

Blight Certification for Fairhill/ St. Hugh:
Area bounded by Lehigh Avenue, 6th Street,
“B” Street and the AMTRAK Railroad

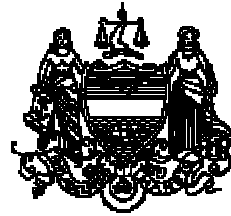
Philadelphia City Planning Commission
March 2003

CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

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Report by:
Cornel J. Pankey, *North Philadelphia Community Planner*

Contributions by:
Bryan C. Lightner, *GIS Specialist*
Jametia Johnson, *Strategic Planning Division*
Christine Rupert, *Student Intern*

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Philadelphia City Planning Commission, March 2003

INTRODUCTION

This report presents an evaluation of blight in two neighborhoods in Upper North Philadelphia east of Broad Street: Fairhill and St. Hugh. The blight certification boundaries are shown on page 2. The boundaries are Lehigh Avenue on the south, 6th Street on the west, "B" Street on the east, and the AMTRAK railroad on the north.

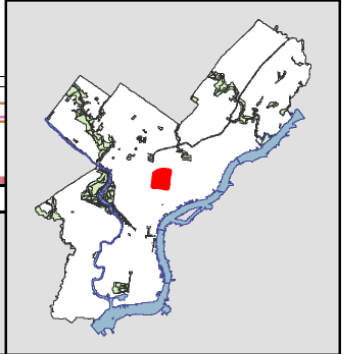
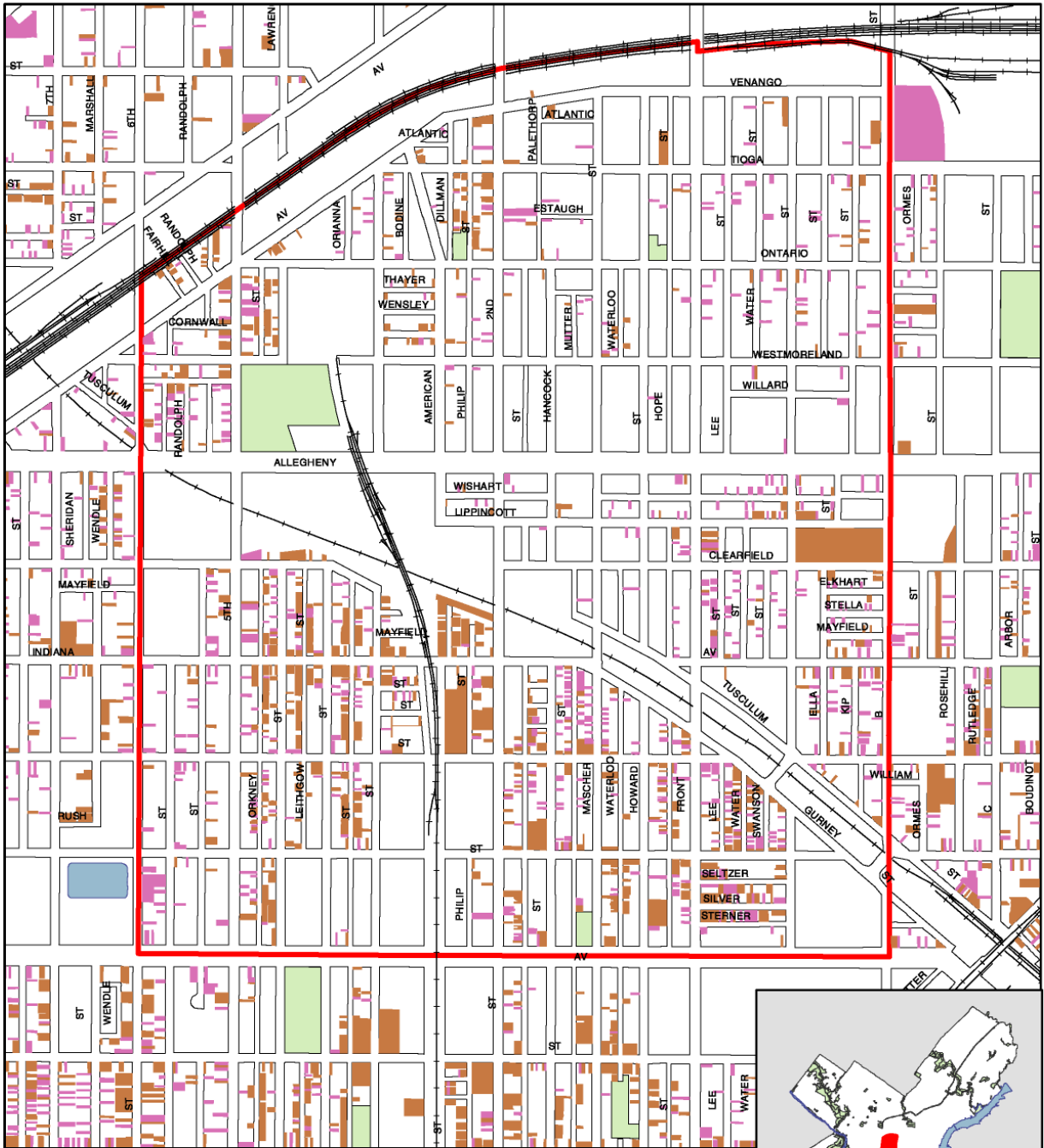
The northern part of the study area is the neighborhood of St. Hugh (north of Allegheny Avenue). The section south of Allegheny Avenue is the Fairhill neighborhood. This area is designated for community planning services as part of the City's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative.

The certification study reviews existing conditions in relation to seven criteria used to determine whether blight exists in an area. The criteria are set forth in Pennsylvania Urban Redevelopment Law, which



Blight Certification boundary

Blight Certification for Fairhill and St. Hugh



PCPC
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 Vacant Lot
 Vacant Building

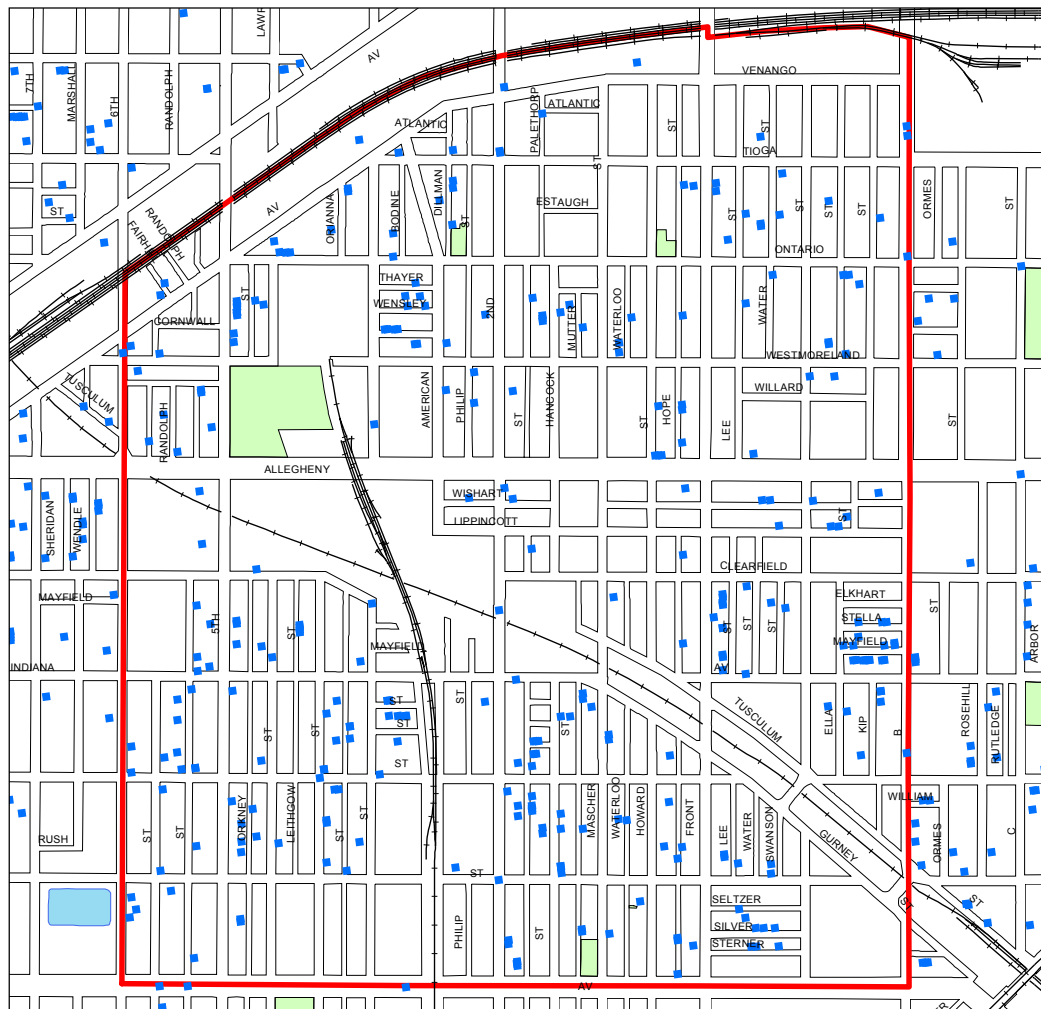


stipulates that only one of these criteria must be met to make a finding of blight in an area. The law also states that blighted conditions need not be evident throughout the area under study. The fact that individual properties are free from blight does not make the finding of blight arbitrary, according to the law, because comprehensive planning requires that areas be considered in their entirety, and not in their unseverable parts.

This report cites specific examples of the conditions listed in four of the criteria. Blight does exist in the area.



5th Street above Westmoreland



Dangerous Buildings in blue (source: Dept. of Licenses and Inspections, 2001)

CRITERIA

Pennsylvania Urban Redevelopment Law contains the following criteria for establishing the presence of blight in a particular area:

1. Unsafe, unsanitary, inadequate or overcrowded conditions
2. Inadequate planning
3. Excessive land coverage
4. Lack of proper light, air and open space
5. Faulty street and lot layout
6. Defective design and arrangement of buildings
7. Economically or socially undesirable land use

ANALYSIS

The following section describes the characteristics of blight evident in the area generally bounded by: 6th Street to “B” Street, Lehigh Avenue to Venango Street

1. Unsafe, Unsanitary, Inadequate or Overcrowded Conditions

Key evidence includes the following:

- the presence of 687 vacant structures and 296 dangerous buildings
- the existence of 1,106 vacant lots
- the presence of 2,785 properties with code violations

There are many vacant properties in Fairhill and St. Hugh, providing clear evidence of blight. The most recent Licenses & Inspections vacancy survey indicates that there are 1,793 vacant buildings and lots in the area, which represents an overall Vacancy rate of 20.3%. This includes 687 vacant buildings and 1,106 vacant lots included in the 2001 survey by L & I. Many properties have unsafe and unsanitary conditions, including 296 buildings officially designated as “dangerous” by L & I (2001). Most of the vacant lots are uncared for and strewn with trash, as observed by Planning Commission staff in the field; and this indicates the presence of unsafe, unsanitary and inadequate conditions in the area.

Census information confirms that there is a large amount of vacancy in the study area. There are three census tracts within Fairhill and St. Hugh, containing 1,187 vacant housing units (2000 Census). Vacant housing accounts for almost 18% of the housing units in the area. This is significantly higher than the comparable city rate of 10.9%.

Code violations are indicative of unsafe and inadequate conditions. In the census tracts located within the study area boundary, there are 2,785 properties in violation of City Code as determined by the Department of Licenses and Inspections in April 2002. Code violations exist for 36% of the properties in those tracts, compared to only 20% for the City as a whole (data sources: University of Pennsylvania’s Neighborhood Information System, and L & I).

2. Faulty Street and Lot Layout

Faulty lot layout is evident in the study area. The residential lots on the unit blocks of Sterner, Silver and Seltzer Streets and the 2800 blocks of Lee, Water and Swanson Streets are approximately 800 sq. ft. in size, which is far smaller than the minimum lot size in the City Code (1,440 sq. ft.).

Faulty street layout is demonstrated by the 100 blocks of Stella, Birch and Monmouth Streets, which are 30 feet in width. These streets are too narrow in relation to the current City Code (Section 14-2104[5]) which contains the following standards:

- 64 ft. for a primary residential street
- 54 feet for a secondary residential street
- 50 feet for a tertiary street
- 36 ft. for a marginal access street

3. Inadequate Planning

Inadequate planning is evident in the study area because of the faulty street and lot layout described above.

4. Economically or Socially Undesirable Land Use

There is substantial evidence of economically and socially undesirable land use. This criterion is primarily met within the study area by virtue of the 1,187 vacant housing units (2000 Census) and 296 dangerous buildings. Tax delinquency and relatively low housing values provide additional evidence of economically undesirable use.

Vacant structures and lots are economically undesirable inasmuch as citywide experience has demonstrated that vacant properties have an increased likelihood of being long-term tax-delinquent. Residential property abandonment deprives the neighborhood, the city and the region of purchasing power, which erodes the local economy and results in reduced sales tax revenue to government.

Vacant structures and lots and dangerous buildings are socially undesirable for a number of reasons: they downgrade the overall physical environment of the neighborhood, they reduce the area's vitality, and they increase the potential for vandalism, arson, and other crime. The increased threat of arson is a hazard, which affects both vacant buildings and adjoining, occupied structures in the neighborhood. Furthermore, the vacant building in this area may be structurally deteriorated and therefore they pose a danger to children, passersby and people who might be trespassing on the property.

Tax delinquency represents economically undesirable land use. When real estate tax is not paid, privately owned properties are benefiting from municipal services without contributing to the revenue base that pays for those services. Within the blight certification area, approximately 1,160 properties are long-term tax-delinquent. These tax delinquent properties appear in the L& I database as being included in a 1996 lien sale; and the lien sale data is reported by the University of Pennsylvania's Neighborhood Information System. Again, this indicator gives a picture of tax delinquency that is understated, in the opinion of Planning Commission staff. Staff experience with tax delinquency trends strongly suggests that actual tax delinquency is far greater than 1,160 properties; but regardless, the significant level of tax delinquency shows that the area currently provides a low economic return to the City.

For the Census tracts located in the study area, the 2000 Census shows median property values ranging from a low of \$15,300 to a high of \$27,100. This is less than half of the City's median value of \$59,700. Low property values represent economically undesirable land use because of decreased tax revenues to the City, and diminished potential to attract new development and private investment.

CONCLUSION

In the overall area bounded by Lehigh Avenue, 6th Street, “B” Street and the AMTRAK railroad, existing conditions are consistent with four (4) of the criteria necessary to produce a finding of blight under Pennsylvania Redevelopment law. Those criteria are:

1. Unsafe, unsanitary, inadequate or overcrowded conditions
2. Faulty street and lot layout
3. Inadequate Planning
4. Economically or socially undesirable land use

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that these four (4) criteria for establishing the presence of blight are satisfied and the area is eligible for certification.



N. 2nd Street at Somerset

RESOLUTION

WHEREAS, Pennsylvania Urban Redevelopment Law, Act of May 24, 1945 (P.L. 991) as amended, authorizes the Philadelphia City Planning Commission to certify as blighted specific areas which may then, in whole or in part, be made the subject of redevelopment proposals formulated by the Redevelopment Authority in accordance with said Act, and

WHEREAS, after substantial review and study, the Commission staff has presented a report concluding that the expanded area bounded by Lehigh Avenue, 6th Street, “B” Street and the AMTRAK railroad exhibits characteristics of blight as defined by the Act, and

WHEREAS, the Planning Commission concurs with the findings and conclusions set forth in said staff report,

NOW THEREFORE on this eighteenth day of March 2003, the Philadelphia City Planning Commission hereby finds, based upon its staff report dated March 2003 that the bounded by Lehigh Avenue, 6th Street, “B” Street and the AMTRAK railroad exhibits the following characteristics of blight as established by Pennsylvania Urban Redevelopment Law:

1. Unsafe, unsanitary, inadequate or overcrowded conditions
2. Faulty Street and lot layout
3. Inadequate Planning
4. Economically or socially undesirable land use

and hereby certifies the above described area as blighted under the terms and provisions of the said Act.