

# Assessing the Feasibility of Side Yard Programs as a Solution to Land Vacancy in U.S. Shrinking Cities

Urban Affairs Review

1–18

© The Author(s) 2014

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1078087414555435

uar.sagepub.com



Joanna P. Ganning<sup>1</sup> and J. Rosie Tighe<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Scholars have recommended various strategies to combat land vacancy in shrinking cities. Side yard programs, in which adjacent homeowners purchase vacant lots, represent one such solution. We use the case study city of St. Louis, Missouri, to evaluate this approach's potential for reducing residential land vacancy. The analysis reveals that while demand-side issues (i.e., affordability) exist, the supply-side barriers (i.e., restrictive guidelines and inequitable or illogical pricing structures) are the larger constraints for the program's success. In St. Louis, the program as currently structured could find buyers for approximately 10.8% of vacant residential parcels if all eligible buyers were interested. Through comparison of policy scenarios, we conclude that program policy significantly influences a program's potential success through a range of mechanisms including restrictions regarding buyers' owner-occupancy status, side yard lot width maximums, and pricing structure. State legislation regarding tax foreclosure auctions and elements of urban design also influence program effectiveness.

---

<sup>1</sup>University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA

<sup>2</sup>Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Joanna P. Ganning, Department of City & Metropolitan Planning, University of Utah, 375 S 1530 E, Room 235, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA.

Email: joanna.ganning@utah.edu

## Keywords

shrinking cities, side yards, vacant land

## Introduction

The effort to plan for shrinking cities has recently gained momentum (e.g., Hollander 2011a; Pallagst 2009, 2010). Scholars have chronicled the issue's scope (Beauregard 2009; Mallach 2010), outlined some of its macroeconomic causes (Hollander 2011b; Ryan 2012), suggested best practices (Goldstein, Jensen, and Reiskin 2001), and proposed solutions (e.g., Hollander 2011b; Popper and Popper 2002; Ryan 2012). Among other ideas, these solutions include home ownership and urban design goals (Ryan 2012), and inactive use strategies such as creating new parks and open space or promoting urban agriculture (Wachter 2004). Several other authors suggest conversion of abandoned lots to side yards and expanded holdings for remaining residents (e.g., Armbrorst, D'Oca, and Theodore 2008; Hollander 2011b; Ryan 2012). It is argued that such conversion would help to protect against vacancy and neglect, the effects of which have been extensively discussed (e.g., National Vacant Properties Campaign 2005; Wachter 2004; Whitaker and Fitzpatrick 2013). Some also note that such conversions would transfer land from tax delinquent or city-maintained status back to the tax rolls (Dewar 2006) and would improve the quality of life for residents by giving them suburban-style development patterns (Ryan 2012). One article even claims that expanding contiguous residential property could be an "entirely plausible response to Detroit's depopulation and disinvestment" (Armbrorst, D'Oca, and Theodore 2008, p. 47). However, the feasibility of this solution has yet to be proven. Affordability presents one obvious problem. The economic rationality of expending monies on land not likely to provide a return on investment presents another concern. Supply-side constraints also exist, primarily through the guidelines land banks impose for participation in side lot programs, and the pricing policies implemented.

Although urban land vacancy is not new (e.g., Berkman 1956), this issue is likely underresearched due to the dearth of available data. There is no data source or standard definition of vacant land across the United States (Dewar 2013; Pagano and Bowman 2000). Furthermore, case studies pose generalizability challenges, as some cities and counties operate land banks while others do not, state and local laws governing tax foreclosure and reversion vary widely, and local or regional norms for governmental cooperation, data management, and data quality vary. In addition, many cities have poor means of estimating the amount of vacant land that exists within the city or of maintaining an accurate count of vacant buildings (Pagano and Bowman 2000).

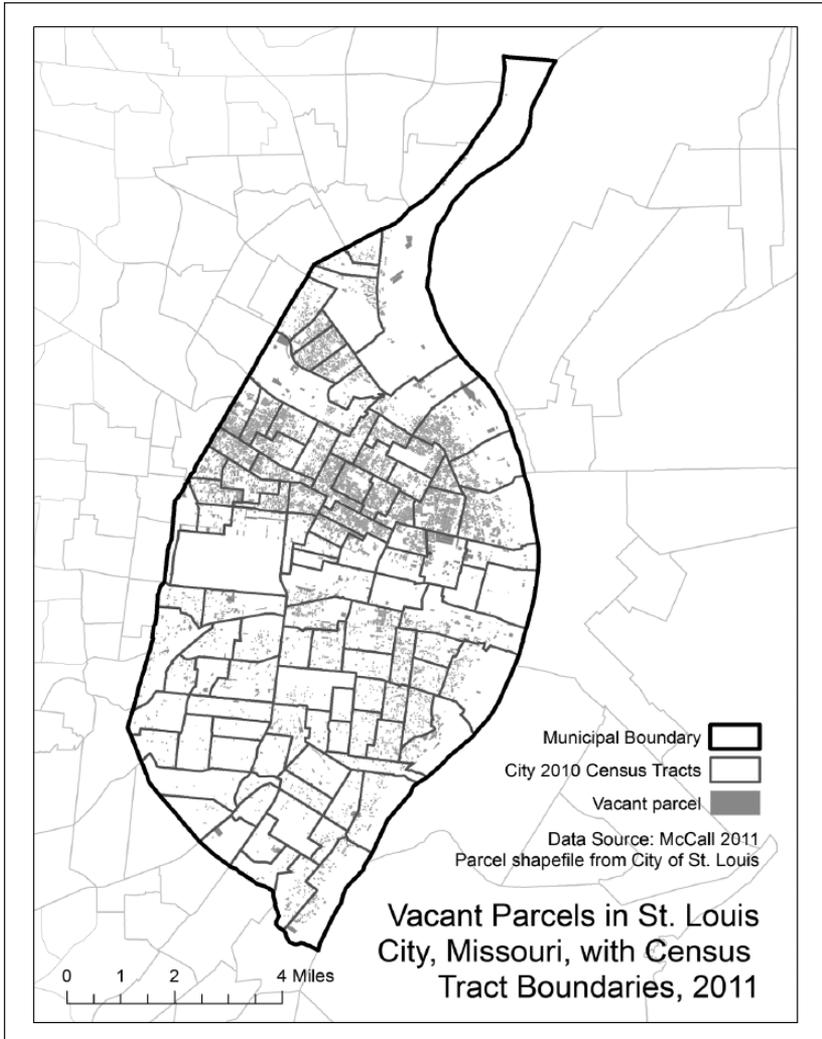
This article uses a parcel database from the City of St. Louis, Missouri, to assess the feasibility of the existing side yard program across three focus areas (Census tracts) and the city as a whole. This article argues that while affordability issues limit the success of any side yard program, the supply-side constraints (in this case, program eligibility guidelines and pricing) play a larger role in overall program feasibility. Based on the assessment, we conclude that side yard programs would be well advised to ease owner-occupancy requirements for buyers (as St. Louis has done) and consider revising other restrictive program rules, and that states might consider legislation to enable pre-auction property acquisitions by land banks, or to limit who can participate in auctions.

## Background

Programs encouraging homeowners to purchase adjacent, vacant lots are designed to accomplish several goals. First, they provide the opportunity to formalize existing but informal arrangements, where neighbors have appropriated use without ownership. Second, these programs provide neighbors some assurance that neither speculators nor locally unwanted land uses (LULUs) will encroach. Third, these programs reduce land maintenance costs for the city, by shifting responsibility to homeowners. These programs also create revenue by moving the property back onto the tax rolls (Ehrenfeucht and Nelson 2013).

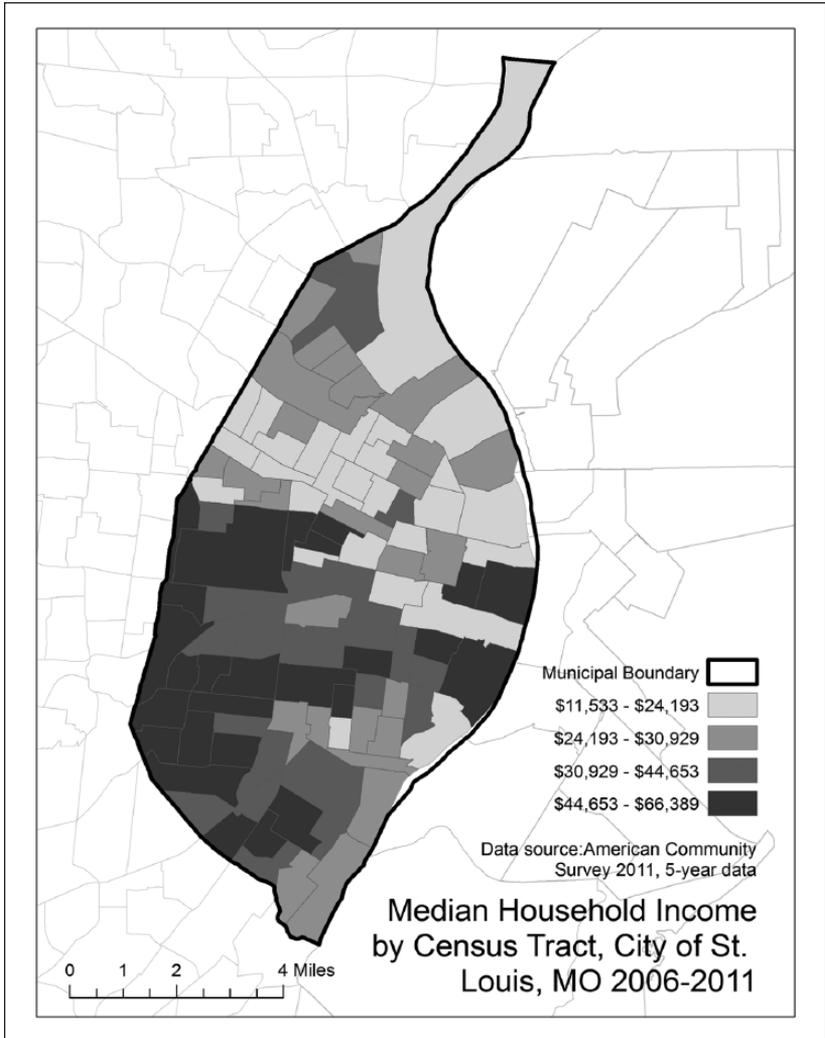
Evidence of success for such programs is mixed. The Lot Next Door program was established in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. By June 2011, the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA) announced its thousandth Lot Next Door closing. However, the program “had more impact in higher-income neighborhoods where residents were more likely to have the means to acquire an additional lot” (Ehrenfeucht and Nelson 2013, p. 147) and “NORA officials acknowledged the difficulties in disposing of properties in the most blighted neighborhoods” (Ehrenfeucht and Nelson 2013, p. 148). This challenge may be especially relevant in a case such as St. Louis, where issues of land vacancy are more prevalent in low-income neighborhoods (Figures 1 and 2).

Where side yard programs are finding buyers in low-income neighborhoods, it is not clear that the net effect is significant. In the Brightmoor neighborhood of Detroit, approximately 250 lots had been purchased to add to adjacent homeowners’ lots as of 2010. However, 166 vacant lots had become dumpsites, 31% of housing units in the neighborhood were vacant, and only 18% of property offered at auction, for \$500 per property, sold between 2002 and 2010 (Dewar and Thomas 2013; all currency in U.S. dollars). Other lots



**Figure I.** Vacant parcels in St. Louis City, Missouri, 2011.

were, certainly, used as side yards without legal ownership. Armbrorst, D’Oca, and Theodore (2008) claimed that land appropriations (which they call “New Suburbanism” or “blotting”) “are typically purchased legally” in Detroit (p. 54), yet argued repeatedly that the effect is a “large-scale, unplanned re-platting



**Figure 2.** Median household income by Census tract, in quantiles City of St. Louis, Missouri, 2011.

of the city that will happen through the bottom-up actions of thousands of individual homeowners” and “could change Detroit forever” (p. 48).

In practice, side yard programs (and land bank programs in general) have encountered a range of barriers. By far, the most frequently mentioned are

clouded title (Dewar 2006, 2013; Thomas 2013), inconsistent or unpredictable pricing (Dewar 2006, 2013), government incapacity (Beauregard 2013; Herscher 2013; Schilling and Vasudevan 2013; see also LeDuff 2013), and inconsistent or poor record keeping by local governments (Pagano and Bowman 2000; Thomas 2013). Among regulatory barriers, legislation allowing land banks to acquire tax-reverted properties varies considerably between states. Powers vary broadly in the ability to intercept properties before a tax foreclosure auction and in the ability to limit who can purchase at auctions; both issues affect the role of land speculation (Hackworth 2014). On the demand side, if vacant land is more apparent in low-income neighborhoods, it is logical to wonder whether households in these areas have the means to acquire and maintain expanded real estate holdings. This article argues that these significant demand-side constraints pale in comparison with supply-side challenges.

While it may be tempting to simply give land to adjacent homeowners, there are substantial costs that must be accounted for, and different places and programs have handled them differently. In New Orleans, a buyer pays approximately \$2,250 per property, paying for legal fees and real estate transaction costs which yield clear title (Lowe and Bates 2013). In both Detroit and Cleveland, residents have purchased lots for as little as \$100 (Armbrorst, D'Oca, and Theodore 2008). Information is unavailable regarding costs for legal fees or transaction costs in the case of Detroit. In Cleveland, the Cuyahoga Land Bank absorbs the recording and transfer fees (Cuyahoga County Land Reutilization Corp. 2013; Sarah Norman, personal correspondence, November 22, 2013). In Detroit, lots appear to be transferred without guarantee of clear title. In Cleveland, although the Cuyahoga Land Bank transfers lots with quitclaim deeds, property is always transferred with clear title (Cuyahoga Land Bank, Lilah Zautner, personal communication, November 4, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Costs increase in programs that include soil clean-up from previous buildings or infrastructure, although no national, systematic data exist on this either. Two projects in Philadelphia averaged lot costs for remediation of \$16,238 in 2000 or \$22,355 in 2014 dollars (Cummings, DiPasquale, and Kahn 2002; Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014).

In the context of this range of prices and benefits, St. Louis's land bank, the Land Reutilization Authority (henceforth LRA), offers a middle-of-the-road approach. For the price of \$18.75 to \$257.80 per foot of frontage (depending on neighborhood and assessor's neighborhood, a subgeography of each neighborhood) plus approximately \$350 in closing costs, an adjacent homeowner can purchase land for a side lot with clear title for a lot with up to a 25-foot frontage (the standard residential lot width in the city; under

some conditions a 30-foot frontage is allowed). Costs in St. Louis are higher than the costs in cities conveying land with clouded title, yet much lower than the costs associated with achieving clear title and land remediation. The combination of having program costs in the middle of the range of observable program costs across the country, having lost 63% of population between 1950 and 2010, and having appropriate data for analysis (notably, parcel data and reliable land vacancy data) encouraged the use of St. Louis as a case study city. One legislative detail also recommends St. Louis; vacant land can be purchased *only* through private sales or through the St. Louis Redevelopment Corporation (SLRC). The SLRC houses various authorities, but only the Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority (LCRA) and the LRA manage real estate sales, and the LCRA does not handle side yard transactions. Consequently, the assessment of the LRA program does not constitute an oversight of alternative government programs. In addition, the municipal boundaries of the City of St. Louis have been fixed since 1876, cleanly negating any concerns regarding the relationship between vacancy and annexation (see Bowman and Pagano 2000).

The LRA was established in 1971 by Missouri legislation that authorized it to “acquire, hold, manage, and sell tax-foreclosed properties for which no private owners had bid” (Spalding and Duda 2011 p. 11). The LRA receives property either by private tender or, more often, by failure of tax-foreclosed properties to sell at auction. In St. Louis, tax auctions set a minimum price of the amount owed in taxes and fines at the time of foreclosure, with no no-minimum auction following. In 2009, the LRA held approximately 9,400 parcels. Between 2003 and 2010, the LRA received offers on over 5,300 unique properties, but rejected offers on 2,200 of those, 550 of them repeatedly. After a period ranging from one to three years after the LRA accepted or countered an offer, only 34% and 22% of these offers had resulted in a transfer of ownership, respectively. Between 2003 and 2009, the LRA sold approximately 2,096 properties, though its holdings held steady during this period (Spalding and Duda 2011). Information is not available regarding the number of these sales that stemmed from the side lot program, which has operated since at least the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Sales occurred without any clear spatial pattern across the city, as can be seen in the maps produced by the Show-Me Institute (Spalding 2011). The LRA has been criticized for its unwillingness to sell properties (Logan 2012) or provide clear rationales for its decisions, but also for pricing expectations that conflict with both the LRA’s own list prices and market conditions, and for a decision-making process that invites undue political influence and the possibility for corruption (Spalding and Duda 2011).

## Data and Method

At its simplest, the methodology involves identifying lots eligible for purchase through the side yard program and estimating the number of eligible buyers that could absorb that vacant land into side yards through the LRA. The results are presented according to possible program guideline scenarios, including the LRA policies in effect in March 2011 (the data's vintage), at present, and according to other possible scenarios. Each scenario, method, and data source is given in Table 1. In all scenarios, potential side yards are LRA-owned and residentially zoned, and buyers are adjacent homeowners of non-vacant, residentially zoned parcels.<sup>3</sup> Potential side yards and eligible buyers were identified using the City of St. Louis parcel database from March 2011 to match the vintage of the available land vacancy data (McCall 2011).<sup>4</sup> Adjacency and spatial aggregation were done using a Geographic Information System (GIS).

A few notes of clarification are warranted. First, in Scenario 2, side yards are limited to those with frontages of 30 feet or less. The side yard program rules state that parcels with 25-foot frontages (the standard city lot width), and under certain circumstances up to 30 feet, are candidates for side lot use and that applicants requesting lots with larger frontages must undergo an exemption process (City of St. Louis 2011). In practice, the regulation is confusing. Lots listed in the parcel database at just over 25 feet often appear in the LRA online sale database as standard lots, yet some publicity has surfaced regarding near-standard vacant residential lots that the LRA has refused to sell (Ihnen 2011b). A minimum of 30 feet was used to provide a margin of safety and to follow the published guidelines.

Second, Scenario 5 adjusts the results to allow for the assumption that neighbors separated by rear alleys would count as "adjacent" homeowners. This was estimated by assuming that each vacant lot could have five neighboring parcels (a neighbor to either side, a rear-facing neighbor, and two rear diagonal neighbors, one on each side), which would be the case were it not for the separation of parcels by the city's rear alley design. This method likely overestimates program potential, because some buyers in this scenario could be "adjacent" to multiple side lots, while LRA program rules clearly state that no individual can purchase more than one. These results are provided to allow generalizability to other cities.

As mentioned, the analysis was carried out in three representative Census tracts and citywide. Each Census tract in the City of St. Louis was evaluated for median household income (American Community Survey, Table S1903, five-year data) and percent of land that was vacant in 2011 by area (vs. number of parcels). The city's range of values was used to determine the 10th,

**Table 1.** Data and Method.

Scenario	Data Other Than Parcel Database	Method
Scenario 1: All vacant, LRA-owned, residentially zoned lots are eligible for purchase		
Scenario 2: Potential side lots limited to parcels with a maximum width of 30 feet		
Scenario 3: Scenario 2 conditions AND potential buyers are limited to owner-occupants		
Scenario 4: Scenario 3 conditions AND potential buyers are limited to those likely to have expendable monies	American Community Survey 2011 five-year data <sup>a</sup>	Scenario 3: Number of potential buyers is multiplied by the percent of owner-occupied households spending less than 30% of income (the affordability limit) on housing
Scenario 5: Scenario 4 conditions AND each side lot are assumed to have five neighbors		Within each tract: (No. of potential side yards) × 5 × (No. of eligible buyers identified in Scenario 4 / Total No. of lots adjacent to eligible side yard properties)
Scenario 6: Scenario 2 plus the affordability constraint	American Community Survey 2011 five-year data	Scenario 2: Number of potential buyers is multiplied by the percent of owner-occupied households spending less than 30% of income (the affordability limit) on housing.

Note. LRA = Land Reutilization Authority.

a. The use of American Community Survey data is less than ideal given the wide margins of error reported, and results should be interpreted accordingly. It also bears noting that the use of housing affordability to gauge purchasing power is not a standard measure, but in the absence of a more standard approach, it is reasonable to assume that households experiencing housing unaffordability would not likely expend monies on additional land. One could easily recalculate the lines in Table 2 to remove the demand-side constraint of affordability if desired.

50th, and 90th percentiles of income (low to high) and percent vacant land (high to low). The Census tracts minimizing the total, standardized, absolute value difference to the three percentiles were chosen to represent the city at the 10th, 50th, and 90th percentiles. While land vacancy was the intuitive choice for a selection variable, in the absence of any socioeconomic variable it led to the selection of industrial areas or areas that were outliers in key

metrics that would bias an analysis. The 10th (low income, high land vacancy), 50th, and 90th (high income, low land vacancy) percentiles were selected to provide a range of least to most distressed areas, excluding outliers. The citywide results were estimated by calculating the outcome of each scenario at the tract level for all tracts in the city, then aggregating.

Within each focus area, a specific LRA-owned lot was used to calculate the purchase cost of a side yard according to the published cost schedule (City of St. Louis 2011). As most program-eligible lots have a frontage of approximately 25 feet, the specific costs do not vary considerably between properties within each assessor's neighborhood. There are, however, large differences in the per-frontage-foot price between assessor's neighborhoods. Assessor's data from March 2011 and the city's millage rate were used to estimate the annual property tax. This is used to further inform the discussion on program affordability and pricing.

## Results and Discussion

### Results

The first step of the methodology identifies the number of vacant parcels for each representative tract and for the city as a whole. As Table 2 shows, these numbers vary widely across tracts. The 10th percentile tract (low income, high land vacancy) has 198 vacant residential parcels and 23.3% land vacancy (counting all vacant land) by area. The 90th percentile tract (high income, low land vacancy), which represents an area with a more robust real estate market, shows only 32 vacant residential lots and a 2.1% land vacancy rate by area. The city as a whole has 15,076 vacant residential lots and 7.8% vacant land by area (a tract exactly at the 50th percentile of land vacancy by area would have a land vacancy rate of 5.3% and the 7.8% figure decreases if one includes the city's water area in the denominator).

Scenario 1, the most lenient, would allow a significant return of vacant residential land to private ownership. The program could address from 11% of vacant residential parcels in the 10th percentile tract, to 59% in the 50th and 32% citywide. In the focus tracts, there would be more eligible buyers than available side yards. Each incremental program restriction limits this feasibility, in most cases, severely. The restriction that side yards must not exceed 30 feet in frontage (Scenario 2) removes 47% of potential side yards from the pool citywide. The owner-occupancy requirement (Scenario 3) removes 57% of remaining potential buyers citywide and nearly two-thirds in the 50th percentile tract. In Scenario 4, affordability is applied, eliminating a quarter of remaining buyers citywide (using the Scenario 3 maximum buyer number as the denominator) and

**Table 2.** Analysis of the Supply and Demand of Vacant Lots for Side Yard Conversion in Three Sample Census Tracts, St. Louis, 2011.

	10th Percentile	50th Percentile	90th Percentile	City of St. Louis
<b>Contextual data</b>				
No. of households	1,090	1,968	1,813	139,930
No. of parcels	753	2,295	1,290	129,506
No. of parcels zoned residential	700	2,134	1,242	111,213
No. of vacant residential parcels	198	151	32	15,076
All vacant land as % of tract by area	23.3	5.7	2.1	7.8
<b>Scenario 1 (all LRA-owned, vacant, residentially zoned lots)</b>				
No. of potential side yards	21	89	4	7,100
No. of neighboring parcels	52	139	9	7,365
No. of potential buyers	34	120	7	4,861
% vacant residential parcels absorbed if all potential buyers participated	10.6	58.9	12.5	32.2
<b>Scenario 2 (limited to 30 feet frontage)</b>				
No. of potential side yards	6	44	2	3,788
No. of neighboring parcels	18	77	4	4,937
No. of potential buyers	11	65	3	2,642
% vacant residential parcels absorbed if all potential buyers participated	3.0	29.1	6.3	17.5
<b>Scenario 3 (further limited to owner-occupants)</b>				
No. of potential buyers	8	23	2	1,149
% vacant residential parcels absorbed if all potential buyers participated	3.0	15.2	6.3	7.6
<b>Scenario 4: LRA 2011 Scenario (further limited by affordability)</b>				
% owner-occupant households with <30% income spent on housing <sup>a</sup>	42.5	57.3	64.6	73.3 <sup>b</sup>
No. of potential buyers	3	13	1	715
% vacant residential parcels absorbed if all potential buyers participated	1.5	8.6	3.1	4.7
<b>Scenario 5 (five neighbor analysis)</b>				
No. of potential buyers	6	38	3	2,493
<b>Scenario 6: LRA 2014 Scenario (Scenario 2 plus affordability limit)</b>				
No. of potential buyers	5	37	2	1,625
% vacant residential parcels absorbed if all potential buyers participated	2.5	24.5	6.3	10.8

Note. Where the number of potential buyers exceeds the number of potential side yards, the latter is used to calculate the maximum absorption potential of the scenario. LRA = Land Reutilization Authority.

a. U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2011 five-year data.

b. This figure represents the city as a whole and was not used in calculations. The number of potential buyers citywide was calculated using tract-level data, then aggregating.

a higher share in the low-income tract. Scenario 5 depicts Scenario 4 if the city were designed without rear alley divisions between properties.

Scenario 4 depicts the LRA's policy on selling side yard lots as of March 2011, the date for which these data are current. The bottom line of the Scenario 4 panel indicates the percentage of vacant, residentially zoned parcels that could be moved to private ownership if all potential buyers were interested. Citywide, the program as operated under these rules could have accommodated, at most, the sale of 4.7% of all vacant residential lots. Later in 2011, after urging from journalists and citizens, the LRA policy was amended to allow sale to adjacent homeowners regardless of owner-occupancy status (Ihnen 2011a). The estimated effect of this policy change (noting that the data underlying this analysis were approximately six months out of date at that point) is shown in Scenario 6. As can be seen, citywide and in all focus area tracts except the 10th percentile tract, this policy amendment allowed the sales potential of side lots to double.

## Discussion

The feasibility of side lot program success depends upon the combined influence of supply-side and demand-side barriers. As Table 2 reveals, supply-side challenges (policies and pricing) create larger barriers to program feasibility than do demand-side issues (affordability). Yet, the ability of a land bank to influence these factors is mixed. On the supply side, some barriers are matters of land bank policy. The elimination of the owner-occupancy rule provides an example. The LRA could go further, however, by easing the 30-foot frontage rule, which also significantly affects program feasibility, though this must be balanced with other plans and planning goals. Land ownership is more difficult. A lot must be owned by the land bank to be eligible for purchase through the land bank's program. In both the 10th and 90th percentile tracts, nearly 90% of vacant residential land is owned outside the land bank, primarily by developers. Consequently, in both tracts, the side yard program could return substantially less than 10% of vacant land to private ownership. In Missouri, the land bank cannot preclude speculators from purchasing land from tax foreclosure auctions, though broader powers are being granted to land banks elsewhere in the United States (Hackworth 2014; Logan 2012; for a discussion of Detroit's struggle with land speculation, see Galster 2012; MacDonald 2011; see also Hackworth 2014). Enhancing the potential of the side yard program from the supply side requires, in this case, amendment of state law to allow land banks to bypass the tax foreclosure auction process or stricter regulation of buyers at such auctions.

On the demand side, the land bank cannot directly influence household incomes, and thus the affordability constraints presented in Table 2 lie beyond control. However, on the supply side, the land bank could make ownership

**Table 3.** Estimation of Costs and the Range of Potentially Available Monies for Potential Consumers of Vacant Lots Through a Side Yard Program in St. Louis, 2011.

	10th Percentile	50th Percentile	90th Percentile
Purchase price for representative vacant lot	\$1,406	\$938	\$3,516
Transaction costs	\$350	\$350	\$350
Annual property taxes on side yard only	\$36	\$42	\$181
Total Year 1 costs	\$1,793	\$1,329	\$4,047

affordable for a larger group by adjusting the pricing policy. Table 3 presents the total cost of purchasing a side yard in each of the three focus areas (estimated as described in the methodology section). Acquisition costs for a side yard range from \$1,330 in the 50th percentile tract to \$4,047 in the 90th percentile tract. These costs include the land price, transaction costs, and property taxes, and the land comes with clear title. Property taxes, estimated from assessor's data and city millage rates, are owed annually. Paradoxically, the purchase price in the 10th percentile tract exceeds the price in the 50th percentile tract.

This could readily be amended by an equity-based pricing structure based on neighborhood incomes. A market-based pricing structure would bring the purchase price in line with the assessed value of the property. Evidence suggests that a reduction in the purchase price can stimulate demand; a policy experiment held by the LRA in 1989 reduced the cost of a side yard purchase for a two-month period within a small portion of the city. Properties sold at a disproportionate rate within that area during the sale, but the LRA downplayed the results and ended the experiment (Spalding and Duda 2011).

The results do not touch on environmental barriers facing side yard programs, though they could be significant, as cited in the case of Philadelphia. The likelihood that a side lot program exposes residents to environmental contamination lies beyond the scope of this article, yet warrants further study.

## Conclusion

Citywide in St. Louis, the land bank's side yard program as of March 2011 could find buyers for up to 4.7% of vacant residential lots, jumping to a maximum of 10.8% when the owner-occupancy requirement was dropped. Different

combinations of demand- and supply-side barriers give the side yard program more and less capability to combat vacant land in different neighborhoods. The tract at the 50th percentile of both median household income and vacant land by area was found to have the best potential for the side yard program. Under Scenario 6, nearly a quarter of vacant residential parcels in this tract could be sold if all potential buyers were interested, not counting rear alley neighbors.

Overall, supply-side barriers (policies and pricing) weaken program potential more than supply-side concerns (affordability) do. The LRA, and similar land banks elsewhere, could find more buyers by both loosening restrictive guidelines and bringing pricing policies in line with *either* land values or equity-based approaches. Most obviously and readily, guidelines could be changed to cover properties with frontages exceeding 25 (or 30) feet, though this decision should be made in consultation with broader planning goals. The State of Missouri might consider buyer restrictions for the purchase of vacant land at tax foreclosure auctions. While it is not an issue in St. Louis, the issue of conveying land with clouded title will remain a challenge in other shrinking cities. Similarly, for land banks that have the ability to devise targeting strategies, the common practice of triage, which emphasizes viable but threatened neighborhoods over lower-income areas, will underserve areas most in need of public programming. The economic rationality of expending even nominal amounts of money to expand real estate holdings in low-income areas will resurface as well.

Aside from restructuring side yard programs, alternative solutions remain elusive for high-vacancy neighborhoods. Large building projects face challenges in assembling contiguous parcels, remediating land, and gaining clear title (e.g., Ryan 2012). Preventing land speculation in the absence of aggressive targeting is difficult, due in part to difficulties in restricting bidders at tax foreclosure auctions. Blotting has been promoted by some (e.g., Armbrorst, D'Oca, and Theodore 2008) as a bottom-up strategy for managing land vacancy. However, other scholars cast serious doubt on its plausibility, going so far as to submit that "it therefore constituted an acceptance of state (and market) passivity, and even an antistate, antimarket approach that bordered on libertarianism" and would deny "design a role in shaping the future of the city at a scale greater than the individual property owner" (Ryan 2012, p. 188).

We hope that this evaluation of the feasibility of side yard programs in combating residential land vacancy will lead to research on the feasibility of other strategies for neighborhoods in shrinking cities. Of course, encouraging "gradual, unplanned, uncoordinated, and bottom-up" (Armbrorst, D'Oca, and Theodore 2008, p. 49) neighborhood change is also an option, but is not ideal if planning seeks to address issues of equity, environmental remediation, or credibility in shrinking cities.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

1. A quitclaim deed offers no warranties and thus offers the worst protections for side lot buyers. Generally, a quitclaim deed does *not* come with clear title. However, in the case of the Cuyahoga Land Bank, correspondence with two program officials indicated that a quitclaim deed is offered with clear title. The confusion stemming from this seeming contradiction was a primary reason for contacting the Cuyahoga Land Bank directly.
2. We spoke with two staff members at Land Reutilization Authority (LRA) who could not pinpoint a date and indicated that possibly no one knew an exact inception date. A third staff member did not return our phone calls. The Show-Me Institute report, as discussed later in this article, references a 1989 policy experimentation, so it can be surmised that the program is at least that old.
3. “Homeowner” is defined as ownership by “Individual” or “Redevelopment” in the parcel database. These classifications are interpreted by the city as private individuals.
4. Although the parcel database contains a field for land vacancy, the office that maintains the database instructs that this field is not reliable. Therefore, while the parcel database was used to identify potential side lots, as it is the authoritative source for LRA ownership, McCall (2011) was used to ensure that potential buyers represented nonvacant adjacent parcels. McCall is also used to establish citywide land vacancy rates in Table 2. McCall incorporates advanced spatial processing with local data and U.S. Postal Service data to improve reliability of the City’s vacancy fields.

## References

- Amborst, Tobias, Daniel D’Oca, and Georjeen Theodore. 2008. “Improve Your Lot!” In *Cities Growing Smaller*. Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, 45-64. Cleveland: Kent State Univ.
- Beauregard, Robert A. 2009. “Shrinking Cities in the United States in Historical Perspective: A Research Note.” In *The Future of Shrinking Cities: Problems, Patterns and Strategies of Urban Transformation in a Global Context*, edited by Karina Pallagst, Jasmin Aber, Ivonne Audirac, Emmanuele Cunningham-Sabot, Sylvie Fol, Cristina Martinez-Fernandez, Sergio Moraes, Helen Mulligan, Jose Vargas-Hernandez, Thorsten Wiechmann, Tong Wu, and Jessica Rich, 61–68.

- Berkeley: Institute of Urban and Regional Development, Univ. of California, Berkeley.
- Beauregard, Robert A. 2013. "Strategic Thinking for Distressed Neighborhoods." In *The City After Abandonment*, edited by Margaret Dewar and June M. Thomas, 227–43. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.
- Berkman, Herman G. 1956. "Decentralization and Blighted Vacant Land." *Land Economics* 32 (3): 270–80.
- Bowman, Anne, and Michael A. Pagano. 2000. "Transforming America's Cities: Policies and Conditions of Vacant Land." *Urban Affairs Review* 35 (4): 559–81.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2014. *Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator*. [http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm) (accessed May 20, 2014).
- City of St. Louis. 2011. "Pricing Information and Renovation Costs." <https://stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/slhc/real-estate/pricing-information.cfm> (accessed November 1, 2013).
- Cummings, Jean L., Denise DiPasquale, and Matthew E. Kahn. 2002. "Measuring the Consequences of Promoting Inner City Homeownership." *Journal of Housing Economics* 11 (3): 330–59.
- Cuyahoga County Land Reutilization Corp. 2013. "Side Lot Program." <http://cuyahogalandbank.org/sideLot.php> (accessed October 28, 2013).
- Dewar, Margaret. 2006. "Selling Tax-Reverted Land: Lessons from Cleveland and Detroit." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 72 (2): 167–80.
- Dewar, Margaret. 2013. "What Helps or Hinders Nonprofit Developers in Reusing Vacant, Abandoned, and Contaminated Property?" In *The City After Abandonment*, edited by Margaret Dewar and June M. Thomas, 174–96. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.
- Dewar, Margaret, and June M. Thomas, eds. 2013. *The City After Abandonment*. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.
- Ehrenfeucht, Renia, and Marla Nelson. 2013. "Recovery in a Shrinking City: Challenges to 'Rightsizing' Post-Katrina New Orleans." In *The City After Abandonment*, edited by Margaret Dewar and June M. Thomas, 133–50. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.
- Galster, George. 2012. *Driving Detroit: The Quest for Respect in Motown*. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.
- Goldstein, James, Michael Jensen, and Edward Reiskin. 2001. *Urban Vacant Land Redevelopment: Challenges and Progress*. Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.
- Hackworth, Jason. 2014. "The Limits to Market-Based Strategies for Addressing Land Abandonment in Shrinking American Cities." *Progress in Planning* 90:1–37.
- Herscher, Andrew. 2013. "Detroit Art City: Urban Decline, Aesthetic Production, Public Interest." In *The City After Abandonment*, edited by Margaret Dewar and June M. Thomas, 64–83. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hollander, Justin. 2011a. "Can a City Successfully Shrink? Evidence from Survey Data on Neighborhood Quality." *Urban Affairs Review* 47 (1): 129–41.
- Hollander, Justin. 2011b. *Sunburnt Cities*. London: Routledge.

- Ihnen, Alex. 2011a. "A Side Yard in the City: St. Louis, Vacant Land and Shrinking Cities in the News." *NextSTL, Politics & Policy*. <http://nextstl.com/2011/11/a-side-yard-in-the-city-st-louis-vacant-land-and-a-shrinking-city/> (accessed September 6, 2014).
- Ihnen, Alex. 2011b. "Why the LRA Should Sell This Lot, but Won't." *Next STL, Urban Living*. <http://nextstl.com/2011/04/why-lra-should-sell-this-lot-but-wont/> (accessed November 20, 2013).
- LeDuff, Charlie. 2013. *Detroit: An American Autopsy*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Logan, Tim. 2012. "City's Land Plan Has Successes, Shortcomings." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 25. [http://www.stltoday.com/business/local/city-s-land-plan-has-successes-shortcomings/article\\_cb0f6e66-5f09-11e1-94ca-001a4bcf6878.html](http://www.stltoday.com/business/local/city-s-land-plan-has-successes-shortcomings/article_cb0f6e66-5f09-11e1-94ca-001a4bcf6878.html) (accessed June 4, 2014).
- Lowe, Jeffrey S., and Lisa K. Bates. 2013. "Missing New Orleans: Lessons from the CDC Sector on Vacancy, Abandonment, and Reconstructing the Crescent City." In *The City After Abandonment*, edited by Margaret Dewar and June M. Thomas, 151–73. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.
- MacDonald, Christine. 2011. "Private Landowners Complicate Reshaping of Detroit." *The Detroit News*, February 3. <http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20110203/METRO01/102030395> (accessed May 23, 2014).
- Mallach, Alan. 2010. *Facing the Urban Challenge*. Washington, DC: Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution and What Works Collaborative.
- McCall, Benjamin D. 2011. "Vacant Land Census for the City of Saint Louis: Land Use Intelligence for Policy and Planning." Master's Capstone, Saint Louis Univ.
- National Vacant Properties Campaign. 2005. *Vacant Properties: The True Costs to Communities*. Washington, DC: National Vacant Properties Campaign.
- Pagano, Michael A., and Anne Bowman. 2000. *Vacant Land in Cities: An Urban Resource*. Washington, DC: Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, The Brookings Institution.
- Pallagst, Karina. 2009. "Shrinking Cities in the United States of America: Three Cases, Three Planning Stories." In *The Future of Shrinking Cities: Problems, Patterns and Strategies of Urban Transformation in a Global Context*, edited by Karina Pallagst, Jasmin Aber, Ivonne Audirac, Emmanuele Cunningham-Sabot, Sylvie Fol, Cristina Martinez-Fernandez, Sergio Moraes, Helen Mulligan, Jose Vargas-Hernandez, Thorsten Wiechmann, Tong Wu, and Jessica Rich, 81–88. Berkeley: Institute of Urban and Regional Development, Univ. of California, Berkeley.
- Pallagst, Karina. 2010. "Viewpoint: The Planning Research Agenda: Shrinking Cities—A Challenge for Planning Cultures." *Town Planning Review* 81 (5): i–vi.
- Popper, Deborah E., and Frank J. Popper. 2002. "Small Can Be Beautiful: Coming to Terms with Decline." *Planning* 68 (7): 20–23.
- Ryan, Brent D. 2012. *Design After Decline*. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.
- Schilling, Joseph, and Raksha Vasudevan. 2013. "The Promise of Sustainability Planning for Regenerating Older Industrial Cities." In *The City After Abandonment*,

- edited by Margaret Dewar and June M. Thomas, 244–67. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.
- Spalding, Audrey. 2011. “Maps Showing Offers to Purchase LRA Property, and Where the LRA Has Rejected Offers to Purchase Property.” <http://www.show-meinstitute.org/publications/policy-study/red-tape/507-standstill.html> (accessed June 4, 2012).
- Spalding, Audrey, and Thomas Duda. 2011. *Standstill: Is Saint Louis Hindering Development by Waiting for Large-Scale Miracles?* St Louis, MO: Show-Me Institute.
- Thomas, June M. 2013. “Targeting Strategies of Three Detroit CDCs.” In *The City After Abandonment*, edited by Margaret Dewar and June M. Thomas, 197–244. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.
- Wachter, Susan. 2004. *The Determinants of Neighborhood Transformations in Philadelphia, Identification and Analysis: The New Kensington Pilot Study*. Philadelphia: Wharton School, Univ. of Pennsylvania.
- Whitaker, Stephan, and Thomas Fitzpatrick. 2013. “Deconstructing Distressed-Property Spillovers: The Effects of Vacant, Tax-Delinquent, and Foreclosed Properties in Housing Submarkets.” *Journal of Housing Economics* 22 (2): 79–91.

### Author Biographies

**Joanna P. Ganning**, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of City & Metropolitan Planning and the executive director of the Metropolitan Research Center at the University of Utah. Her research focuses quantitatively on place-based economic development, natural resources, and the interface between the two.

**J. Rosie Tighe**, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Urban Studies at Cleveland State University. She holds a PhD in community and regional planning from the University of Texas at Austin and a master’s degree in urban and environmental policy and planning from Tufts University. Her research focuses on fair housing, race and class, public opinion, and housing affordability.