any other pertinent data that can be used to craft the framework for a Warren County Land Bank.





Step 3 - Develop Land Bank Plan

The plan would be a comprehensive report of the research on the land bank and a series of detailed policy proposals and recommendations to be carried out by the local governments to generate a specific outcome. In other words, this is how the County would enact a land bank, by utilizing the work of volunteers passionate about addressing the County's issues with blighted property. This plan would include identifying revenues for use in an ongoing land bank program so that the system is sustainable.,

Step 4 - Generate Land Bank

The final step would be to take all materials, legal and otherwise, and create the Warren County Land Bank. That would include a framework where the County RDA, or another similar body, would oversee the initiatives driven by the land bank; there would (perhaps) be an executive director or some type of executive providing management and support to the initiative; various tax agreements would be put in place for the County, School District, and local municipalities, so that everyone is on board with the land bank's mission; and funding streams available and a management framework so that the land bank can be a sustainable enterprise which functions in perpetuity.

Here are some sample "sub-steps" of setting up a land bank in this area:

1. Land Bank Ordinance is established by the County Commissioners.
2. Board of Directors, By-laws, Procedures, and Policies are established.
3. Warren County Municipalities could become part of the county-wide Land Bank through Intergovernmental Cooperative Agreements.
4. Land Bank Authority would provide aid to the municipality in obtaining blighted, abandoned, vacant, and tax-delinquent properties to maintain and restore the properties for productive use.

Funding/Cost Analysis

This is perhaps the most complicated element of setting up a land bank. In researching land banks in western Pennsylvania, what is clear is that a seed fund needs to be identified and then some annual resources are allocated (at least initially) to get it up and running.

County Funds

In the case of Washington County, PA, which has over 200,000 residence and a large RDA with staff and resources. They recently funded their land bank with \$450,000

allocated over three years (\$150,000 a year) as a seed fund. Erie County funded their land bank with roughly \$1 million of county gaming funds. Venango County has allocated \$10,000 a year to fund their land bank.

In the case of Warren County, if the final closure of the County landfill happens, that would generate funds from the stagnant closure fund associated with the landfill (which is currently over \$700,000) that could be used to seed a land bank for startup. Another option would be to allocate some portion of tax revenue to address blight, which is a challenge for all residents and needs to be addressed.

One of the challenges, as previously stated, for the current RDA and blight process is that fund from grants (especially CDBG funds) come with a number of regulations which make them difficult to use. One of the benefits of allocating general fund dollars to this is that RDA and other organizations would have more freedom to be creative and make the best use of the funds.

Recorder of Deeds Fees

Commonwealth Law recently changed to allow for a \$15 fee when a new deed is recorded which would go directly to blighted property redevelopment. Both Erie County and Venango County have enacted those fees and use the funds to support their land banks and Redevelopment Authorities.

Grant Funds (both State and Federal)

Currently, the RDA's only real available funds are CDBG funds, which have a number of strings attached to them. Those funds, however, are greatly needed. Other potential funds could be PHARE (Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement Act) Housing Funds which are used to generate affordable housing for economically challenged citizens. Clearfield County in Pennsylvania has used over \$130,000 in PHARE grant funds to address blighted property in their communities. Warren County, as apart of a comprehensive plan, could utilize these dollars to address blight as well as affordable housing.

Land Bank Generated Funds

It's important to understand that as part of the land bank laws, an arrangement between taxing bodies can allow for a portion of taxes on property redeveloped through the land bank can go towards funding the land bank. As an example, a commercial property in need of redevelopment worth roughly \$150,000 that is severely tax delinquent (and a nuisance property) is acquired by the land bank with the assistance of the Tax Claim Bureau for several thousand dollars. The property is then redeveloped through the land bank for roughly \$50,000 making basic

improvements to get the property in shape to sell. The property is then sold to a tenant of the property who is interested in further redevelopment and business expansion for roughly \$150,000, creating a profit for the land bank. At that point, the property returns to the tax rolls and due to the land bank ordinance and various intergovernmental cooperative agreements 50% of the taxes generated for 5 years go to funding the land bank. The property would otherwise continue to decline and perhaps become severely blighted. The land bank also receives needed funds to then target and rehab or demolish other properties.

Links/Resources

Erie County land bank plan moves forward:

<http://www.goerie.com/news/20161124/erie-land-bank-plan-moves-forward>

Erie County creates a land bank:

<http://www.goerie.com/news/20180201/land-banking-whats-at-stake-for-erie-area>

Lawrence County, PA to establish a land bank:

http://www.ncnewsonline.com/news/county-to-establish-land-bank/article_eb007d88-9d9b-11e7-8c0e-377be2784f4b.html

Land Bank Legislation, Act 153 of 2012:

<https://www.legis.state.pa.us/WU01/LI/LI/US/HTM/2012/0/0153..HTM>

Celebrating Five Years of Land Banks in Pennsylvania (published by the PA Housing Alliance):

https://housingalliancepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/HAPA001_1711_LandBanksFactSheet-C2.pdf

Philadelphia Land Bank:

<http://www.philadelphialandbank.org/>

PA Blight Library (which includes a wealth of information on PA land banks):

<http://www.pablightlibrary.com/>



Photo by Stratos Drone Services

PROJECT | Organize a "Knock Down Crew"

One of the major challenges in dealing with vacant and abandoned property is the cost of demolition and remediation. For an average property, the costs can range \$5000 or \$6000 all the way up to \$15,000 or \$20,000 for a larger residential property. Commercial properties are even more expensive with potential costs in the \$50,000 range for a two or three-story storefront in downtown Warren. Warren County needs to find community-driven and low-cost methods to demolishing and remediating nuisance and abandoned properties, as its funds for such projects are limited.

One of the concepts discussed during the work of the Redevelopment Task Force was to collect all of the resources within the County, be creative, and generate something new and affordable: a "Knock Down Crew" which would reduce the County's overall costs. They would not be able to handle big jobs (i.e. large commercial properties) but could alleviate the need for allocating a lot of resources on small jobs. This could function in many different forms.

Form 1 - Community Service Project - Basically organized through the County Probation Department and Prison Work Release Program (also could be in conjunction with a nonprofit), the County could have work release eligible inmates and parolees work on removing materials from demolition sites. In other words, depending on the size of the property, a work release or community service crew could demo materials or (at least carry) materials out of a structure being selected for demolition. This would need to be done with strict regulations and management, in order to limit liability, but would be a solid community service.

This program would not function often, perhaps 10 times a year starting out, but could make a huge impact in that time. Community members could volunteer to manage the program or coach inmates and community service folks on construction and other knowledge bases. Inmates and community service individuals would learn to work and to provide a positive impact on their community.

In a recent article in *Governing* magazine, a couple of nonprofit organizations were highlighted that would work with former inmates and community service folks to work on demolition jobs and learn some trades.

"The work on neglected properties in Baltimore has spawned new businesses and jobs. Two nonprofits, Details Deconstruction and Brick+Board, have been working with the city to salvage building materials from homes slated for demolition. They hire former inmates, people recovering from drug addictions and other individuals who have difficulty finding employment. Workers remove every piece of salvageable wood and brick from the century-old houses. The cleaned bricks and milled beams and boards are then sold to builders, architects and furniture makers in Baltimore and around the country. 'The idea is to hire and train the next generation of carpenters, millworkers, skilled craftspeople, and do all that work right here in Baltimore,' says Brick+Board Director Max Pollock."

Form 2 - Nonprofit Organization - We'd create a nonprofit or identify a nonprofit to work with in order to do demolition to benefit the community. This could also take the form of a rehabilitation organization. Below, as a part of the Blight Subcommittee, we identified one project as creating a "Community Development Corporation" or CDC, along the lines of the Corry Neighborhood Initiative. That organization could potentially organize a community effort around remediation of blighted properties. Of course, the idea here is to address the low-hanging fruit and reduce the overall costs of demolition and provide more opportunities for the community to get involved in cleaning up the community.

Form 3 - Hired Work Crew - Another option is to purchase/rent equipment and hire a crew on a part-time basis to demo properties under expert supervision. That way you can address multiple properties in a sweep, over the summer, and reduce costs. The employees could work for the County Maintenance Department or could be additional employees of the City of Warren who'd work in conjunction with the County of regional blighted properties. The City of Warren currently has their own crew as a part of their works department who regularly demolish properties. The County could contract with them and expand their responsibilities. Again, with the right setup, it may be cheaper to go this route.

These options could also be combined. The assumption is that this would be initiated as part of a larger strategic plan to address blight within the community.

Potential Allies/Collaborators

This, again, would be a "community" effort including the City of Warren, community members with construction and demolition backgrounds, the City and County Redevelopment Authorities, interested municipal governments, the Court system including Adult Probation and the County Prison, and of course the County government. The idea again is to reduce costs and create a more efficient system with a strategic mission.

Action Plan

Step 1 - Research and Consensus Building

This could be a complex process, especially due to concerns of liability, both for municipalities and those involved in the projects being undertaken. Therefore, a variety of people will need to be consulted including the City of Warren, the Planning Commission, the County Planning and Zoning Department, the County Solicitor, the Commissioners Office, volunteers in the community willing to help that have demolition experience, etc. They would need to both be brought together and consulted individually in order to even determine if this is a plausible solution for some of the costs related to demolition. In this phase, a lot of detailed research would need to be done to bring all of the elements together.

Step 2 - Develop Plan to Create Crew

In this phase, the Redevelopment Task Force, or whatever group was working on this project, would bring their research information together and then formulate a detailed plan as to how this would be carried out. That would involve identifying potential employees that would need to be hired, an operating budget for equipment, a framework by which the RDA or other redevelopment organizations would work with the organization, a method or policy related to how properties are identified and demolished, how leftover materials are disposed of, how we'll identify materials that can be recycled, among other issues. All of that would go into a strategic plan for the group.

Step 3 - Create the Group and Begin Address Property Demolition

This would require some agreements to be voted on and signed by the Commissioners and other municipal bodies involved in the group. All of this paperwork would be worked on and reviewed by the County Solicitor and others, leading up to execution of the plan. The project should probably start out small, depending on what is projected in steps one and two, and then grow based on the needs of the community.

Funding/Cost Analysis

Funding could come in many forms, from grant funds to County tax dollars to land bank funds (if a land bank is created). Currently, much of the funding utilized by the County RDA is for the demolition of properties. In this case, we're "self-funding" a demolition crew. This is somewhat similar to what Clarion County has done by expanding their maintenance department by hiring contractors to do construction for the County, rather than having to hire engineers, bid jobs, pay prevailing wages, and other issues that drive up the ancillary costs of construction projects. They end up saving annually on capital projects. This is similar in that we demolish tax delinquent

and abandoned houses every year and pay a great deal of money to do so, so instead we'd have a dedicated crew to demolish and remove derelict structures and save overall.

Links/Resources

Governing.com article on Baltimore's "Vacants to Value" program:

<http://www.governing.com/topics/urban/gov-baltimore-blight-vacants-to-value.html>



PROJECT | Neighborhood Initiative

Our neighbors to the west, Corry, Pennsylvania, are an example of how a community can come together, create a Community Development Corporation (CDC), and have a platform to support public projects through volunteerism and community organization. They created the "Corry Neighborhood Initiative" which is a community organization that helps address blight. They list some of their activities as acquisition and demolition of vacant/problem properties, facade improvement for existing homeowners, neighborhood beautification through trash removal and other activities, and partnership with code enforcement.

The Corry Neighborhood Initiative defines a CDC as:

"A nonprofit organization incorporated to provide programs, offer services and engage in other activities that promote and support community development. CDCs usually serve a defined geographic area such as a neighborhood or municipality. They can be involved in a variety of activities including economic development, education, community organizing and housing/real estate development."

Although CDCs are very common, they are mostly a feature of larger municipalities. In this case, we believe we could initiate a county-wide CDC to help people come together in an organized way to address blight and redevelopment. Currently, there are numerous disparate organizations working independently to address issues in their own backyard, with limited effectiveness. With our limited resources, we need to start pooling them in order to have a greater and more strategic impact on the community. A county-wide CDC could be a platform for volunteers and philanthropes in the region to affect major changes.

As an example, a regional CDC could bring together youth with volunteer contractors willing to teach young people carpentry and other skills, while working on housing rehab projects for economically challenged seniors to help maintain their properties and address deterioration of housing stock. This would help instill the idea of the benefits of community service in our youth and address a major need within the community.

In the case of the Corry Neighborhood Initiative, they seem to focus a lot on blight and essentially serve as an RDA. What we'd try to accomplish in Warren County as a

whole would be a more expansive effort, perhaps even focused more on prevention than demolition. This organization could, however, function as an organization that facilitates Project 4, related to the demolition team in the county as well. In any case, it would be a organizational tool for greater community involvement in property maintenance.

Potential Allies/Collaborators

A clear collaborator could be the Warren Community Foundation. The Corry Neighborhood Initiative is essentially funded via the Corry Community Foundation. Church groups and other community-related organizations could be supportive of this effort. The Lion's Club and other membership organizations in the community that currently engage in philanthropic work may be incorporated into this effort. The Warren/Forest Economic Opportunity Council (EOC) is another organization which may be very helpful, especially since it has a shared vision or addressing citizens in need.

Action Plan

Step 1 - Build Consensus

For the most part, in this area, this would be an entirely new initiative. It's difficult to say how popular it may be or whether the community would embrace it or not. With groups like Leadership Warren functioning successfully, it's not hard to imagine a nonprofit organization being developed for people to come together to affect positive change in the region. Therefore, the first step should be to develop some general informational documents and begin sharing them with local leaders and groups to give them the opportunity to "buy-in" to the effort. This type of initial community engagement effort will really determine whether this type of effort is plausible or not.

Step 2 - Create an Organizational Framework

Once it becomes clear that the potential for a regional development corporation with community involvement is realistic, then creating a framework for its existence is necessary. In this case, identifying funding streams, what type of nonprofit structure is necessary, researching and generating a legal framework for a sustainable nonprofit, and identifying a mission and core leadership are priorities. Once the framework is generated and adopted by community leaders the actual work can commence.

Step 3 - Begin to Address Needs in the Community

Once the framework is in place, all the legal issues have been worked out, funding has been identified, and the volunteer and leadership framework developed, then the job of identifying projects and working on them becomes a reality. Part of

the framework needs to be how properties/projects are identified and what the process is to address their needs. The organization would then function within that framework and address projects in a step by step manner on an annual basis.

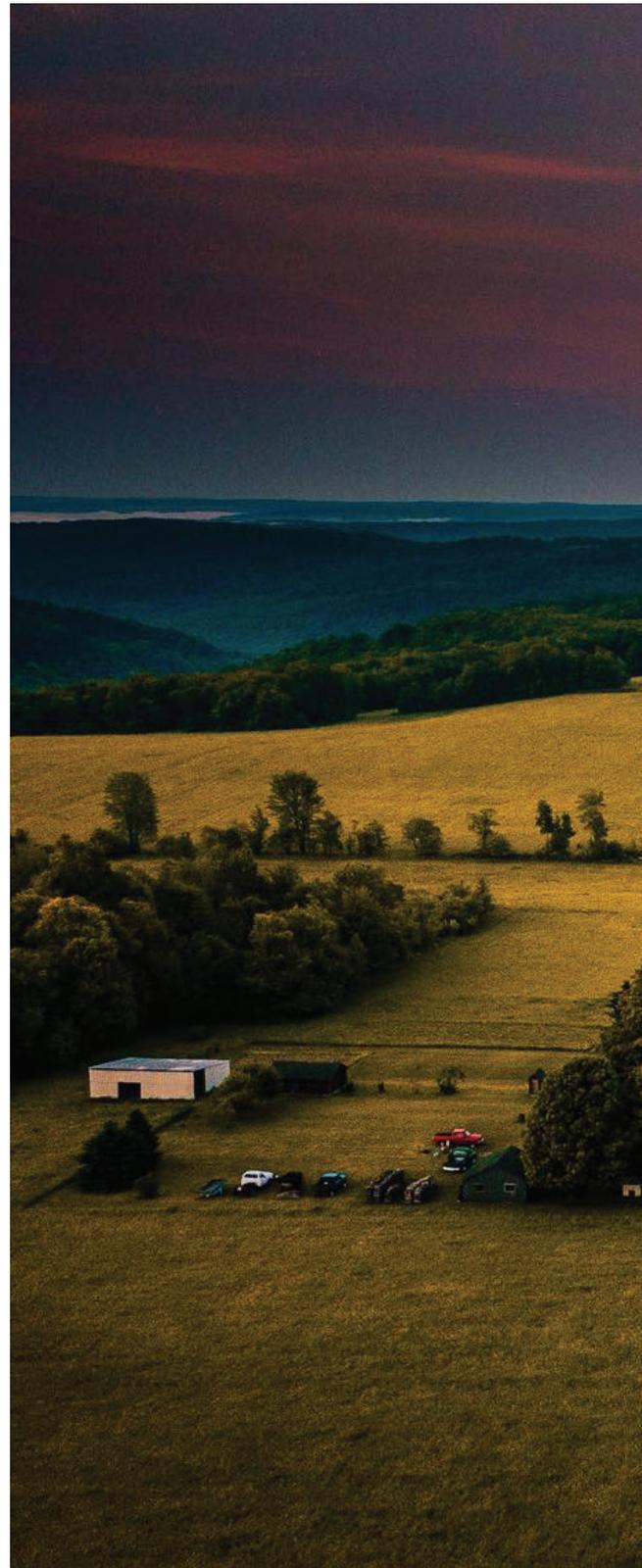
Funding/Cost Analysis

Potential sources of funding could be the Community Foundation, local nonprofit organizations interested in community redevelopment, the County government or local municipalities, philanthropists interested in making a difference in their community, and grants from the state and federal government related to affordable housing or redevelopment.

Links/Resources

Why.com article - What is a Community Development Corporation (CDC)?:
<https://why.org/articles/what-are-community-development-corporations-cdcs/>

Corry Neighborhood Initiative on Facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/CorryNeighborhoodInitiative/>





PROJECT | Comprehensive Housing Rehab Initiative

One of the best ways to address blight in Warren County is to prevent it from becoming a major issue in the first place. In Warren County, the population has declined some 7000 residents over the past 40 plus years, and Warren County has one of the oldest county populations in Pennsylvania. These factors have led to a serious issue of blight within our communities, as there are fewer residents to purchase and maintain properties and we have more seniors and economically distressed citizens who are unable to properly take care of their properties. One way to address these issues is to have comprehensive programs to help maintain and update properties in the region before they reach a state of blight and are unsavable (in which case they become a greater liability to the community and taxpayers as a whole).

Currently, there are a variety of programs all being operated by multiple agencies with varying goals. They include the Warren/Forest Economic Opportunity Council, the Housing Authority, the Planning and Zoning Department, among others. All of these organizations offer some type of housing rehab services in various forms. In each case, the resources are somewhat limited and are constantly challenged with changing regulations and shrinking funding sources.

In this case, what is being proposed is an organized effort to both gather resources and systematically promote services that are needed within the community, especially related to housing rehab. The initiative could come in many forms and should be designed and implemented by those involved regularly in providing these types of services.

Why does this need to be done? There are essentially three reasons. First, there are programs available that are currently underutilized and we need to do a better job of promoting the programs and then pitching them to prospective clients. For example, one tool available to the community is low interest (1%) USDA loans for single-family housing rehab. Those loans could be more widely utilized and also accepted, with a concerted effort to both promote and pitch the loans. One of the issues identified by members of the Redevelopment Task Force was the lack of interest (by some prospects) in taking low-interest loans (even at 1%) and accruing any debt whatsoever. This can be for a variety of reasons, and those reasons need to be understood and addressed with a better pitch. A comprehensive initiative could focus on increasing the utilization of these types of Federal Funds through a more proactive and positive approach to pitching them.

The second reason is that resources are limited and need to be pooled and we need to collaborate on the solutions. As in all other areas of this report and other reports recently completed, Warren County does not have the resources to split up into numerous "fiefdoms" so that everyone can have their own personalized program. What happens, and has happened, is that we scratch the surface of problems and do so in a scattershot way. Resources need to be pooled and used in a deliberate and strategic way.

The third reason to have a comprehensive effort is to avoid wasting money on large projects that have no bearing on the real needs of the community. Although we have some programs underutilized, and we have programs that could be pooled or coordinated, we also have projects that are generated due (in some cases) just to a random opportunity and a desperate need for growth and development. When talking with leaders in the community related to housing issues it has become clear that they have a great deal of knowledge related to the real needs of the community, having their hands dirtied over the years working on behalf of economically challenged individuals. That knowledge needs to be shared collectively, and leaders at the top of the County and municipal governments need to make strategic decisions based on that knowledge and the wants and needs of the community. That can only be done with a comprehensive strategy with all players at the table.

Listed below are some sub-projects that could be a part of a comprehensive strategy:

USDA Loans/Grants

The USDA has many types of grants and loans for rural development. One we would focus on in the Redevelopment Task Force and a comprehensive housing rehab initiative would be USDA loans which have a limit of \$20,000 and run a 1% interest rate, which is far below anything a bank could offer. There are also grant fund for homeowners over 65 years of age up to \$7500 which can help with housing rehab. We need to push these programs to help jumpstart redevelopment. When there's a successful project completed, we need to document the project and further promote it to future prospects to make them feel comfortable with being a part of the program.

Residential Tax Abatement for Deteriorating Property

There are multiple commercial LERTA programs in Warren County, which are highlighted in the Commercial Property section of this report. In this case, we're talking about something similar but focused on residential housing units. Governing bodies are afforded the ability to offer tax abatement programs under the Improvement of Deteriorating Real Property or Areas Tax Exemption Act with some limitation. At the time of this writing, we could not find any evidence of residential tax abatement programs within Warren County. Residential tax abatement programs currently

exist in the cities of Erie, Bradford. Other notable municipalities in Pennsylvania with recent residential tax abatement programs are Washington, PA and Harrisburg, PA. Philadelphia has had one of the most aggressive residential tax abatement programs in the United States for the past decade and seen a large degree of redevelopment and new construction as a result.

How a residential tax abatement program could work in Warren County or the City of Warren, is that regions would be designated as "redevelopment areas" or some other term in accordance with state law, and properties would then be eligible to have taxes eliminated for a period of time for new construction and upgrades. As an example, a dilapidated, unoccupied house in a designated area which requires a great deal of work to bring up to code and reoccupy would normally have an annual total annual property tax bill of \$1500. After purchase and proper renovations, the tax bill might increase to \$2400 annually. For many prospective buyers, this is a burden they cannot shoulder. A residential tax abatement program might forgive the additional \$900 in annual taxes for a period of five to ten years in order to push interested parties into buying and redeveloping the property.

In some cases, the tax slowly increases 10% per year over a ten year period. So, the first year a property owner would see a 100% forgiveness on all new taxes due to redevelopment; in the second year 90%; in the third year 80%; in the fourth 70% and so on until it reduces to 10% in the final year and the property owner is then paying 90% of what they would be paying in new taxes due to redevelopment.

There are advantages and disadvantages to each method. In the graduated method (100% first year and 10% last year), the property owner becomes gradually accustomed to the taxes they will eventually pay. The downside is that there's more for the taxing bodies to monitor tax wise and it isn't as much of an investment if you did 100% for five or ten years (Harrisburg and Philadelphia do 10 years, 100% tax abatement on new construction).

If a municipality initiated the 5 or 10 years, 100% tax abatement system, they might lose a great deal of potential revenue. It's also something to consider that property owners would one day have to pay a substantial amount of increased taxes as the abatement subsides. Certainly, that would be up to the property owner, but policies can sometimes have unintended consequences.

On the other side, Warren County is facing what amounts to a population and redevelopment crisis. Population projections over the next 20 years are not positive, and the need for able-bodied and motivated workers is great. What's also important to recognize is the need to address blight and redevelopment in general. The time for half-hearted solutions and underwhelming measures has passed. The idea of 100% tax abatement in designated residential areas of the County (for new construction

and redevelopment) would be a huge incentive to build in the region and something that could be widely promoted as a "selling point" since so few municipalities in the region have been bold enough to enact such a measure.

RDA/Land Bank Loans

This is another somewhat abstract idea. Basically, through a variety of funding sources and federal and state programs, the RDA would potentially offer and manage low interest or no-interest loans for housing rehabilitation. Currently, as an example, Bucks County offers their "Owner-Occupied Rehabilitation Program" which offers zero-interest loans to low and middle-income residents. It looks as if the program is being either funded or subsidized by the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program. Potential home rehabilitation programs could function with funding from the federal HUD program or state programs. Again, this is something that could be heavily researched and perhaps initiated with the help of multiple entities and funding streams working in concert.

Potential Allies/Collaborators

The County Planning and Zoning Department, the City of Warren and County Redevelopment Authorities, local municipal governments, the Warren County School District, and U.S. Congressional Leaders. For any type of tax abatement programs, ordinances would need to be passed by all levels of local government including interested local municipalities, the County, and the School District.

Action Plan

Step 1 - Prioritize Responses and Engage in Research and Coalition Building

What is listed previously is ambitious, at the very least, and will require a great deal of "buy-in" from the local communities and governing bodies. Working with a group of leaders, the above items will need to be prioritized and addressed in a strategic fashion. Once a leadership group feels comfortable moving forward, data needs to be collected, beyond what is already available, so that a cohesive plan can be generated and implemented in each case, and in concert with the other proposals.

Step 2 - Delegate Identified Work to Action Team

Whether the Redevelopment Task Force or another identified leadership group handles it, the work of writing draft ordinances and summary documents needs to be done. An Action Team could put the overall framework together and then deliver it to public and private leadership for adoption. For many of the governing bodies, having the work done in advance and having ready-made proposals will shorten the time for adoption and implementation.

Step 3 - Implement Programs and then Promote through Organized PR Campaigns

For these types of programs to be successful, a good, sustainable plan needs to be generated for long-term operations, but the program also needs to be well promoted in the community. The idea here is to have governing bodies implement these strategies and then have them promoted via news releases, town halls, pamphlets, online resources, community engagement, and other initiatives. Later in this report, we'll be discussing a "Warren Builds" online portal, which could house all of the information related to housing rehab programs in the County. Single points of contact are very important in disseminating information about beneficial programs.

Funding/Cost Analysis

Here, there would need to be grant writing for Federal grants including HUD and USDA grants to assist low and middle-income homeowners. Numerous state programs could be tapped for a comprehensive effort. On the local level, funds from the potential Landfill Closure or County tax dollars could be rolled into a self-sustaining or slightly subsidized housing rehab loan program.

Links/Resources

Single Family Housing Repair Loans & Grants:

<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/single-family-housing-repair-loans-grants>

Urban Redevelopment Law:

<https://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/Legis/LI/uconsCheck.cfm?txtType=HTM&yr=1945&sessInd=0&smthLwInd=0&act=0385>.

Improvement Of Deteriorating Real Property Or Areas Tax Exemption Act:

<https://www.legis.state.pa.us/WU01/LI/LI/US/PDF/1971/0/0034..PDF>

Harrisburg's Tax Abatement and Exemptions text:

<https://ecode360.com/13741205>

Fayette County Redevelopment Authority Housing Rehab Programs:

<https://www.racfpa.org/housing-programs.html>

Jefferson County Housing Rehabilitation Program (JCHRP):

<https://www.jeffersoncountypa.com/departments-of-development/housing-programs/>

Armstrong County Housing Rehabilitation Program:

<http://www.co.armstrong.pa.us/housing>

RDA of Bucks County Housing Rehabilitation Programs:

<http://www.bcrda.com/bucks-county-housing-rehabilitation-program/>



Photo by Stratos Drone Services





Photo by Stratos Drone Services

KeyBank
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FOCUS 2

TAX CLAIM BUREAU

Introduction

The Real Estate Tax Sale Law has been in effect since July 7, 1947, and functions as a complicated and lengthy process. Not only is it confusing to county & local officials, but it is also even more so to taxpayers and prospective participants in the process. There are bits of the law that are under-utilized, or not utilized at all. The goal of the following projects would be to illustrate how the process works, to inform those connected to the process, but also to utilize what is available to us in the law.

PROJECT | Information/PR Campaign

The Real Estate Tax Sale Law is a complicated and involved law. There are sales that have to occur before it can move onto the next phase, timelines that must be adhered to, and distribution processes that must be followed. If the public can be properly informed, it may help increase buyers at the tax sales, if officials are informed, it could help alleviate confusion thus providing a better understanding for themselves so they can have an action plan in place for properties that are issues within their respective municipalities.

There are two information sessions that could be planned. The first could be done in January for the public. This would detail the basic process of the Tax Claim Bureau then go on to explain what should be done before purchasing a property at tax sale. The second would be geared towards officials of municipalities, secretaries, the staff of the county, etc. This presentation would also show the basic process of the Tax Claim Bureau and how one could purchase the property. There would also be a more in-depth discussion on the disbursement process, and how tax sales and basic collection affects their disbursements.

Potential Allies/Collaborators

The public session would solely rely on the Tax Claim Director and the venue of choice. The session geared towards officials of municipalities, secretaries, staff of the county, etc, would have to be coordinated with different municipalities, with the City of Warren carrying most of the work. The Tax Claim Director would work with the COG, City of Warren, and the venue to create a "Government Symposium".

Action Plan

Public Session

- Create PowerPoints explaining the following processes of the Tax Claim Bureau:
 - ◆ What the Tax Claim process looks like
 - ◆ How to buy at a Tax Sale
- Locate a Venue
- Advertise well in advance of session
- Show and discuss PowerPoints
- Receive feedback, take notes on questions, improve

Government Symposium

- Create PowerPoints Process of the Tax Claim Bureau/What we do & Disbursement and How Sales Effect
- Coordinate with the City of Warren. Choosing a venue, presenters, lunch, etc
- Advertise well in advance of the session
- Show and discuss PowerPoints
- Receive feedback, take notes on questions, improve

Funding/Cost Analysis

Public Session would have no real costs besides snacks for that evening. The Government Symposium would have a venue, and food costs, which could be offset by vendor fees.

PROJECT | Right Of First Refusal

As stated before, the Real Estate Tax Sale Law is complicated. Some items are underutilized. One of those items is the municipalities' first right of refusal following a Judicial Sale. What this means is, a municipality may, within fifteen days of any Judicial Sale, petition the court of common pleas to prohibit the transfer of any deed for any property exposed to sale which is located in that municipality to any purchaser who is proven to meet any of the criteria set forth in the municipality's petition.

The petition of the municipality shall allege that the purchaser has over the last three years preceding the filing of the petition exhibited a course of conduct which demonstrates that a purchaser permitted an uncorrected housing code violation to continue unabated after being convicted of such violation and: (i) failed to maintain property owned by that purchaser in a reasonable manner such that it posed a threat to health, safety or property; or (ii) permitted the use of property in an unsafe, illegal or unsanitary manner such that it posed a threat to health, safety or property. (2) A person who acts as an agent for a purchaser who sought to avoid the limitations placed on the purchase of property by this section shall be subject to the restrictions imposed by this section. (3) Allegations under this subsection shall be proved by a preponderance of the evidence. In ruling on the petition, a court shall consider whether violations were caused by malicious acts of a current non-owner occupant and the control exercised by a purchaser in regard to his ownership interest or rights with other properties. (d) A change of name or business status shall not defeat the purpose of this section.

It is believed that no municipalities are aware of this option, as the current director has never seen this utilized, or even discussed previously.

Potential Allies/Collaborators

Every municipality within Warren County.

Action Plan

Two weeks prior to any Judicial Sale, a letter can be mailed to all municipalities reminding them of their right to petition the Court of Common Pleas. This topic would also be part of the Government Symposium.

Funding/Costs Analysis

Postage for informing all municipalities would be part of the Tax Claim budget.



Photo by Stratos Drone Services

PROJECT | Director Involvement

County RDA, County Blight Committee, City RDA, City Blight Committee, Council of Government, all of these boards/committees, they all deal indirectly with the Tax Claim Bureau. Unfortunately, they do not have a solid grasp of how the bureau works or how the tax sales work. The director should be attending these meetings to assure that the right information is presented so that the members of these boards and committees are making the best decisions when it comes to properties in Warren County.

Potential Allies/Collaborators

The Tax Claim Director would attend any committees related to properties in Warren County. Such as, and not limited to: County RDA, County Blight Committee, City RDA, City Blight Committee, and Council of Government.

Action Plan

Acquire dates of all meetings, place on work calendar, and if time allows, attend those meetings.

Funding/Costs Analysis

None.

 **FOCUS 3**

COMMERCIAL PROPERTY

Introduction

Over the past few decades, many businesses have come and gone in Warren County. The County has been blessed with a diverse portfolio of business from a wide range of niches, which has helped the community weather numerous economic downturns during that time. Unfortunately, overall, the shifts in business nationally and the reduction of industrialized factory production has hit Warren County particularly hard.

In the wake of these economic shifts are a variety of derelict commercial properties, sometimes with serious environmental remediation needs. Commercial properties, in many cases, cost a great deal more than residential properties to maintain and redevelop. They also, conversely, can create a great deal of opportunity with the right creative mindset. With all of that in mind, the need to have a comprehensive strategy to deal with commercial properties in Warren County is paramount.

A critical element in Warren County's economic redevelopment efforts is the establishment and maintenance of a detailed inventory of properties throughout the County which hold the potential for commercial activity. The information which must be documented for these properties would potentially include:

Property ownership and owner's goals and objectives for the property

- Current use of the property
- Current zoning designation of property
- Utility services available at the property location
- Transportation available to the location
- Neighboring activities that could influence property usage



Former PNC Building
Photo by Stratos Drone Services



In addition to this property inventory, it is also critical that the redevelopment initiative includes a comprehensive, collaborative and fully supported administrative framework for property redevelopment. Such a structure will allow for consistency in redevelopment activities and focused resources to support such activities.

The Warren County Commercial Property redevelopment initiative must also have two customer bases of focus. The first is existing Warren County business stabilization and growth and second is the recruitment of new business and employment opportunities to the community.

PROJECT | Development Of Property Inventory

The focus of Project 1 is the development and ongoing maintenance of a Property Inventory which includes properties located throughout Warren County which are, or could be, available for expanded or new business activities. This inventory would not be limited to properties currently listed for sale but also properties which are currently underutilized and/or hold the potential for expanded business activities or potential sub-division. Both developed and undeveloped properties should be included in the inventory. Properties shall be classified as to the potential use within the inventory such as industrial or commercial activities.

Potential Allies/Collaborators

To complete the initial Property Inventory database, a Task-Force shall be formed including representatives of the following:

- Warren County Realtors
- Warren County Planning and Zoning
- City of Warren Planning office
- Warren County Council of Governments
- Warren County Redevelopment Authority
- City of Warren Redevelopment Authority
- Warren County Chamber of Business & Industry

Action Plan

Step 1 - Create Method

Once formed, the Task-Force shall develop a methodology for identifying properties which warrant inclusion in the Property Inventory. This methodology is expected to include:

- Current property sales listings
- Outreach to the community at large seeking requests for property inclusion
- Current properties on Blighted Properties inventories

Step 2 - Generate Database

Develop an electronic database format and determine where this database will be hosted, accessed and maintained.

Step 3 - Administration

Develop an administrative structure for populating the database including identification of financial and personnel resources available or needed to complete the population effort.

Step 4 - Sustainability

Develop an administrative structure for maintaining the database including identification of financial and personnel resources available or needed to complete the ongoing maintenance effort which will include regular monitoring of included property conditions as well as addition of new properties to the database due to changes in use or activity.

Funding/Cost Analysis

Based upon the scope of this project it is estimated that one full-time individual will be required to complete steps 2 and 3 above.

- Annual personnel cost == \$ 30,000
- Database hosting and supporting equipment/materials cost == \$10,000
- Annual database maintenance personnel cost == \$15,000

PROJECT | Create Property Redevelopment Incentive Program

The focus of Project 2 is to develop a cohesive program which defines first a "chain-of-command" which has been charged with administering property redevelopment initiatives throughout Warren County and to also develop materials which assist with marketing these properties within as well as outside the County.

Potential Allies/Collaborators

To complete Project 2 a Task Force shall be formed with representation from the following:

- Warren County Planning and Zoning
- City of Warren Planning
- Warren County Chamber of Business & Industry
- Northwest Regional Planning Commission

Action Plan

STEP 1 – The Task Force shall review all current property development incentive plans and programs available such as LERTA and compile this information into a single database

STEP 2 – The Task Force shall review "best practices" and community-based incentive programs from other similar sized communities/regions across Pennsylvania

STEP 3 – The Task Force shall evaluate existing public-sector property redevelopment assistance programs and compile this information into a single database

STEP 4 – The Task Force shall develop a Property Redevelopment Assistance program document which defines organization responsibility for implementation of the program throughout Warren County.

Funding/Cost Analysis

Completion of steps 1 through 4 is expected to be completed by the Task Force at no direct cost. Implementation of the Property Redevelopment Assistance program upon it's completion is also not seen as a program carrying direct cost but is rather seen as a tool which can be utilized within existing organizational activities.

PROJECT | Adoption Of The Pa Wilds Design Guide County-wide

A successful property redevelopment initiative must include some level of control over how any given property is redeveloped in terms of purpose and appearance. This control is necessary to ensure overall community vitality and appeal and to avoid the potential of new development having a negative impact upon neighboring properties. Based upon its' applicability to the Northern Pennsylvania heritage, use of the PA Wilds Design Guide as the cornerstone of the Warren County Property Redevelopment initiative is considered to be the prudent decision.

Action Plan

STEP 1 – Incorporate the PA Wilds Design Guide into the Warren County Comprehensive Plan as a reference document

STEP 2 – Distribute the Design Guide to all Warren County Municipalities

STEP 3 – Hold Design Guide educational sessions for all Warren County municipal officials to ensure awareness and understanding of the Guide and how it is to be utilized

STEP 4 – Present a Memorandum of Understanding to all COG member seeking municipality adoption of the Design Guide for projects within their municipality

STEP 5 – Include the Design Guide in the Property Redevelopment Assistance program

Funding/Cost Analysis

No direct costs are contemplated for the completion of this project.

FOCUS 4

PUBLIC HOUSING

Introduction

Public Housing as it applies to the Task Force is a complex topic. We took a broad definition, considering all ways that residents live in housing that requires government assistance, be it for rent, maintenance, or temporary shelter. We note first that definitions matter, especially when considering the wide array of funding sources (local, state, and federal government; public and private foundations; charities; etc), as the definitions one uses need to be aligned with the primary funding streams used for any project. For instance, the term 'homeless' has different definitions even between various federal departments, let alone the several other avenues one might use to fund a project in Warren County. Pursuing a project to alleviate homelessness will not find funding if it does match up with the funding stream's expectations.

A second critical consideration in this area is determining the real needs of the area. Due to our rural nature and low population, it is difficult to directly connect our region to applicable programs. Only with an in-depth and more accurate profile of the public support needs can we then work to craft approaches that would tie funding and resources to the community.

With these considerations, we believe there are many needs not being met in the county that if addressed would provide a benefit to all our residents. As we seek to re-develop our county, nurturing a more robust and beneficial system of public housing support is necessary. Below are four potential projects that could be accomplished in 1-2 years of time, beginning with the needs assessment that is needed by all others.



Downtown Warren, PA
Photo by Stratos Drone Services



PROJECT | "Real" Needs Assessment

In order to determine the needs/wants of the county and to identify/rank areas to be addressed. Needs to be community driven, not driven by outcome already defined.

Partners

- County Government
- Local Non-Profits (EOC, Bollinger, YMCA, etc.)
- WCCBI – Access to Business Community
- City Government
- Health Providers
- School District

Steps – Consider hiring an independent consultant

Compile information from various sources, i.e.

1. Census data
2. Local Assessments already completed
3. Pennsylvania Data Center
4. Center for Rural Pennsylvania
5. Utilize focus groups for specific areas i.e.
 - ♦ Human Resource Professionals for employment requirements/needs
 - ♦ Mental health consumers for health needs
 - ♦ County alcohol/other drugs/and local law enforcement for the extent of drug issues.
 - ♦ County School District educators
 - ♦ Business leaders

- ◆ Youth – age 15-18
- ◆ Non-profit providers (elderly, intellectually, disabled, etc.)
- ◆ Elected officials

6. Survey Monkey

- ◆ General county population
- ◆ Individuals receiving specific services

Cost - \$40,000 if hiring a consultant

- In-house – staff time (extremely time-consuming)
 - ◆ Mailings
 - ◆ Printing report

Resources–Community Foundation

- Local Business' – Financial Institutions

Photo by Ben Kafferlin



PROJECT | Homeless to Housed

Introduction

Housing is a basic human need and we have a population in Warren County where this is not met. The complexity of funding sources and the relatively small size of the community makes meeting the need a special challenge. Varying funding sources require different requirements. Although HUD funding is still available, it will begin to diminish. Currently, funding is available very specific housing programs such as:

- VASH (Veterans Assistance Supportive Housing) designed for use of Section 8 vouchers for Veterans – must coordinate with VA Medical Center (results in long-term temporary housing)
- Choice Neighborhood Planning Grants – leverages public AND private dollars to support local methodologies to address neighborhoods with distressed public or HUD-assisted HUD housing (can result in homeownership and/or long-term temporary housing)
- Continuum of Care – designed as a community-wide effort with the ultimate goal of ending homelessness. Could very well be the best effort of moving one from homeless to housed but requires the absolute support of community agencies. Turf wars would have to be dealt with and resolved rather than swept under the carpet because each agency would have specific roles and other agencies would depend on the other doing their part. Regular information sharing would be a must.

Partners

EOC, HUD, DHS (county and state), Housing Authority, DCED, PCCD, PHFA, Private/tax credit equity investors (creates additional reporting relationships = more paperwork)

Steps

- Create a clearer picture of need through a needs assessment
- Define for county what "homeless" and 'housed' mean, considering the potential funding partners that such definitions would involve.
- Strategize a formula of funding sources by partnering with current local experts
- Consider funding administrative support to increase the flexibility of the project due to funding changes and funding reductions
- Consider ways to become self-sufficient via land banking, micro-enterprises through the RDA that benefit housing and homeless activities perhaps using a Habitat for Humanity model for the permanent housing aspect

Cost

The costs will vary depending on the size of the project and funding options

Resources

Either a book of various government agencies and their prominent educational materials or a list of local experts who have a facility with such government and private funding sources. (ed. I prefer the later)

Project Outline

Phase I - could be Short Term Housing and could be provided either through EOC or the Housing Authority using HUD's "Housing First" model. Once housed, underlying issues are dealt with, MH, D&A, child care/support, medical issues, employment/employability, parenting, life skill development, justice-involved issues, etc. Upon achieving stated goals, graduation to the next step of housing could occur. The next step –

Phase II - could be the Housing Choice Voucher Program (Section 8) where the participant leases from a private landlord and is no longer under constant supervision from the original provider but still maintains services and new goals are developed.

Phase III Upon successful completion of Phase II, graduation could lead to a Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) and/or homeownership model. FSS allows participants to earn a certain percentage of their subsidy as an escrow that can be used to help purchase a house. The homeownership program allows voucher holders to use their vouchers to purchase a home. Both options require goal management and attainment throughout.

Using Step 3.e. above, once a house is purchased by a program participant, the funds earned can be placed back into the program to purchase and renovate additional houses.

Both the Housing Authority and EOC already have the resources for Phase I housing. Both agencies would require additional funding for Phase II and Phase III. The Housing Authority would have to apply for and receive a status called "Moving to Work" to be able to "graduate" participants through the programs at varying time frames. It would also have to apply for and receive the additional funding for the FSS and homeownership programs. All three are available through HUD. It would also have to have stronger landlord support to lease vouchers once graduates move to Phase II.

Without these designations for the Housing Authority, it cannot enforce service requirements. Services beyond the FSS would still need to be provided by Community providers.

PROJECT | Aging In Place and Housing

Overview

The number of Warren County residents, over the age of 65, continues to rise.

Senior population has risen by almost 800 persons from 1990 to 2010 (or 15%). By 2030, the projection is that 30.3% of County residents will be over age 65.

Younger people are tending to migrate out of the County. In 2000, there were 4948 persons living in the County between the ages of 25 and 29. In 2010, that number was reduced by 790 people (to 4158).

Not only is the population aging, but the housing stock is as well. In 2000 the number of homes built before 1939 was 8,309 or 36% (no data avail for 2010).

In the experience of the Warren County grants administrator, most of the elderly persons that we have come into contact with have expressed that they would rather grow old in their homes ("age in place") versus moving into a smaller dwelling, rental housing, or a senior care facility.

Most times, the elderly homeowners have a fixed income, and keeping up with the maintenance on their homes is very difficult, financially. I receive many requests for gov't assistance for home maintenance from County seniors.

Partners

- Warren County Commissioners
- Warren/Forest EOC (Econ Opportunity Council)
- HANDS (Housing and Neighborhood Dev Service), Erie PA
- Housing Authority of the County of Warren
- Western PA CoC (Continuum of Care)
- USDA (US Dept of Agriculture)
- Private Developers

Action Steps

- Determine target population (ex. Elderly, concentrations of low-income persons by location, etc). Confer with local partners regarding target population, funding support, supportive services, project development.
- Define program eligibility and client selection criteria
- Hire agency for Project Delivery
- Apply for funding (County/Non-Profit/Developer)
- Implement Housing Rehab program.

Potential Issues

- Lack of reliable contractors. Potential Solution: Create a program to "identify" "good" contractors and create a list of them to provide to homeowners.
- The frustration of homeowners while home being worked on (lapses of time between contractor visits and upheaval of home/routine).
- Staffing for program administration and project delivery
- Addressing Lead-Based Paint (high cost and finding certified/licensed contractors and lead assessors).
- Utilizing a large amount of funds, for a low number of households (due to funding requirements to bring homes completely "up to code" VS repairing obvious needs/ basic items). Average per home rehab cost: \$40,000.
- Fears of banks and other lending institutions.

Cost Projection

- Several hundred thousand dollars in total
- \$40,000 per home (guess-ti-mate based on past experience).

Resources

- HOME grants through PA DCED (Dept of Community and Econ Dev) and PHFA (Penna Housing Finance Agency). Grants to address housing rehab and Lead-Based Paint for income-qualifying homeowners.
- CDBG funds (Community Dev Block Grants) through PA DCED.
- USDA (US Dept of Agriculture) Housing Preservation grants

PROJECT | Rehab Partnership

Currently, all people seeking in-patient rehab must leave the county to find programs. While this is not a problem in itself, the availability of housing locally makes partnering with a company that provides rehab services a potential way to better utilize our local resources and create rehab jobs locally. Once a needs assessment brings us a clearer picture of the need, partnering rehab companies could be approached who would have an incentive to help the county develop a plan.

Partners

- Warren County Commissioners
- Warren/Forest EOC (Econ Opportunity Council)
- Warren/Forest County Human Services D & A program
- Housing Authority of the County of Warren
- SAMHSA – Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- PADDAP – Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs

Action Steps

- Participate in “Real” needs assessment process, focusing on determining the scope of need locally
- Approach partner companies (non-profit and for-profit) to seek competitive options for establishing a local facility
 - ♦ Gaudenzia, Deerfield, Turning Point, or other
- Consider different funding streams for facility and operations
 - ♦ Facility grants through local foundations, county commissioners, or another source may keep costs low in establishing a physical plant.
 - ♦ Management grants through SAMHSA or other government agency may provide more stable, long-term funding for operations.

Potential Issues

- Wide variation in public perception and support of those in need of rehab.
- Funding streams often focus on larger programs than may be reasonable here.

Cost Projection

Hard to quantify, but initial exploration after needs assessment will lead to potential funding sources that would supply the bulk of resources needed.

Resources

Online information: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK64106/>

Photo by Stratos Drone Services



 **FOCUS 5**

PERMITTING / CODE EN

The addition of the "Permitting/Code Enforcement/Zoning" was somewhat last minute, and initially had a great deal to do with the lack of uniformity in the County related to these topics. When the group formed and had an in-depth discussion on related topics, it became clear that this would be one of the most dynamic and thought-provoking groups in the Task Force.

To outline the broad themes related to this group, we'll briefly describe topics related to the title of the group:



N F O R C E M E N T / Z O N I N G

Permitting

For the purpose of this report, permitting is anything building or construction related which requires a building, or occupancy, or similar type of permit. This usually involves an inspector visiting a work site to review the work to make sure the permit is maintained and approve the completion of construction. In the case of Warren County, depending on what entity a municipality contracts with for permitting and code enforcement, you may be dealing with an inspector from another County.

Downtown Warren, PA
Photo by Stratos Drone Services



Code Enforcement

"Code Enforcement" generally refers to site inspections, plan reviews, and issuance of citations for violations of the Uniform Construction Code. The following is from the Central Keystone Council of Governments website:

"In November of 1999, then Governor Tom Ridge signed Act 45, the Pennsylvania Construction Code Act which established the Uniform Construction Code (UCC) throughout Pennsylvania. The UCC will provide uniform standards for new construction and renovations around the state. Commercial buildings will comply with the International Building Code (IBC); residential (one- and two-family) construction will comply with the International Residential Code (IRC). The code applies to almost all buildings, excluding manufactured and industrialized housing (which are covered by other laws), agricultural buildings, and certain utility and miscellaneous buildings."

"Under Act 45, the Uniform Construction Code will supersede and preempt all building codes, after taking effect on April 9, 2004. Act 45 also requires any local government wishing to administer and enforce the UCC to pass an ordinance adopting the UCC (consisting of most of the codes issued by International Code Council) as the local building code."

Of the 27 municipalities in Warren County, only two have "opted-out" of administering the UCC locally, leaving the administration up to the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry. Therefore, it is the responsibility of each municipality to provide code enforcement either with municipal staff or by contracting with an outside vendor. It's important to note that the only legitimate local code enforcement resource within the County is the City of Warren Code Enforcement Department, headed by Terry Williams, which currently provides code enforcement and inspection services to nine municipalities including the City of Warren.

Zoning

Article VI of the Pennsylvania Municipal Planning Code describes the general powers of zoning as "The governing body of each municipality, in accordance with the conditions and procedures set forth in this act, may enact, amend and repeal zoning ordinances to implement comprehensive plans and to accomplish any of the purposes of this act." The McNeese Landuse Blog states: "Zoning is, at its core, the municipal regulation of the use of land. Today, a municipality regulates the use of land by implementing a zoning ordinance."

In Warren County there are twelve zoned municipalities. Zoning ordinances are administered by the County Planning and Zoning Department's Zoning officer with the help of the Planning Commission and the Commissioners Office.

Although these items are separate, to some extent, they are all entwined in the effort to create a safe community environment for the citizens of Warren County. It's important to note that "early land use regulations in Pennsylvania and elsewhere were generally concerned with preventing

the spread of fires." so even early in the Commonwealth's history, land and building management had to do with the overall safety and strategic management of the community to create the safest and smartest community plan possible.

Current Challenges

Through those early in-depth discussions, several challenges that needed to be addressed became clear.

Community Understanding/Engagement

First, there is a lack of understanding among the community at large, as well for some municipal governments as to what the construction codes are, how they can be applied to construction projects, and how they benefit the community. For many citizens, especially folks new to the area, knowing who to contact, how to contact them, and why you should contact them can be a mystery. It needs to be easier to get information and go through the system, step-by-step, from planning to construction.

Lack of Local Resources/Trained Professionals/Uniformity

There are essentially three organizations that provide permitting and code enforcement services in Warren County. One of them is the City of Warren. The other two are in Oil City and Erie. As a result, there are discrepancies in how the UCC is administered throughout the County, both in response time as well as the cost of permits and general enforcement. It also means local taxpayers are funding operations outside of the community (which is not uncommon in rural communities).

Regionally, there are few people who are properly certified for all of the various inspections a municipal code enforcement officer is required to administer. This makes it difficult to hire locally or employ qualified candidates for positions. All of these factors hamper growth and development and the system is slowed down by a series of small delays.

Finally, there is also a lack of quality contractors who understand and accommodate the uniform construction code. This makes it difficult for organizations (nonprofits/public institutions) to hire locally and trust that the work is going to be done up to specifications.

In response to these challenges, the Permits/Code Enforcement/Zoning sub-committee of the Warren County Redevelopment Task Force makes several recommendations meant to greatly improve public relations, public awareness, and the process for applying for various permits.

PROJECT | Public Relations Initiative

This project would essentially take on two forms. The first is the creation of a “Warren Builds” website which would function as a development hub for new construction. The second would be a comprehensive information campaign to promote the understanding and utilization of building codes and zoning ordinances.

“Warren Builds” Website

This would function as a construction information hub for the community and be a single point of entry for new homeowners, developers and anyone looking to build in Warren County. The site could be monitored and maintained by the County Planning Office, participating municipalities, motivated community members and anyone else who has a vested interest in the growth of Warren County.

Information on the site could include a series of contact forms for local code enforcement officials, step-by-step guides on how to navigate the system, frequently asked questions, downloadable and fillable forms to be returned to municipal agencies, complete documentation of all local ordinances and the uniform construction code, and perhaps information related to some of the previous issues sighted in the report like grant information and info related to neighborhood initiatives. There could also be simple videos produced with code enforcement officers and others discussing routine tasks and providing recommendations to help with common construction projects.

The site should be simple and straightforward so that it would be easy for citizens to move quickly from point A to point B. The site should be easily searchable and search engine optimized so that locals trying to find information online are taken quickly to relevant pages on the site. It would also be included in the County website navigation so that folks can quickly be redirected from the County site.

County residents are often understandably confused as to what they need to do for their project and who they need to talk to for the proper permits and other relevant information. It can be a real challenge. The site would be a one-stop-shop for this type of information and hopefully shorten motivated citizens searches.



Photo by Stratos Drone Services

Information Campaign

As a part of the development of a "Warren Builds" website could be the creation of various "info docs" which summarize how code enforcement works, best practices, common forms, and other relevant information and make them specific to each municipality. These summary documents can be circulated via snail mail and email, as well as carried to events.

Also, a part of the Information Campaign would be community and municipal engagement efforts. That would include regular presentations at the local COG (Council of Governments), forums at the Fair, informational videos shared on websites and social media, and engagement with the Municipal Secretaries organization.

A third piece to the information campaign would be the gathering fo "testimonials" from residents who've benefited from working with code enforcement officials. One story shared during Redevelopment Task Force discussion was the story of a man who was building a porch incorrectly. The Code Enforcement Offices instructed him to build it a different way, as the way method he was using would have caused the porch to collapse. The individual finished the project and warmly thanked the Code Enforcement Officers for their insights, despite being originally displeased with having to rework his designs. The individual realized the Code Enforcement Officers were right and they saved him a big headache down the road.

Potential Allies/Collaborators

As the most local authority, the City Code Enforcement Department would be a huge part in putting this together. The County Planning and Zoning Department would also be instrumental in gathering a processing information. The Commissioners Office would focus on resources to develop the website. The website could reside on the County's hosted system as a part of its overall web presence.

Action Plan

Step 1 - Gather Information

The initial effort to put together a comprehensive collection of all of the code enforcement and zoning information in the County would be challenging, but that is where you'd start. Currently, information exists in a variety of places. Once you had a complete picture of relevant construction information, you could move forward. This data could be collected by an ongoing subcommittee of the Redevelopment Task Force. It might be helpful to start with a checklist.

Step 2 - Organize Information/Generate Site Content and Website Framework

Once all data is collected, the action team would want to organize it according to some agreed upon framework. The framework should coincide with the start of a website framework. The focus has to be on simplicity in every case. Some descriptive content is going to need to be written for each section to help explain the processes related to permitting, code enforcement, and zoning. It's important to understand that the website would generally come first as print materials could be generated off of the content for the website.

Step 3 - Launch Website and Engage the Public

Once the website is completed and all information is up-to-date, the action team would initiate a site launch and simultaneously start a PR campaign to engage municipal officials and the public to share all of the information that has been gathered. The goal here is to create a big splash so the public feels as many informational "ripples" as possible. The long-term utilization of the website and other materials hinges on the community's awareness of their existence.

Funding/Cost Analysis

Most of the costs related to this project would be minimal and shouldered by the County. All of the website development and hosting costs could be incorporated into the County's IT budget. Print materials, however, would need to be split up. That said, those costs would be minimal. It's very possible the entire print setup could be done so that people could print the materials out on their home printers.



PROJECT | Government Symposium

The group felt strongly that an annual symposium for local officials would be extremely helpful to introduce township supervisors, borough council members, etc. to both opportunities and resources they can take advantage of to improve the quality of life for their residents. This annual symposium can cover many topics in the future, but for the initial event, we felt the areas of focus should be the Blight Process, the International Property Maintenance Code, and how they can/should work together; County Tax Claim; Zoning; and the PA Uniform Construction Code and local compliance. The presenters, starting out, could all be local and Youngsville Borough is willing to host the event free of charge. We propose soliciting sponsors for the event (banks, realtors, insurance companies, engineers, etc.) which would subsidize a lunch offered for free to the participants (which would hopefully encourage attendance). A keynote speaker will start the day off, followed by four presenters, each with an hour of time to make their presentation.

The idea here is to have another venue to talk with municipal officials and community leaders about growth and development in Warren County and the part code enforcement and zoning (among other issues) have to play. This event could easily be used to promote some of the other projects cited in this Report. The fundamental goal is cooperation and collaboration and getting everyone to work in concert with each other.

Potential Allies/Collaborators

The Warren County COG would be a obvious collaborator. Again, the City Code Enforcement Department would have to be an organizing force. The City Council and other municipal officials would need to be incorporated into the effort, along with the Commissioners. It's important to note that due to the efforts of the Task Force, this initiative has already been discussed in various circles and may be rolled out in 2019.

Action Plan

Step 1 - Convene Planning Committee and Gather Data

The planning team would identify a location, come up with a rough agenda, potential funding sources and other pertinent data related to the setup for the first Government Symposium. It could be roughly modified after the Municipal Officials Conference generally held at the Youngsville Firehall in the summer, but with a more expanded mission and more localized sharing of information.

Step 2 - Set Date and Promote Event

Once a date, time, and location are set for the event, along with an agenda and speakers, the promotion of the event should begin. The goal needs to be to cast as wide a net as possible to encourage attendance and make it a great networking opportunity.

Step 3 - Review and Follow Up

After the event is launched and takes place an effort to review the outcome is important in order to learn from what worked and what didn't. One of the challenges is generally to make these types of these events interesting and not bore attendees with tons of dry presentations on "nuts-and-bolts" issues. The CCAP conferences are a good watermark to reference as they mix entertainment and dynamic topics with great educational offerings as well so that attendees do not get overwhelmed.

Funding/Cost Analysis

It's difficult to project the related costs with an event such as this without doing a great deal of research. It's assumed that between a catered lunch and a quality room rental you're looking at roughly \$2000 for one hundred individuals. As stated previously, there are locations that have already volunteered their spaces for use for such an event, so there's a lot to sift through. There's nothing being proposed that couldn't be funded through sponsorships with regional vendors, including banks, architects, municipal service providers, and other government-related businesses.



PROJECT | Neighborhood Initiative

This was also proposed in the Blighted Property Subcommittee and fleshed out to a greater degree in that section of the Report. For the purposes of code enforcement, it's important to note that there is a definite lack of resources from which select property owners can seek assistance with minor property maintenance concerns, such as high grass, clogged gutters, shoveling snow, minor repairs, painting of siding, etc. The goal of a "Neighborhood Initiative" would be to encourage and organize able-bodied members of the community willing to help others in need, so they can assist with minor property maintenance issues. This is especially relevant for vulnerable seniors who may have challenges with maintaining their properties long term and during a temporary crisis.

PROJECT | Recruit and Develop New Code Enforcement Officers

There is a serious statewide lack of certified PA Uniform Construction Code plan reviewers and inspectors for both residential and commercial projects. This is a three-fold problem. First, there is little awareness of the opportunities in this career field; second, there are limited educational opportunities for anyone interested in taking the certification tests required by the Commonwealth; and third, once the test is passed, there are limited opportunities for mentoring as people work to gain experience in the field.

The City Codes Department has initiated conversations with both the Warren County School District Career Center and the Northern Pennsylvania Regional College to begin to address these areas of concern. The City Codes Department will continue to cultivate a relationship with the Career Center engineering and construction classes to introduce those students to the lucrative careers available to them in regards to PA UCC plan review and inspection services. In addition, the Northern Pennsylvania Regional College is now exploring the viability of offering college credit and/or certificate level programs related to PA UCC services.

Potential Allies/Collaborators

As stated, the Warren County School District Career Center and the Northern Pennsylvania Regional College would be collaborators in a concerted effort to channel

prospects through training programs to become code enforcement officers. This could be done in conjunction with the City Code Enforcement Department and the County Government.

Action Plan

Step 1 - Build Relationships with Educational Resources

One of the signature achievements of the Redevelopment Task Force has been the building of previously unrealized partnerships. In this case, the City Code Enforcement Department, spurred by discussions during Redevelopment Task Force meetings initiated talks with regional educational institutions to address the lack of knowledgeable code enforcement inspectors in the area. This type of collaboration and team building needs to continue for these projects to be successful.

Step 2 - Continue to Coordinate Regionally on Recruitment

On an annual basis, the need to re-engage with local officials and educational resources will be a must. That way, the focus on recruitment will be maintained and new prospects will be regularly cultivated.

Funding/Cost Analysis

There should be little-accrued cost in this project. Potentially, down the road, if recruitment is incredibly challenging, it may be necessary to come up with incentive programs funded by various municipalities and/or the County to encourage prospects to join the various certification programs.

Links/Resources

Municipal Code and Ordinance Compliance Act:

<https://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/li/uconsCheck.cfm?yr=2000&sessInd=0&act=99>

McNees Landuse Blog - A Brief History of Zoning in Pennsylvania:

<https://www.mcneelanduse.com/2018/06/brief-history-zoning-pennsylvania/>

Photo by Stratos Drone Services

