

Bucks County
Comprehensive Blighted Property Study

Prepared by:

The Gulotta Group, LLC

February 2024

Bucks County

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Executive Summary 1

II. Background and History 2

III. Data Sources—Qualitative 4

A. Key Informant Interviews

B. Blight Survey Results

C. Focus Group Results

D. In-Depth Interviews with Municipal Officials

IV. Data Sources—Quantitative 14

A. American Community Survey Data

Blight Risk Factor 1: High(er) Vacancy Rates

Blight Risk Factor 2: Old(er) Housing Stock

Blight Risk Factor 3: High(er) Percentages of

Rental Housing Blight Risk Factor 4: Low(er)

Median Housing Values

B. Municipal Blight Risk Score

C. USPO Data on Long-Term Vacant Property Address

D. Blighted Property Inventory

V. Implications of Data Related to Blighted Properties 28

VI. Conclusion 32

Exhibit A – Highlights of Discussion Points with Key Informants 33

Exhibit B – List of Municipalities Completing the Blight Survey 36

Exhibit C – Challenges Identified by Municipalities in Addressing Blighted Properties 38

Exhibit D – Interview Form for In-depth Interviews with Municipal Officials 39

I. Executive Summary

In April 2023, the county contracted with *The Gulotta Group, LLC* to prepare a comprehensive blighted property study to assess the nature and extent of blight, including varying dimensions of the problem throughout the county. The study involved collecting information from a variety of partner organizations that interface with blight throughout the county, including municipalities, redevelopment, economic development, and housing entities. While the incidence of blighted properties is not as evident in Bucks County compared to economically challenged areas in the Commonwealth, blighted properties, even in small numbers can have a chilling effect on economic development and neighborhood revitalization efforts.

The Comprehensive Blight Study undertaken in 2023 extracts data from multiple sources to document the nature and characteristics of blighted properties. These sources are referenced in Section II of the Study and include:

- Key informant interviews with elected and appointed officials
- Municipal focus groups
- Municipal survey
- In-depth interviews with municipal officials
- 2021 American Community Survey data from the U.S. Census
- U.S. Post Office data on long-term vacant addresses
- Municipal/Redevelopment Authority Inventory of Blighted Properties

These sources, taken together, tell the story about the challenge of blighted structures in the county. Section V of the Study includes a number of findings including:

- Noticeable differences in the nature and extent of blighted properties in Lower, Central, and Upper Bucks which for the most part reflects **differences between more urbanized and rural areas.** The municipal capacity to effectively address blight can vary in rural versus more urbanized areas, as well as **smaller versus larger municipalities**.
- Blighted structures include **vacant and occupied** properties. One of the challenges noted in the study is working with **owners with fixed incomes** who live in occupied properties.
- Blighted **commercial and residential** structures are a problem in many municipalities. Many commercial structures have associated **environmental contamination issues**. Blighted commercial properties are also located in older strip malls along heavily traveled commercial corridors.

- A significant number of properties have been **blighted for long periods of time** (in excess of five years) because **"bad actor" owners have been uncooperative** in taking corrective action. Many municipalities expressed frustration about this situation and are open to strategies that can address these long-term blighted structures.

- Some of the residential blighted property problem is attributable to **heirs who have been negligent** in maintaining and/or disposing properties after the owner has passed away.

- Municipalities that do not report having a blighted property **may still be at risk of an increase in blighted properties** based on a higher percentage of vacant properties, comparatively lower property values, and older housing stock.

- A potential silver lining is the **opportunity to create affordable housing** opportunities in redeveloping blighted properties.

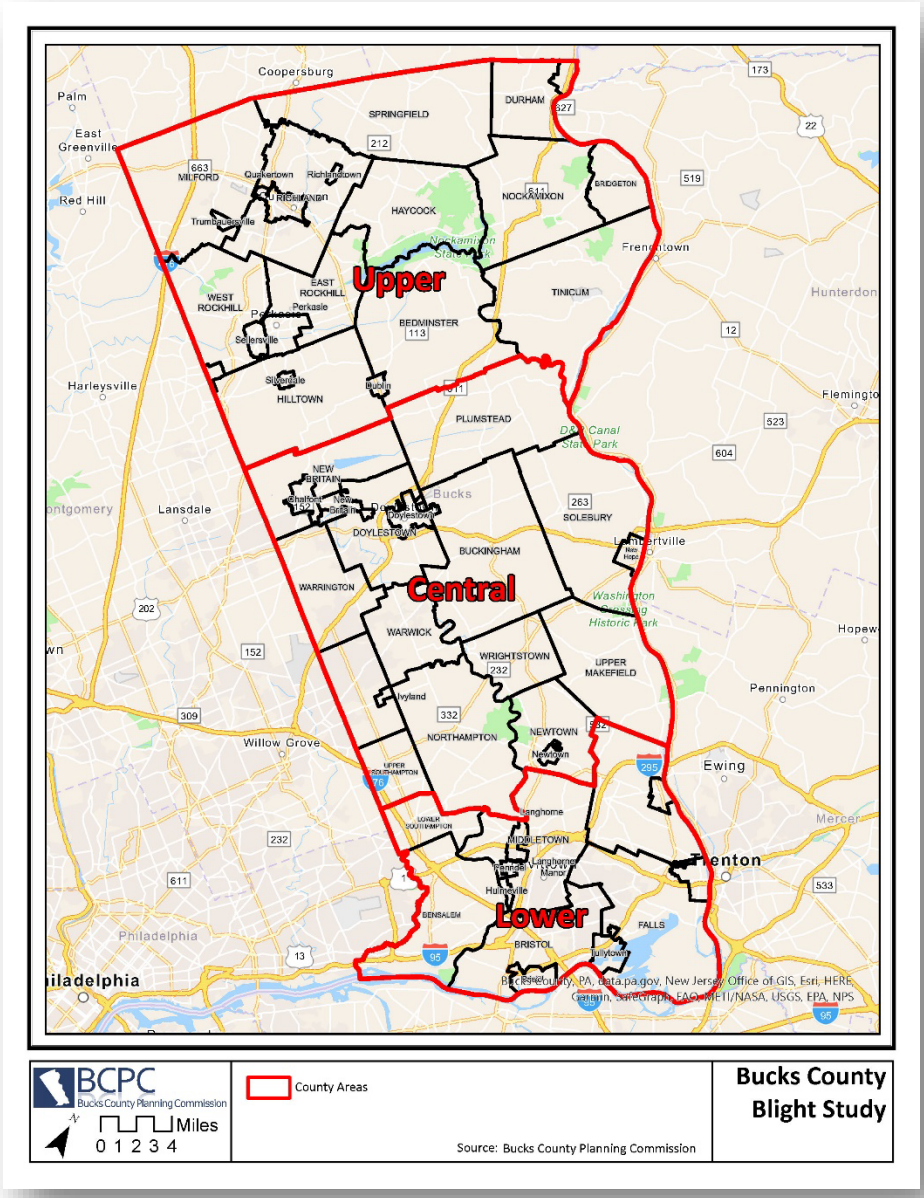
The second phase of this effort will include training opportunities for municipalities interested in deploying more tools to address blighted properties, as well as the formulation of a county strategy to prevent, remediate and redevelop blighted properties. This strategy may include new programmatic initiatives including increasing the pool of funds to address and repurpose blighted properties.

II. Background & History

Bucks County (population 645,054 according to the 2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimate) is a geographically diverse county consisting of urban and suburban sections as well as areas that have characteristics of rural communities. The county does not have any cities, but consists of 54 Townships and Boroughs, including two HUD-designated metropolitan areas (Bristol and Bensalem Townships). Lower Bucks County is contiguous with the City of Philadelphia and the heavily populated southeastern portion of Montgomery County, which is somewhat urbanized. Suburban areas are evident in Central Bucks County and some areas of Lower Bucks County as well. Upper Bucks County is primarily rural in nature; however, there are several boroughs with denser population in these areas, including Quakertown, Sellersville, and Perkasie. The demographics of the county are strong in terms of household income, employment, educational levels, and relatively low poverty rates. Real estate prices, including prices for housing, are high because portions of Bucks County are bedroom communities for Philadelphia. The real estate market in general is quite strong because of strong underlying demographics. Bucks County went through a post-industrial period in the 1980s and 1990s, transitioning from a manufacturing to a service economy. During this time *industrial* buildings became vacant, with some eventually becoming blighted. These properties, for the most part, were repurposed by economic development and community development organizations.[1] With the advent of the digital economy, many *commercial*

[1]These organizations include the Bucks County Economic Development Corporation, Bucks County Redevelopment Authority and Bucks County Industrial Development Authority

properties including strip malls and some enclosed malls, have fallen into deterioration. These properties are along major commercial corridors in the county, such as Route 13, Route 1, and Route 132. *Residential* properties in Bucks County are for the most part in good condition; however, there are properties throughout the county that are physically blighted because owners have not been responsive to code enforcement efforts for a variety of reasons detailed in this study. However, this does not necessarily mean that the properties have been declared blighted by a municipality.[2]



[2] The PA Urban Redevelopment Law authorizes municipalities to declare properties blighted which is the first step in having a Redevelopment Authority proceed with an eminent domain action. See footnote 5 for the definition of blight under state law. A property may meet the definition of blight under state law and still be considered blighted by a municipality even if the municipality does not go through this process.

III. Data Sources—Qualitative

Background data for conclusions reached in this report are drawn from a combination of quantitative and qualitative sources. Qualitative data for this study includes key informant interviews, survey results of municipal officials, focus groups, and in-depth interviews with municipal officials.

A. Key Informant Interviews

Chris Gulotta of *The Gulotta Group, LLC* met with several community leaders one-on-one during April and early May 2023 to capture their thoughts on the nature and extent of blighted properties in the county. Key informants interviewed (in alphabetic order) included:

- Kristian Ballerini, County Treasurer
- Robert Cormack, Executive Director, Bucks County Economic Development Corporation
- Jeff Darwak, Executive Director, Redevelopment Authority of the County of Bucks
- Don Grondahl, Executive Director, Bucks County Housing Authority
- Joe Hogan, State Representative
- Thomas J. Lonergan, Jr., Deputy Executive Director, Bucks County Industrial Development Authority
- Stacey Mulholland, Executive Director, Bucks County Association of Township Officials
- Evan Stone, Executive Director, Bucks County Planning Commission
- Susan Yahrling and Mark Jackowski, Office Manager and Chief Assessor (respectively), Bucks County Board of Assessment

These key informant interviews provided valuable qualitative information on the subject of blighted properties in the county. Highlights of the discussion points with each are included in **Exhibit A.**

Here are key takeaways that emerged from the **Key Informant Interviews**:

- **A consensus that the nature and dimension of blight varies between Upper, Central, and Lower Bucks County**. In **Upper Bucks**, which is primarily rural, blight takes the form of isolated abandoned barns and farmhouses, as well as a scattering of occupied structures in a state of disrepair, often with junk and abandoned equipment/vehicles in the yards. In **Central Bucks,** the predominant

problem is spot blight, residential structures in core communities such as boroughs. In **Lower Bucks**, there is more blight than in the two other areas, though it is still not pervasive. Blight in **Lower Bucks** communities takes the form of: 1) One or two blighted properties in older post-war residential developments; 2) Structures in or around older commercial strip shopping centers along high-traffic corridors; 3) Mixed-use structures (commercial first floor, residential upper floors) or single-use structures (e.g. apartment building) in or around a central business district and 4) A limited number of larger commercial/industrial buildings that are blighted and may have some environmental remediation issues. The properties are not always vacant, which can be challenging in terms of the use of various tools to address blight.

Occasionally, blight in residential properties stems from deceased owners whose heirs have failed to open an estate or have failed to move the estate process along. There may be some situations where the owner has died without a will.

- **There are relatively few tax-delinquent properties in the county.** This is a function of relatively high real estate prices. In some other areas of the state, owners stop paying taxes because the value of the property is low and may have in recent years declined. This is not the case in Bucks County. There are structures and/or buildable lots listed for delinquent real estate tax sales that are vacant and blighted, but these are few and far between.

- **Larger industrial and commercial properties have been repurposed with success, through the efforts of the Redevelopment Authority, economic development agencies and other organizations.** Examples include former industrial buildings in many Lower Bucks communities that have been adaptively reused for commercial office uses and housing, as well as former industrial sites that have been redeveloped as commercial business parks for multi-tenant uses. This work should be acknowledged, as it represents a huge challenge, given the number of properties that came on the market because of the precipitous decline of manufacturing in the latter part of the 20th century. Many of the industrial sites had contaminated soils or other hazardous waste that needed to be cleaned up before the property could be marketed to a subsequent buyer.

  To be clear, there are additional industrial/commercial sites that are vacant and could be repurposed; to this end, funding recently secured from the Environmental Protection Agency by the Bucks County Redevelopment Authority will be used to update an inventory of these properties.

- **Bucks County's real estate market is strong,** unlike many other counties in Pennsylvania. As a result, there is an interest on the part of the private sector to acquire and redevelop blighted properties for market rate housing and commercial use. This fact, in tandem with the fact that the number of blighted properties is limited, provides an opportunity to make significant progress in remediating and addressing a relatively small number of blighted properties.

Very little, if any development subsidy is required by responsible buyers to accomplish the repurposing of the properties because of relatively high selling prices and rents. One exception would be the need for development subsidy to create affordable housing.

- **The Redevelopment Authority uses its powers under the Urban Redevelopment Law to acquire *vacant* properties that meet the definition of blight under State law.**

  A total of nine municipalities have adopted a Blighted Property Review Board. These municipalities consult with the Redevelopment Authority as needed and authorize the authority to proceed with eminent domain actions. Additional municipalities are gradually being engaged by the Redevelopment Authority to adopt Blighted Property Review Boards. The Redevelopment Authority has utilized its powers of eminent domain increasingly over the past seven years and has been successful in acquiring properties in Bensalem, Bristol and Northampton Townships and Bristol, Morrisville, and Sellersville Boroughs.

  As a side note, the level of this effort is limited to the extent the municipality has the resources to cover the legal and acquisition costs of the authority. State Representative Joe Hogan has introduced legislation[3] known as the *Redevelopment Authority Start-up Loan Program* to provide funding in the form of loans to Redevelopment Authorities, which will put the authority in a position to expand its efforts into other communities. Larger projects, such as the redevelopment of multi-tenant buildings and mixed-use buildings, may benefit from funding through State grant programs such as ***Keystone Communities*** and the ***Redevelopment Assistance Capital*** Program.

- **Unfortunately, the blighted property problem is not limited to vacant properties.** Spot blight eminent domain is limited to vacant properties under state law; however, a number of properties are occupied, some by owners with fixed incomes. There is a need to develop tools and strategies to address these situations.

[3] H.B 1347, companion to S.B. 802 Last Action: Referred to Housing and Community Development Committee June 7, 2023; laid on the table 10/31/2023.

Economic Development agencies such as Bucks County IDA and Bucks County EDC have collaborated with the Redevelopment Authority to accomplish the acquisition and repurposing of commercial and industrial properties.

B. Blight Survey Results

In late May 2023, an on-line survey of municipalities was conducted with the assistance of the Planning Commission. This survey had a limited number of questions, with the goal of maximizing the number of surveys returned. Eighty percent (80 percent), or 43 of the 54 municipalities, responded to the survey.[4] This return rate met the goal of at least 40 municipalities responding to the survey.

The questions posed in the survey included:

- Do you feel blighted properties are a problem in your municipality?
- How many blighted properties are in your municipality?
- What is most challenging about addressing blighted properties in your municipalities?

The survey was completed by municipal managers or code enforcement officials.

A list of municipalities that completed the survey is attached at Exhibit B.

Overall results of the survey follow:

Blighted Property Problem

- 18 municipalities (42 percent) feel that blighted properties are a problem.
- 25 municipalities (58 percent) feel that blighted properties are not a problem.

Number of Bighted Properties

Fifteen (15) of the 40 municipalities responding had four or more blighted properties within their jurisdiction and six of the municipalities indicated that they had more than ten blighted properties. Nineteen municipalities indicated they had 3 or fewer blighted properties and eight municipalities did not respond to the question.

Challenges in Addressing Blighted Properties

Owners who are **Chronic Codes Violators** led the list of challenges in addressing blighted properties (21 responses). Other leading responses included: **Absentee Owners** (17 responses); Difficulty Obtaining Compliance from **Owners on Fixed Incomes** (16 responses); **Deceased Owners** (9 responses); and **Insufficient Staff** (10 responses). A complete list of survey results pertaining to municipal challenges in addressing blighted properties appears in Exhibit C.

[4] Forty municipalities completed the on-line survey; three municipalities were interviewed by the Consultant.

C. Focus Group Results

All municipalities in the county were invited to Focus Groups facilitated by the Consultant, Chris Gulotta of *The Gulotta Group, LLC.*

Two Focus Groups were held: one on June 8, 2023, and the other on June 12, 2023:

June 8th Focus Group

Robert Prato, Warwick Township
Michael Kirk, Lower Makefield Township
Angela Benner, Plumstead Township
Steve Hicks, Plumstead Township
Stacey Mulholland. Wrightstown Township
Lisa Gerhart, Springfield Township
Jim Ennis, Middletown Township
Colleen Purcell, Dublin Borough
Greg Lippincott, West Rockhill Township (online)
Sally Bellaspica, Bristol Borough (online)
John Miller, Bristol Borough (online)
Judith Danko, Morrisville Borough (online)

June 12th Focus Group

Stephanie Mason, Doylestown Township
Sinclair Salisbury, Doylestown Township
Randee Elton, Bristol Township
Kenneth Farrall, Bensalem Township
Mark Showmaker, Upper Southampton Township (online)
William Wheeler, Hulmeville Borough (online)
Scott Ambron, Richland Township (online)
Leslie Huhn, Richland Township (online)
David Conroy, New Britain Township (online)

1. *Definition of Blight*

The Consultant asked participants in the Focus Groups to talk about types/causes of blighted properties.

Responses included:

- Long-Term Vacant Properties
- Seniors on Fixed Incomes that have difficulty maintaining their properties
- Absentee Landlords who fail to maintain properties
- Stormwater Basins that are not maintained properly and may be a location for vermin
- Deceased Owners whose heirs have abandoned the property

During the Focus Groups, the consultant clarified with several municipalities that while they indicated in the survey that they do not have a blighted property problem, this does not necessarily mean that they do not have any blighted properties. However, in this situation there are only a few blighted properties, and the municipality thins that the problem is manageable.

Following this discussion, the consultant shared information concerning the definition of blight under state law. Any one of the conditions must be documented to utilize the many tools available to municipalities that have been authorized by the legislature to address blight. For this reason, it is important that municipalities become acquainted with the

definition of blight under State law. This was highlighted in the power point shared with Focus Groups.[5]

2. Level of Effort to Address Blight

A few municipalities that participated in the Focus Groups do not have a property maintenance code in effect. Some municipalities in attendance license and inspect rental units on a regular basis, but for the most part code enforcement is on a complaint basis.

Morrisville indicated that they try to stay on top of the problem of blighted properties by convening a Vacant Property Committee on a quarterly basis.

There was an extended discussion about owner-occupants, and the difficulty of achieving compliance because of the limited resources of occupants on fixed incomes.

3. Challenges Faced by Municipalities in Addressing Blight

During the Focus Groups, the Consultant reviewed the survey results concerning the challenges encountered by municipalities in addressing blight. He highlighted the top three challenges reflected in the survey: 1) **Owners who are Chronic Codes Violators**; 2) **Absentee Owners**; and 3) **Obtaining Compliance from Owners on Fixed Incomes.**

There was consensus that chronic violators of codes were a major problem; participants expressed frustration that frequently the owner paid the fines but did not take corrective action.

4. Discussion About the Nature and Extent of Blight

The discussion among the participants of the Focus Groups indicated that the problem is primarily residential; however, in municipalities with commercial corridors such as Bensalem and Bristol Townships there are blighted commercial properties. Dumping on these properties was also mentioned as a concern.

Occupied as well as vacant properties are a problem, particularly property owned by persons on fixed incomes.

---

[5]The definition of blight under state law includes any one of the following conditions:

- The property exhibits signs of deterioration sufficient to constitute a threat to human health and safety or
- The property has been declared a public nuisance by the local government or
- The property is an attractive nuisance to children, including abandoned wells, shafts, basements, and unsafe fences or structures or
- Any structure from which the utilities, plumbing, heating, sewerage or other basic facilities have been removed or disconnected so the property is unfit for human habitation or
- The property has otherwise been declared by the municipality as unfit for human habitation or
- The land is abandoned for at least six months and there are unpaid municipal liens against the property, or the liens placed against a property are 150 percent in excess of the value of the property.

Rental properties are challenging if owners are not responsive.

Properties that are blighted are not necessarily tax delinquent; however, most tax delinquent properties are blighted.

5. Visualizing Blight

The consultant asked participants in the Focus Groups to visualize one specific property in their community that is blighted, even though they may have indicated that they do not have a blighted property problem. This is a property that, despite best efforts by the municipality, has not been brought into compliance. The consultant asked how long this property has been blighted and whether it has been owned by the same owner throughout that time.

There was some discussion about hoarding and hot to deal effectively with these situations given some of the cognitive issues of the owner. Bucks County has recently reinitiated a Hoarding Task Force. This could be a useful took in addressing these situations.

The participants indicated that these "problem" properties have been blighted for at least several years and the owner has owned the property throughout that time. Many participants indicated that the property has been blighted for more than ten years.

Another concern was how to get corrective action from owners of properties that are chronically out of codes compliance. These owners do not repair the properties, even though they may pay a fine and the municipality puts a lien on the property for repairs.

6. Discussion About Blighted Property Risk Factors

At the Focus Groups, the consultant indicated that even if a municipality does not feel it has a blight problem, it should be aware of blight "risk" factors that may indicate an emerging problem. These risk factors include:

- **Vacant Properties**, especially long-term
- **Aging Residential Properties**, built over 80 years ago, as these properties require a certain income level to adequately maintain
- **Increases in Rental Housing**, particularly if concentrated in a defined geographic area
- **Declining or Flat Real Estate Prices**, including median housing values

All the above could indicate that disinvestment in a community is occurring and may gradually lead to blighted properties**.** The consultant indicated that it is important that municipalities track this data to stay on top of the situation.

7. What will Success Look Like?

The consultant asked participants in the Focus Groups to consider '*What will success look like?"* when the study is completed and the strategies in the study are deployed by the county and the municipalities.

Many agreed that success means reducing the amount of time properties are blighted, by utilizing effective strategies emerging from the study and shared with municipalities. Bristol Township indicated that the eminent domain program being operated by the Redevelopment Authority has been highly effective in remediating conditions at vacant, blighted properties; however, not all blighted properties are vacant, and these have been particularly challenging to mitigate when the owner is not cooperative.

Over time, another indicator of success is the reduction in blighted properties through the deployment of **prevention efforts**.

Participants indicate that more education on **tools to address blight**, as well as an increase in financial resources is needed to ensure more favorable outcomes.

Bristol Township indicated that they have been able to recycle an initial investment of $185,000 to tackle vacant, blighted properties using the tool of eminent domain. These funds are replenished as properties are sold.

Bristol Township indicated that they have been successful in reducing the number of blighted properties by collaborating with the Authority. Originally there were 209 properties that were designated as blighted. That number has been reduced to 35 as a result of owner compliance when threatened with eminent domain (or, in a lesser number of cases, the Authority taking the property through eminent domain).

D. In-Depth Interviews with Municipal Officials

The Gulotta Group, *LLC,* as part of its engagement, followed up with municipalities that indicated that they have a blighted problem (surveys returned late May/early June). Follow up interviews were held between July 14, 2023, and July 24, 2023. A copy of the interview form is included in **Exhibit D**. The following municipalities agreed to be interviewed to glean more information about the blighted property problem in their municipalities:

- Hulmeville Borough, Bill Wheeler, Manager
- Langhorne Borough, Kathleen Horwatt, Manager
- Middletown Township, Jim Ennis, Director of Building and Zonin
- Richland Township, Leslie Huhn, Township Manager
- Sellersville Borough, Eileen Bradley, Borough Manager

- Telford Borough, Kyle Detwiler, Borough Manager
- Warminster Township, Tom Scott, Township Manager
- Warwick Township, Bob Prato, Fire Inspector-Code Enforcement Officer
- West Rockhill Township, Greg Lippincott, Township Manager

There were several municipalities that indicated they had a blighted property problem but did not respond to a request for an interview.

Highlights of the in-depth interviews with Municipal Officials

- **Most of the municipalities indicated that the problem with blighted properties is mainly with residential properties**; however, municipalities with commercial corridors such as Street Road, Route 1, and the Bristol Pike identify blighted properties in older strip malls as well as in detached, stand-alone abandoned commercial properties. One municipal official remarked that they have had greater success with commercial owners remediating blighted properties because they have financial resources to undertake repairs. Others indicated that because of the strength of the real estate market, these properties are often purchased, rehabilitated, or torn down. Two municipal officials mentioned older, larger shopping centers that are failing, with high vacancies. These properties are showing early signs of blight.

- **Blighted residential properties are for the most part detached single family homes**. In Lower Bucks, many are in post-war developments. While some are vacant, others are owner-occupied, with residents on fixed incomes. The vacant blighted properties often have ownership issues that have not been resolved, as a result of the death of the owner. Some of the blighted owner-occupied properties result from hoarding issues. One municipality indicated the challenge of finding alternate housing for occupants when their property is declared unfit for human habitation. This has necessitated placement into hotels/motels and providing some case management services. One municipality also mentioned challenges in identifying a good point of contact for properties in foreclosure.

Based on information obtained during the in-depth interviews, most municipalities do not keep a list of blighted properties. One exception is Bristol Township, which retains and updates the list in connection with its Blighted Property Review Board. This is a best practice that should be shared with other municipalities indicating they have a blighted property problem. In most cases municipalities learn about blighted properties from calls from residents and code officials responding to complaints.

- **Blighted renter-occupied properties seem to be more prevalent in more densely populated** areas such as Boroughs and more populated Townships.

- **For the most part, blighted properties are not tax delinquent**, according to municipal officials interviewed. A recent State law requires that Tax Claim Bureaus pre-register bidders for delinquent tax sales, and provide that list to municipalities in advance of the tax sale.

  The following chart summarizes the challenges mentioned by municipal officials with blighted properties:

Challenge	Number of Municipalities
Chronic Code Violators	8
Obtaining Compliance by Fixed Income Owner	7
Insufficient Staff to Enforce Codes	5
Leniency of Court System	4
Absentee Owners	4
Landlords/Condition of Rental Properties	3
Lack of Information Regarding Code Enforcement Tools	3
Deceased Owner	3

  By and large, municipalities that indicated they have problems with absentee owners have enacted rental housing licensing ordinances. A sample rental housing licensing ordinance was subsequently sent to those that were considering such an ordinance.

  Several of those interviewed mentioned the need for more information about tools to address blight. Depending on the nature of the problems discussed in the interview, relevant tools were shared by the Consultant. This issue will also be addressed in blight tool workshops to be offered in the spring 2024.

  Obtaining compliance from owners on fixed incomes is very challenging because of the understandable reluctance to displace owners. In these situations, there is a need to share information with municipalities about grants to assist these households. A related issue is hoarding. There is a County Hoarding Task Force which may be helpful in this regard. More information on the Task Force will be obtained and shared with municipalities.

  Finally, many properties deteriorate to the point of becoming blighted when an owner is deceased without executing a will, or the executors are not vigilant in liquidating the assets in the estate, including the real estate. To this end, information will be shared with municipalities and the Redevelopment Authority about a state law that allows redevelopment authorities to open an estate when a person dies without a will.

IV. Data Sources—Quantitative

A. American Community Survey Data

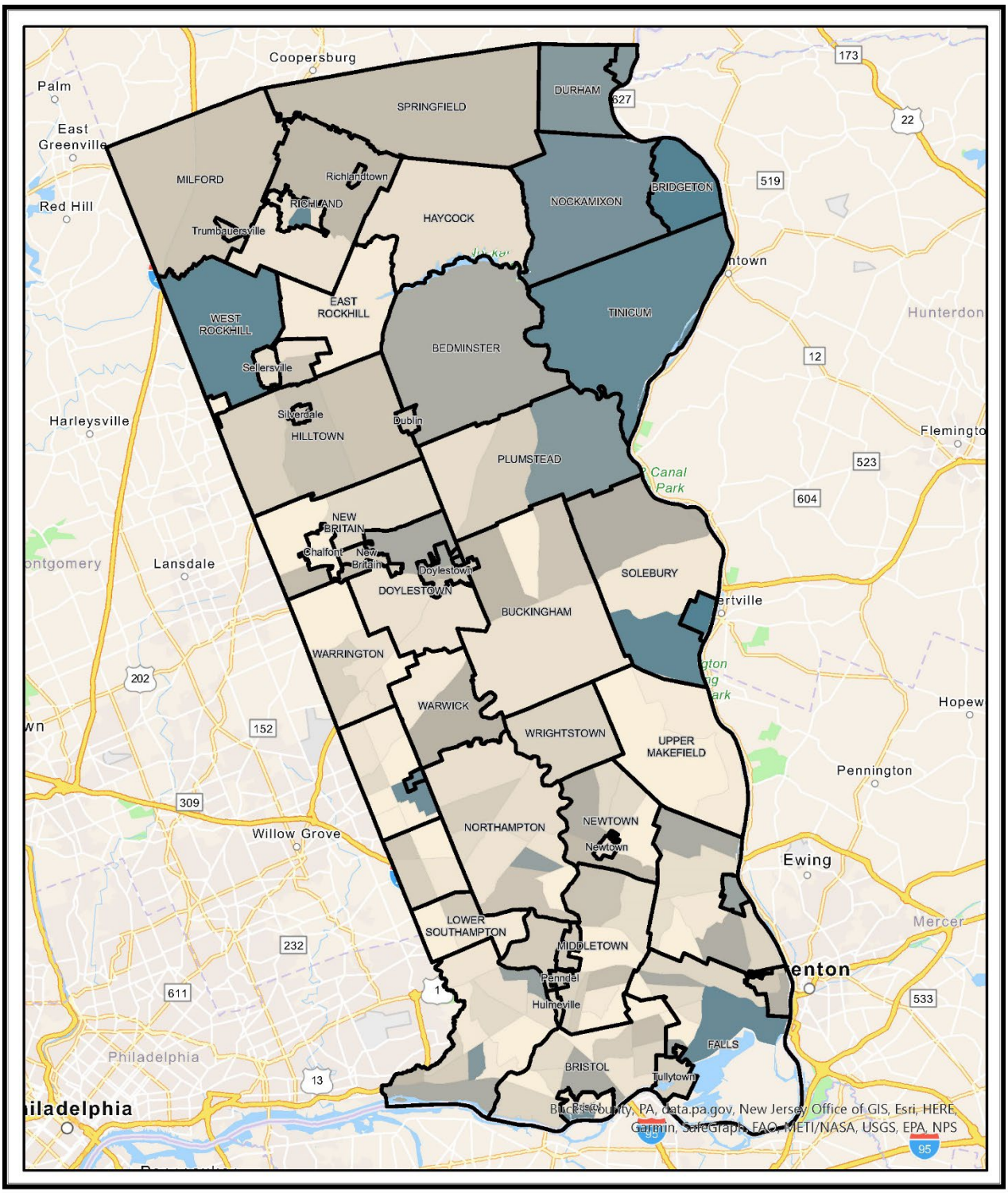
U.S. Census Data is updated every y year in the **American Community Survey (ACS)**. This is estimated data based on the decennial (2020) census and trend information. There is no one data set for blighted properties in the ACS; rather there are several relevant data sets that, taken together, can provide some useful information about municipalities with a higher risk of blight. These risk factors include:

Risk Factor #1: High(er) Housing Vacancy Rates

Vacancy housing rates are one risk indictor. A vacancy rate in excess of 3 percent, given market conditions, indicates that many properties are longer-term vacant. Longer-term vacant properties are magnets for criminal activity, including drug activity, prostitution, and arson. In addition, longer-term vacant properties can be an attractive nuisance to children and young adults if not properly secured. In extreme cases, long-term vacant properties can create health and safety concerns because the structure or components of the structure have been compromised and are in danger of collapse.

The map on the next page indicates municipalities with higher rates of vacant housing. Shades of blue depict municipalities with higher vacancy rates, with dark blue indicating those municipalities with the highest vacancy rates.

(The space below is intentionally blank)



BCPC Bucks County Planning Commission

Miles 0 1 2 3 4

Percent of housing units that are vacant

14

0

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2017-2021

Bucks County Blight Study

Vacant Housing Rates Municipalities* with Highest Rates

Municipality	Housing Vacancy Rates (%)
West Rockhill Township	11.4
NockamixonTownship**	10.3
Bedminster Township	6.9
Doylestown Borough	6.1
Penndel Borough	5.1
Richlandtown Borough	4.9
Dublin Borough	4.5
Plumstead Township	4.5
Hilltown Township	4.5
Bucks County	3.7

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

* Excludes river towns

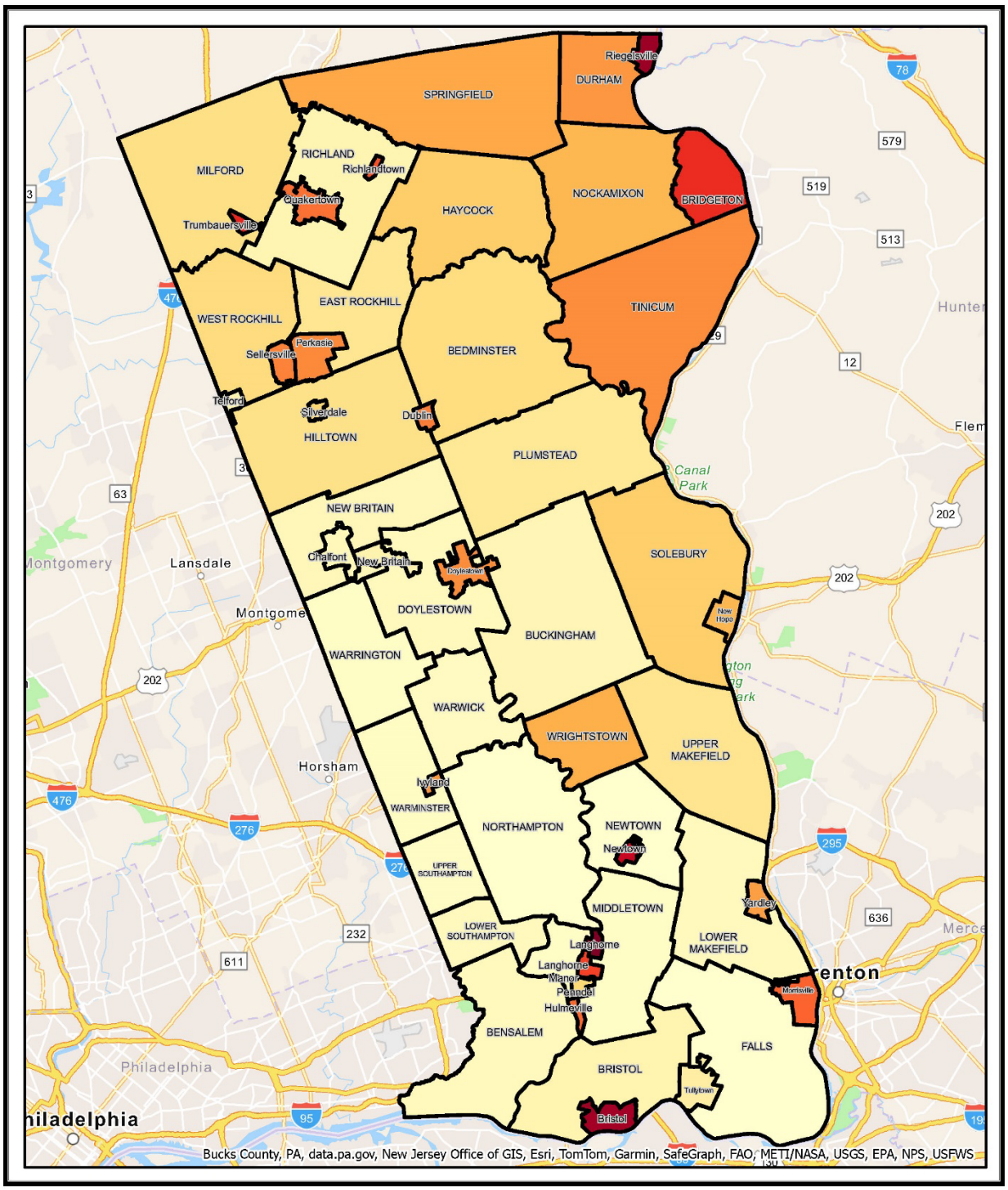
**Higher vacancy rates may be explained by seasonal vacancies because of Lake Nockamixon

River town municipalities typically have higher vacancy rates due to seasonal vacancies (relating to a higher incidence of second homes). For this reason, towns with Delaware River waterfront were excluded from the above table.

Risk Factor #2: Older Housing Stock

Age of housing can be an indicator that relates to blighted properties. Housing built prior to 1939 can become blighted because major systems such as electrical, plumbing, heating, and roofing need to be completely replaced; this is expensive, and many households on fixed incomes cannot afford to maintain a property with these conditions. Older properties may also have functional obsolescence; an example would be a bedroom that one must go through to get to a common bathroom. In addition, in many but not all cases, bathrooms and kitchens need to be updated. Functional obsolescence has the effect of reducing property values even if the property is in good repair.

The map on the next page indicates census tracts where a majority of the housing stock was built before 1939. Note: darker shades of red indicate higher percentages of housing built prior to 1939.



BCPC
Bucks County Planning Commission

N
Miles
0 1 2 3 4

Percent of housing units Constructed Prior to 1939

61%

2.5%

Source: American Community Survey
5-Year Estimates 2017-2021

Bucks County Blight Study

The table below reflects the municipalities in the county with the oldest housing stock, i.e. housing constructed prior to 1939 (over 80 years old).

Municipalities with Highest Percentages of Housing Constructed Prior to 1939

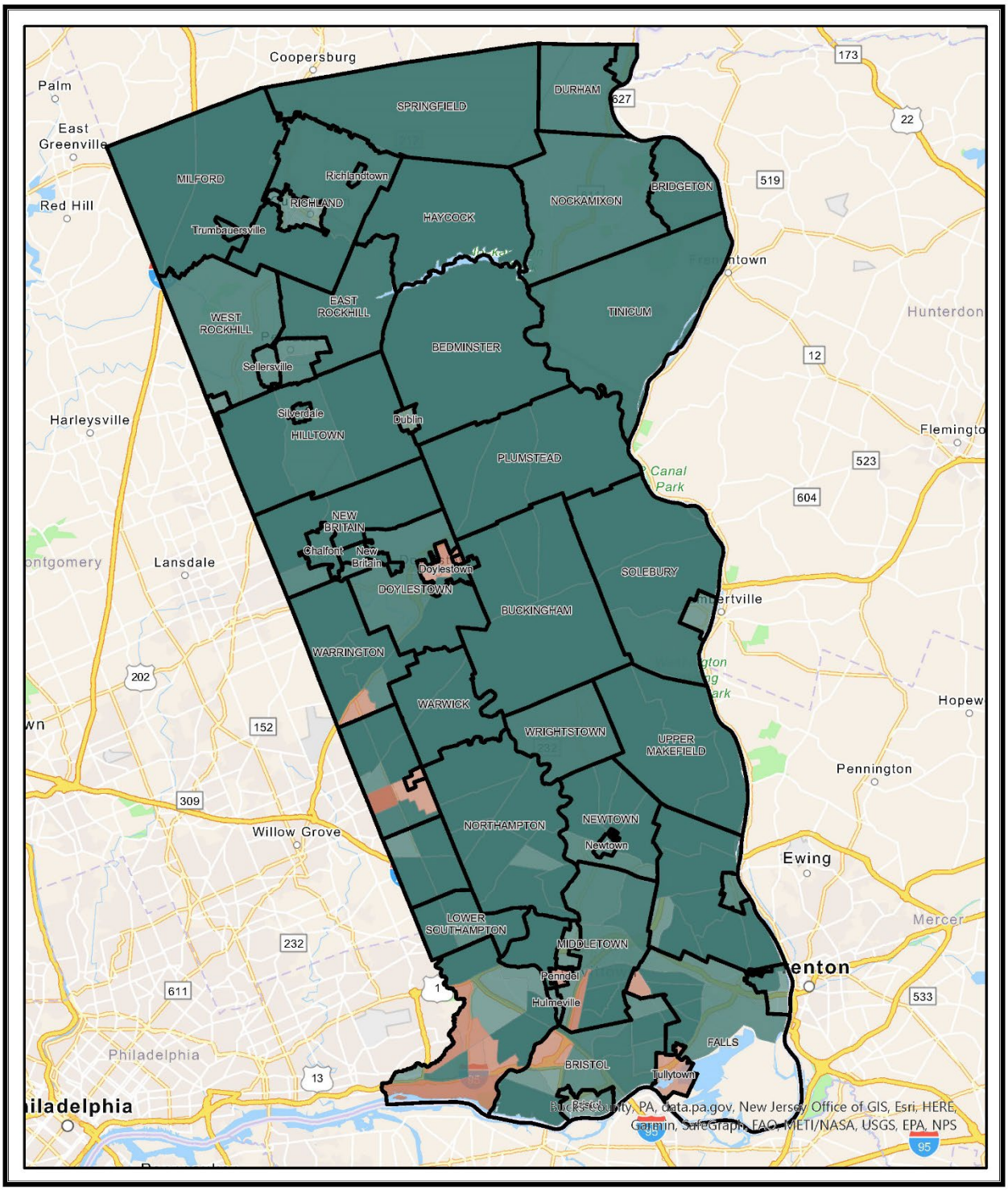
Municipality	% Constructed Prior to 1939
Langhorne Borough	60.8
Riegelsville Borough	57.3
Bristol Borough	56.4
Newtown Borough	51.1
Trumbauersville Borough	44.5
Bridgeton Township	43.6
Langhorne Manor Borough	40.7
Richlandtown Borough	38.3
Morrisville Borough	36.3
Hulmeville Borough	35.7
Bucks County	10.4

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2017-2021

Risk Factor #3: Higher Percentage of Rental Housing

The preponderance of rental housing units in a community can be a blight risk factor in a community, especially if the rental housing is concentrated in a particular neighborhood. If rents are not sufficiently high due to market conditions, owners may not have adequate money to keep the houses in good repair. In addition, rental units owned by absentee landlords are often in poor repair because the owner is not invested in the community's success.

The map on the next page shows the predominate housing tenure (owner vs. rental-occupied) by census tract. Census tracts in brown have rental housing rates in excess of 50 percent of occupied housing units. Note: darker shades of brown indicate a proportionally higher percentage of rental housing in those census tracts.



BCPC
Bucks County Planning Commission

N

Miles
0 1 2 3 4

Predominant Occupied Housing Units

- Owner-Occupied Housing Units
- Renter-Occupied Housing Units

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2017-2021

Bucks County Blight Study

The Table below lists the municipalities in the county with the highest percentage of rental housing.

Municipalities with Highest Percentages of Rental Housing

Municipality	% Rental Housing
Penndel Borough	57.7
Tullytown Borough	52.1
Langhorne Borough	50.9
Doylestown Borough	47.7
Dublin Borough	43.1
Telford Borough	41.7
Quakertown Borough	40.8
Bensalem Township	40.1
Bristol Borough	39.8
New Hope Borough	33.7
Bucks County	21.9

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2017-2021

Risk Factor #4: Median Housing Values

Municipal median housing values can be indicative of blighted conditions to the extent they reflect a lower value compared to the county. Lower values may reflect disinvestment in the community, which can lead to blighted properties. To the extent that there are blighted properties in close proximity, the value of surrounding properties is reduced.

The municipalities in the county with the lowest median housing values are included in the table below.

Municipalities in Bucks County with the Lowest Median Housing Values

Municipality	Median Housing Value
Bristol Borough	$186,000
Quakertown Borough	$214,400
Morrisville Borough	$215,400
Richlandtown Borough	$224,400
Bristol Township	$225,300
Telford Borough	$230,100
Sellersville Borough	$244,500
Tullytown Borough	$250,000
Richland Township	$255,800
Riegelsville Borough	$257,100
Bucks County	$351,700

Source: American Community Survey 5-year Estimates 2017-2021

B. Blighted Property Risk Score

Even though municipalities may not have a high number of blighted properties, the risk factors described above may be factors that could result in a higher incidence of blighted properties in the future. Taken together, the data for these blight risk factors may mean that a municipality needs to ratchet up its efforts to *prevent blight* even if it does not have a blighted property problem now. *The Gulotta Group, LLC* has developed a blight risk factor score that takes into account each of these risk factors:

***Blight Risk Score* = Median Housing Value - (3x Vacancy %) – 1x% Rental Housing – 1x% Units Built 1939 or Earlier**

Vacancy rates are arguably the most important data set in assessing a municipality's vulnerability to blighted properties, so this factor is weighted by three. The other elements of this model (median housing value, percent rental housing, and the percent of units built prior to 1939) are blight risks factors as described previously.

Municipal Data Related to Blight Risk

Note: A lower score indicates that there are conditions which make a municipality more likely to have a blighted property problem; a higher score indicates that there are conditions which make a municipality less likely to have a blighted property problem. **Gray shading indicates a county blight risk score in the bottom quartile or bottom 25 percent for Bucks County.**

Municipality	% Vacant Housing Units	% Housing Units Built Prior to 1939	% Renter-Occupied Housing Units	Median Housing Value (in $1000s)	Blight Risk Score
Bristol Borough	5	56.4	39.8	186.00	74.8
Quakertown Borough	4.3	34.8	40.8	214.4	125.9
Morrisville Borough	5.3	36.3	27.6	215.4	135.6
Riegelsville Borough	10.6	57.3	26.4	257.1	141.6
Richlandtown Borough	4.9	38.3	26.2	224.6	145.4
Sellersville Borough	2.8	32.9	33.4	244.5	169.8
Penndel Borough	5.1	16.7	57.7	265.6	175.9
Tullytown Borough	3.7	9.3	52.1	250	177.5
Trumbauersville Borough	3.7	44.5	24.9	260.8	180.3
Bristol Township	2.9	7	25.8	225.30	183.8

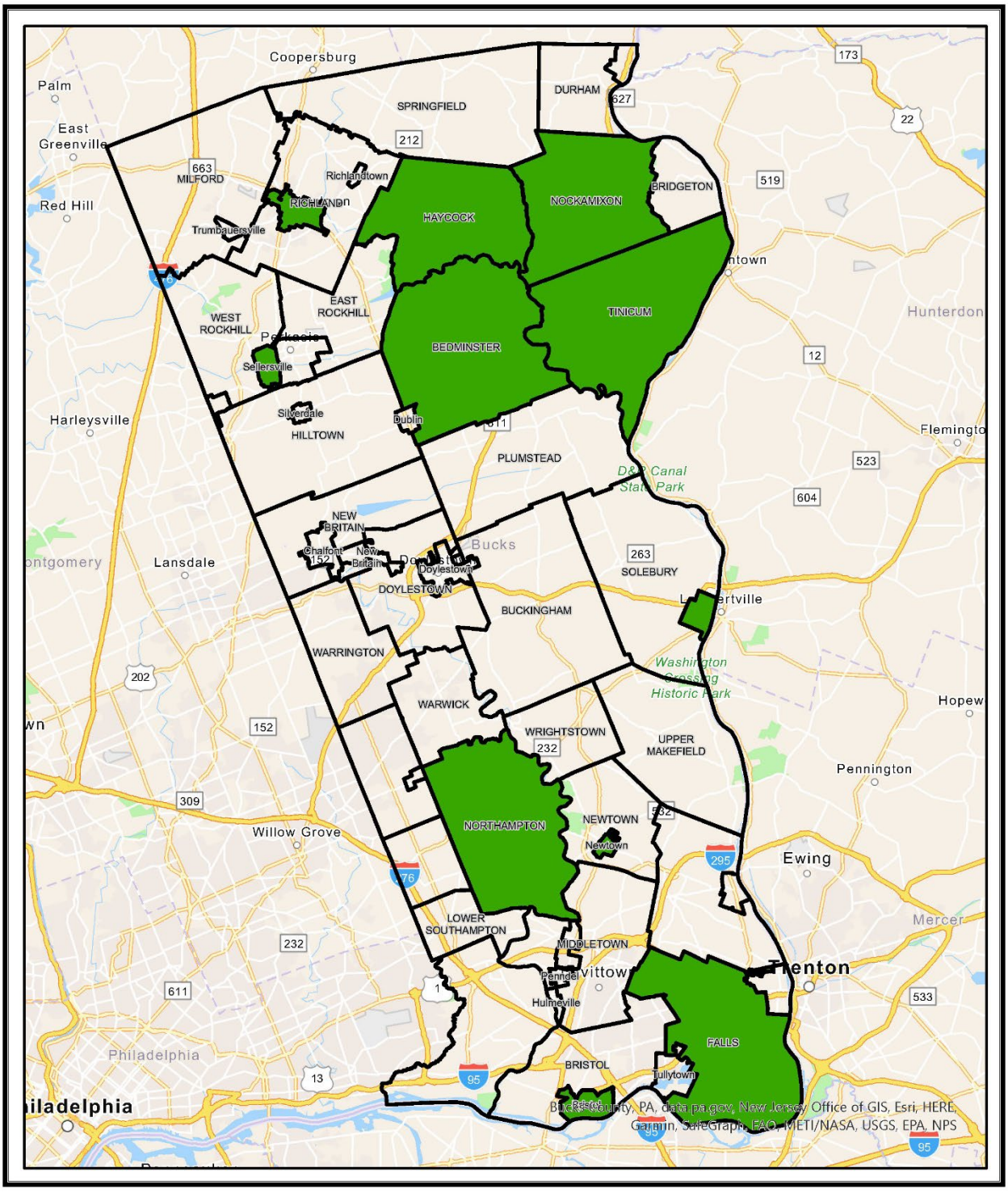
Municipality (cont.)	%Vacant Housing Units	%Housing Units Built Prior to 1939	%Renter-Occupied Housing Units	Median Housing Value (in $1000s)	Blight Risk Score
Dublin Borough	4.5	33.4	43.1	286.1	196.1
Perkasie Borough	3.4	32.1	30.4	274.8	202.1
Falls Township	4.6	2.6	23.8	261.4	221.2
Richland Township	3.8	6.7	13.4	255.8	224.3
Bensalem Township	3.7	5	40.1	288.50	232.3
Silverdale Borough	1.5	17.3	16.3	270.5	232.4
Langhorne Borough	4.4	60.8	50.9	363.9	239
Hulmeville Borough	2.6	35.7	16.1	307	247.4
Bridgeton Township	13.4	43.6	7.2	364.00	273
New Britain Borough	3.9	7.2	6.6	299.5	274
Warminster Township	2.5	3.8	32.1	328.2	284.8
Lower Southampton Township	1.6	4.9	16	311.7	286
Milford Township	4.5	14.1	5.9	326.5	293
West Rockhill Township	11.4	15.6	19	375.8	307
Bucks County	**3.7**	**10.4**	**21.9**	**351.7**	**308.3**
Nockamixon Township	10.3	23.2	17.7	380.4	308.6
Middletown Township	3.1	3.5	24.6	347.9	310.5
Hilltown Township	4.5	13.6	14.1	351.9	310.7
Upper Southampton Township	2.3	3.6	17.4	345.3	317.4
Langhorne Manor Borough	3.6	40.7	17.9	391.8	322.4
Yardley Borough	8.2	28.1	26.5	405.3	326.1

Municipality (cont.)	%Vacant Housing Units	%Housing Units Built Prior to 1939	%Renter-Occupied Housing Units	Median Housing Value in Housing (in $1000s)	Blight Risk Score
Chalfont Borough	0.7	5.5	21.2	360.8	332
East Rockhill	1.3	12.3	19.6	371.9	336.1
New Britain Township	3.4	5.6	16.8	375.3	342.7
Doylestown Borough	6.1	31.5	47.7	451.2	353.7
Ivyland Borough	4.3	29.3	15.2	415.5	358.1
Haycock Township	2.4	19.2	7.8	418.4	384.2
Bedminster Township	6.9	15.2	7.9	428.90	385.1
Warrington Township	1.8	3.5	17.6	432	405.5
Plumstead Township	4.5	11.5	9.2	442.4	408.2
Tinicum Township	11.6	31.5	10.9	492.8	415.6
Northampton Township	3.2	2.7	7.5	440.3	420.5
Newtown Township	3.4	2.5	15.5	451.8	423.6
Warwick Township	4.3	4.4	4.6	474	452.1
Lower Makefield Township	3.6	4.8	12.2	487	459.2
New Hope Borough	13.8	23.3	33.7	559.5	461.1
Doylestown Township	4.2	4.8	18.2	507.2	471.6
Durham Township	8.2	29.5	13.1	563.3	496.1
Buckingham Township	2.6	6.1	4.9	549.8	531
Newtown Borough	2.4	51.5	26.7	643.7	558.3
Wrightstown Township	3.4	24.6	20.1	620.9	566
Solebury Township	5.1	19	9.7	657.4	613.4
Upper Makefield Township	0.7	12.6	7.4	745.9	723.8

Municipalities with a lower score are more likely to have a blighted property problem because of the prominence of risk factors discussed previously; however, if they have a strong code enforcement program and have effectively utilized a variety of other tools to prevent blight, the problem may be mitigated. Conversely, municipalities that have medium or high blight resiliency scores may have more blighted properties because they lack a property maintenance code or do a poor job enforcing codes they have in place.

C. USPO Data on Vacant Properties

The US Post Office keeps data on long term vacant property addresses (vacant for 36 months or longer) for the purpose of mail delivery services. While the percentage of total properties vacant for that period is small, the numbers are significant in certain municipalities. Long-term vacant properties are likely abandoned properties that have become or have the potential to become blighted, and may be venues for illegal activity. Municipalities with long-term vacant property addresses in excess of one percent of all property addresses according to the US Post Office are identified in green in the map on the next page:


Coopersburg
Palm
East Greenville
Red Hill
Harleysville
Lansdale
Willow Grove
Philadelphia
Trumbauersville
Richlandtown
RICHLAND
MILFORD
SPRINGFIELD
DURHAM
BRIDGETON
NOCKAMIXON
HAYCOCK
TINICUM
BEDMINSTER
EAST ROCKHILL
WEST ROCKHILL
Perkasie
Sellersville
Silverdale
HILLTOWN
Dublin
PLUMSTEAD
NEW BRITAIN
Chalfont
New Britain
Doylestown
DOYLESTOWN
BUCKINGHAM
SOLEBURY
WARRINGTON
WARWICK
WRIGHTSTOWN
UPPER MAKEFIELD
NORTHAMPTON
NEWTOWN
Newtown
LOWER SOUTHAMPTON
MIDDLETOWN
Penndel
Hulmeville
Levittown
BRISTOL
Tullytown
FALLS
Trenton
Ewing
Pennington
Hopewell
Flemington
Hunterdon
Mercer
Bucks
Montgomery
D&R Canal State Park
Washington Crossing Historic Park
Bucks County, PA, data.pa.gov, New Jersey Office of GIS, Esri, HERE, Garmin, SafeGraph, FAO, METI/NASA, USGS, EPA, NPS
173
22
519
663
212
627
12
523
604
263
202
152
309
611
232
76
95
295
532
533
13
1
BCPC
Bucks County Planning Commission
N
Miles
0 1 2 3 4
1% or greater total vacancy over 36 months
Source: USPS Data (2021)
Bucks County
Blight Study

The following table identifies municipalities with a higher number of long-term (36 months or longer) vacant property addresses based on the USPO database.

Residential Property Addresses Vacant 36 months or Longer

Municipality	Number of Long-Term Vacant Properties
Falls Township	313
Bensalem Township	273
Northampton Township	225
Bristol Township	112
Warminster Township	91
Lower Southampton Township	77
Bristol Borough	69

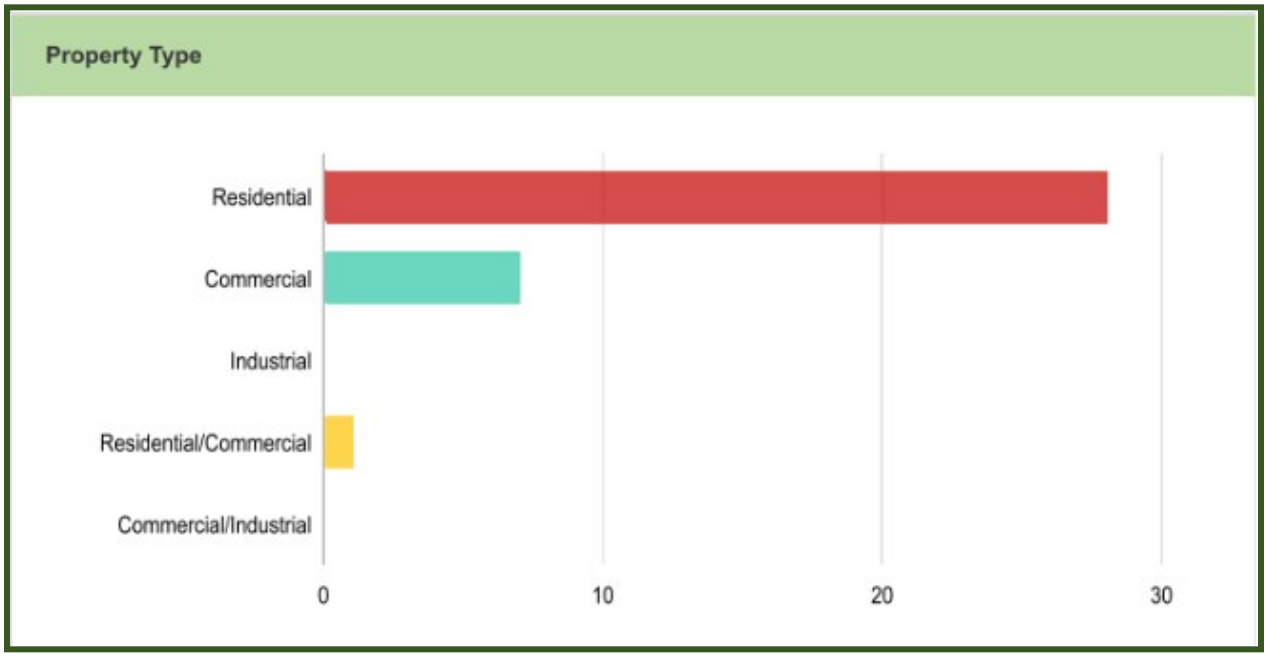
D. Blighted Property Inventory

Seven municipalities (out of the 18 municipalities that indicated they had blighted properties in the initial survey) provided specific survey data on properties that meet the state definition of blight. A total of 36 blighted properties were identified by these 7 municipalities. While the return rate was not robust, an on-line survey tool was developed by the Bucks County Planning Commission to streamline the process for municipalities to submit information on blighted properties more easily. This tool will be useful in capturing blighted property information from more municipalities in the future, with the goal of developing a more comprehensive county blighted property database.

The following municipalities submitted data on specific properties that meet the definition of blighted: Falls Township, Hulmeville Borough, Middletown Township, Sellersville Borough, Warwick Township and West Rockhill Township. Of the 36 properties identified as blighted by these seven municipalities:

- 28 properties (or 74 percent) were residential
- 27 properties (or 71 percent) were currently vacant
- 9 (of the 28) residential properties are currently occupied; of the nine properties, 7 are owner-occupied and 2 are rental occupied
- 14 (or 50 percent) of the residential properties have been declared as unfit for human habitation.

Blight Inventory Data by Property Type



While no conclusions on the nature and extent of bighted properties in the county can be conclusively draw from this limited data, the information provided by the municipalities that return the blight inventory survey is valid in terms of the nature and characteristics of blight in those municipalities.

As indicated previously, the Redevelopment Authority is working cooperatively with nine municipalities to acquire vacant, blighted properties under the PA Urban Redevelopment Law. One hundred forty properties have been declared blighted by six municipalities since this program was initiated. A breakdown by municipality follows:

Municipality	**Number of Properties Declared Blighted Pursuant to Urban Redevelopment Law**
Bensalem Township	4
Bristol Borough	6
Bristol Township	112
Morrisville Borough	16
Northampton Township	1
Sellersville Borough	1
Total	**140**

V. Discussion: Implications/Significance of Data Related to Blighted Properties

The data discussed in Sections III & IV begins to paint a picture of the nature and characteristics of blighted properties in the County as well as the incidence of blighted properties.

Findings based on this data are described below.

Blight in Bucks County…varies in different sections of the county

Interviews with Key Informants and Municipal Officials identifying a blighted property problem indicate that the problem varies by sections: Lower, Central, and Upper Bucks County.

Lower Bucks County's blight problem is characterized by: 1) Older Business Properties that are found along heavily traveled commercial corridors; 2) Older Residential Properties in core communities such as Morrisville and townships with large post-WWII Levittown developments, now nearly 80 years old; 3) Unincorporated Areas within townships such as Croydon in Bristol Township that have a more serious blighted property problem. Despite underlying data including lower median housing values compared to other areas of the county (e.g. Morrisville Borough, and Bristol Borough and Township) and a number of boroughs with generally higher rental housing rates (e.g. Penndel Borough, Tullytown Borough and Langhorne Manor Borough), blight in Lower Bucks County is mitigated by a strong real estate market because of its proximity to Philadelphia and other employment centers. This is due in part to increasing household incomes as this area continues its 40-year transition from an industrial to digital and service economy. Municipalities in Lower Bucks are increasingly focused on the issue of blighted properties with the cooperation of the County Redevelopment Authority.

Municipalities in **Central Bucks County** tend to be more affluent, with a lower incidence of blight. As a result, blighted properties are quite scattered in this area of the county. Municipalities in Central Bucks benefit from strong local economies. Outside of prosperous core communities such as Doylestown, Newtown and New Hope are relatively affluent townships with extensive, newer suburban subdivisions consisting of single-family homes and townhomes.

Upper Bucks County is more rural in nature, except for boroughs such as Quakertown, Sellersville, and Perkasie. By and large, blight is not evident in the boroughs as much as in townships, where there a number of abandoned buildings such as farmhouses and barns. American Community data for communities in this section of the county indicates a high percentage of housing constructed prior to 1939 in communities such as Riegelsville Borough, Richlandtown Borough, and Bridgeton Township. Also evident in some Upper Bucks County municipalities are several occupied residential properties with abandoned vehicles, dilapidated lawn equipment, discarded water heaters, plumbing fixtures, etc. This situation frequently continues for years, because some municipal staffs do not have the capacity to deal effectively with these situations and/or because

properties are on larger lots which may not be affecting neighbors in a negative way. American Community Survey data also indicates some higher vacancy housing rates in a few Upper Bucks municipalities, including Bedminster and West Rockhill Townships.

Blight in Bucks County…is generally not pervasive

The initial survey indicates that less than half (42 percent or 18 municipalities) of the 43 municipalities responding to the survey perceive a blighted property problem, with 19 municipalities indicating they have 3 or fewer blighted properties. This assessment is good news and means that problem is a manageable one for most municipalities. On the flip side, six communities indicate more than ten blighted properties, with many of these being long-term vacant. Depending on the capacity of the municipality (staffing and financial resources), it could be challenging to resolve a higher number of blighted properties. In fact, ten municipalities indicate in the initial survey that insufficient staff is a problem.

Blight in Bucks County…involves occupied housing units as well as vacant housing units

Focus Group and in-depth interviews with municipal officials as well as municipalities completing the initial blighted property survey indicate that many blighted properties may be the result of owner-occupants on fixed incomes that lack sufficient resources to maintain the property. For most municipalities, declaring the property unfit for human habitation is not an option, as this results in the displacement of the owners.

Another dimension of the occupied housing problem is hoarders, who accumulate possessions to the point that the house becomes a health and safety issue for residents and neighboring properties.

Strategies for dealing with blighted, occupied housing are more limited because many of the tools to address blight require that the property be vacant (eminent domain, property conservatorship, etc.) Municipalities need to balance the interests of the community with the vulnerable situation of the homeowner, who has limited financial resources.

Blight in Bucks County…is due in part to properties that have title issues that stem from the death of an owner

In the case of the death of a homeowner, a residential vacancy may be the result of heirs who have not been diligent in opening an estate in local court. In these situations, the property is in limbo, and gradually falls into a state of deterioration. These scenarios may drag on for years, resulting in the property deteriorating to the point of becoming blighted.

A related issue is a situation where the owner dies without a will; in this case the court may appoint an administrator of the estate, but this could take some time and in the meantime the property may not be maintained by potential heirs.

Blight in Bucks County…is frequently characterized by neglected properties that are prominent and have been vacant for a long period of time

According to the Focus Groups and follow-up interviews with municipal officials, problem properties have often been blighted for three years or longer. This is not an optimal situation, as conditions deteriorate to the point where the property may become an attractive nuisance for illegal activity. In fact, municipalities indicate in the survey that their biggest challenge is with chronic and repeat code violators. U.S. Post Office data confirms that in Falls, Bensalem, and Northampton Townships, there is a relatively high number of longer-term vacant property addresses. More than one hundred addresses have been vacant for more than thirty six months.

Municipal managers interviewed expressed frustration that efforts to deal with these properties frequently lag when they reach the Magisterial District Justice (MDJ). Frequently, fines are imposed by the MDJ, but no corrective action is taken by the owner. As a result, discouraged municipalities may subsequently take a less proactive approach such as sending a non-compliance warning letter as opposed to issuing a formal code citation to be adjudicated before the MDJ.

Examples of particularly challenging properties include larger historic properties that have fallen into disrepair and require major funding to accomplish the repurposing of the property. Frequently, the current owner does not have the financial resources to make repairs, so the problem remains unabated indefinitely. Properties located in the one-hundred-year floodplain are frequently blighted for long-term periods because of the added costs associated with floodplain mitigation, including flood proofing measures such as property elevation.

Blight in Bucks County…includes commercial properties

As mentioned previously, blighted commercial properties are scattered along highways with high vehicular traffic in Lower Bucks County. However, municipal officials and key informants mention several commercial properties in other parts of the county that are also blighted. These include properties formerly operated as gas stations, downtown hotels, and restaurants. During the pandemic, several restaurants closed and have not reopened. A total of six municipalities, including the townships of Bensalem, Middletown, Warminster, and Warwick Townships and the boroughs of Hulmeville and Sellersville, indicate that blighted commercial properties are problematic.

The County Redevelopment Authority is in the process of completing an assessment of properties that require environmental remediation as the first redevelopment step. It is expected that some of these properties will be industrial in nature, but many are smaller commercial properties likely to have recognized environmental conditions such underground storage tanks and contaminated soils. Former gas stations, used car dealerships and dry-cleaning operations are examples of properties with these conditions.

In a strong real estate market, it is likely that the private sector will redevelop these properties if there are no environmental issues. With remediation, properties with

recognized environmental hazards become marketable so for the most part these blighted properties will be rehabilitated or repurposed in due time. However, if real estate conditions deteriorate at some point, these commercial properties could become a longer-term issue.

A related problem is the leap-frogging of strip shopping centers. This occurs when tenants of an older shopping center move into a newly opened strip mall, leaving a large amount of vacant space with potential for blight.

Another dimension of this problem exists with larger regional malls such as Neshaminy Mall in Bensalem Township and Oxford Valley Mall in Middletown Township. Efforts are underway to repurpose these properties, which have experienced relatively high vacancies and are becoming less viable as enclosed retail shopping malls.

Blight in Bucks County…presents opportunities to repurpose properties for affordable housing

Like many other areas facing increased housing prices, Bucks County is currently experiencing an acute lack of affordable housing. This is ironic, as the county was Ground Zero for affordable post WWII Levittown developments. There is the potential silver lining of repurposing blighted properties for affordable housing; however, this will require a focused approach to create economically feasible opportunities for both private as well as non-profit developers. This approach could involve: 1) The purchase of the few properties that become available at delinquent tax sales at discounted prices; 2) The purchase of bank-owned properties that have gone through foreclosure; and 3) The donation of blighted properties in exchange for the waiver of municipal liens.

Blight in Bucks County…could be mitigated through preventative and proactive municipal measures

As the blight survey indicates, most municipalities in the county do not feel they have a blighted property problem. In fact, two municipalities, Solebury and Springfield Townships, do not have a property maintenance code. However, as discussed in Section II, there are underlying conditions in some of those municipalities that put them at risk for more blighted properties. As pointed out, these risk factors include vacant housing rates, lower median housing value, a higher percentage of rental housing, and older housing stock. Municipalities with proactive prevention measures in place can prevent blight, even though it may not currently be a major problem. Prevention measures include effective code enforcement and early warning systems, such as monitoring long term vacant properties and criminal activity.

Blight in Bucks County…does not generally correlate to mortgage foreclosures and tax delinquent properties

Mortgage foreclosures and bank-owned properties were mentioned as a problem by only one municipality in the in-depth interview. In addition, only one municipality responded in the survey that bank-owned properties were a problem. This could be because of the

relatively robust economy in Bucks County; higher property values may incentivize people to make their mortgage payments to preserve valuable assets. While this situation could change as mortgage rates increase and credit underwriting loosens, mortgage foreclosures, at least at the current level, do not seem to correlate to the incidence of blighted properties in most municipalities.

Similarly, real estate tax delinquencies do not appear to correlate with blight. One explanation for this could be that the value of the property is generally increasing because of the robust real estate market, regardless of the property condition. This incentivizes owners to pay the real estate taxes so they do not lose appreciated value in the asset. The County Treasurer confirmed in a key informant interview that approximately thirty properties in the county are listed for sale at the Judicial Sale, and the vast majority of these are land-locked, or remnant pieces of ground that are not buildable.

Blight in Bucks County…may be mitigated by providing municipalities with more information regarding enforcement tools

The need for more information regarding enforcement tools was mentioned by seven municipalities in the blight survey. In addition, the consultant's in-depth interviews with municipalities who felt they had a blight problem brought to light the need for guidance on tools specific to their particular needs.

VI. Conclusion

The Comprehensive Blighted Property Study has provided detailed information regarding the extent and nature of blighted properties in Bucks County. This information will be used by the consultant to undertake the second phase of this engagement, the development of a County Blighted Property Program that will include targeted strategies to address and repurpose blighted properties. Said program will include:

- Development of Program Design/Guidelines
- Identification of Various Funding Options
- Workshops for Municipal Officials Regarding Various Tools to Address Blighted Properties

Work on this second phase is expected to begin in the first quarter of 2024 and will be completed on or about June 30, 2024.

EXHIBIT A

HIGHLIGHTS OF DISCUSSION POINTS WITH KEY INFORMANTS

Introduction

The Bucks County Commissioners have engaged The Gulotta Group, LLC to assess the nature and extent of blighted properties in the County and to develop a comprehensive program to address those properties. This will be accomplished by reviewing and analyzing qualitative data from many sources as well as in depth discussions with key informants.

To that end, Chris Gulotta of The Gulotta Group, LLC met with a number of community leaders one-on-one during April and early May 2023 to capture their thoughts on this issue. Key informants interviewed (in alphabetic order) included:

Kristian Ballerini, County Treasurer

Robert Cormack, Executive Director, Bucks County Economic Development Corporation

Jeff Darwak, Executive Director, Redevelopment Authority of the County of Bucks

Don Grondahl, Executive Director, Bucks County Housing Authority

Joe Hogan, State Representative

Thomas J. Lonergan, Jr., Deputy Executive Director, Bucks County Industrial Development Authority

Stacey Mulholland, Executive Director, Bucks County Association of Township Officials

Evan Stone, Executive Director, Bucks County Planning Commission Director

Susan Yahrling and Mark Jackowski, Office Manager and Chief Assessor (respectively), Bucks County Board of Assessment

These key informant interviews provided very valuable qualitative information on the subject of blighted properties in the County. Some consensus takeaways emerged from these discussions. They include:

1. **The Blighted Property Problem in Bucks County …varies in different sections of the County.**

There was consensus that the nature and dimension of blight are different in Upper Bucks, Central Bucks, and Lower Bucks County. In Upper Bucks, which is primarily rural, blight takes the form of isolated abandoned barns and farmhouses as well as a scattering of occupied structures in a state of disrepair, often with junk and abandoned equipment/vehicles in the yards. In Central Bucks,

the problem, is spot blight residential structures in core communities such as boroughs. In Lower Bucks, there is more blight but it would be exaggerating to say that the blight there is pervasive. Blight in these communities takes the form of: 1) one or two blighted properties in older post-war residential developments, 2) structures in or around older commercial strip shopping centers along high-traveled corridors, 3) multi-use structures (commercial first floor, residential upper floors) or single use structures (e.g. apartment building) in or around a central business district and 4) a limited number of larger commercial/industrial buildings that are blighted and may have some environmental remediations issues. The properties are not always vacant which can be challenging in terms of the use of various tools to address blight.

2. **The Blighted Property Problem in Bucks County… sometimes results from estate issues in conjunction with an owner's death.**

Frequently, a portion of the problem of scattered blighted residential properties seems to be related to deceased owners whose the heirs have failed to open an estate or have failed to move the estate process along. There may be some situations where the owner has died without a will.

There are relatively few tax delinquent properties in the county. This a function of the real estate prices which are relatively high. In some other areas of the state, owners stop paying taxes because the value of the property is low and may in recent years has declined. This is not true in Bucks County. There are structures and/or buildable lots listed for real estate taxes sales that are vacant and blighted but these are few and far between.

3. **The Blight Property Problem in Bucks County… relating to industrial and larger commercial properties has been effectively addressed in the past.**

Through the efforts of the Redevelopment Authority, economic development agencies and other organizations, larger industrial and commercial properties have been repurposed with success. Example include former industrial buildings in many Lower Bucks communities that have been adaptively reused for commercial office uses and housing, and former industrial sites that have been redeveloped as commercial business parks for multi-tenant uses. This work should be acknowledged as it represented a huge challenge given the number of properties that came on the market because of the precipitous decline of manufacturing in the latter part of the 20th century. Many of the industrial sites had contaminated soils or other hazardous waste that needed to be cleaned up before the property could be marketed to a subsequent buyer.

To be clear, there are additional industrial/commercial sites that are vacant and could be repurposed; to this end recently funding from the Environmental Protection Agency has been secured to update an inventory of these properties.

4. **The Blighted Property Problem in Bucks County…is manageable because the real estate market conditions in the County are robust.**

Unlike many other counties in Pennsylvania, the real estate market in Bucks County is strong and there is an interest on the part of the private sector in acquiring and redevelopment blighted

properties for market rate housing and commercial uses. This fact, in tandem with the fact that number of blighted properties is limited, provides an opportunity to make significant progress in remediating and addressing a relatively small number of blighted properties. Very little if any development subsidy is required by responsible buyers to accomplish the repurposing of the properties because of relatively high selling prices and rents. One exception would be the need for development subsidy to create affordable housing.

5. **The Blighted Property Problem in the County …is being addressed by a team of organization led by the Redevelopment Authority**

The Redevelopment Authority uses its powers under the Urban Redevelopment Law to acquire *vacant* properties that meet the definition of blight under state law. It has active Blighted Property Review Boards in two communities that consult with the Redevelopment Authority and authorize the Authority to proceed with eminent domain actions. The Authority has utilized these powers for the past six years and has been successful in acquiring properties in Bristol and Bensalem Townships. A total of ten municipalities have adopted a Blighted Property Review Board. The vast majority of these municipalities are gradually being engaged by the Authority.

As a side note, the level of this effort is limited to the extent the municipality has the resources to cover the legal and acquisition costs of the Authority. State representative Joe Hogan will be introducing legislation in the near future to provide funding in the form of loans to Redevelopment Authorities which will put the Authority in a position to expand its efforts into other communities. Larger redevelopment projects such as redeveloping multi-tenant buildings and mixed-use buildings may benefit from funding through state grant programs such as Keystone Communities and the Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program.

Unfortunately, the blighted property problem is not limited to vacant properties only. Spot blight eminent domain is limited to vacant properties under state law. However, a number of properties are occupied, some of which are occupied by owners with fixed incomes. There is a need to develop tools and strategies to address these situations.

Economic Development agencies such as Bucks County IDA and Bucks County EDA have collaborated with the Redevelopment Authority with regard to the acquisition and repurposing commercial and industrial properties.

EXHIBIT B

LIST OF MUNICIPALITIES COMPLETING THE BLIGHT SURVEY

Note: This list reflects municipalities that completed the survey online. Falls Township, Sellersville Borough, and Telford Borough were contacted directly by the consultant in order to obtain survey results.

Bensalem Township
Borough of Riegelsville
Bristol Borough
Bristol Township
Chalfont Borough
Doylestown Borough
Doylestown Township
Dublin Borough
Durham Township
East Rockhill Township
Haycock Township
Hulmeville Borough
Langhorne Borough
Langhorne Manor Borough
Lower Makefield Township
Middletown Township
Morrisville Borough
New Britain Township
New Hope Borough
Newtown Borough
Northampton Township
Penndel Borough
Perkasie Borough
Plumstead Township
Quakertown Borough
Richland Township
Richlandtown

Silverdale Borough
Solebury Township
Springfield Township
Trumbauersville Borough
Tullytown Borough
Upper Makefield Township
Upper Southampton Township
Warminster Township
Warrington
Warwick Township
West Rockhill
Wrightstown
Yardley Borough

EXHIBIT C

CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY MUNICIPALITIES IN ADDRESSING BLIGHTED PROPERTIES

Challenge	# Municipalities
Owners who are chronic violators of codes	21
Absentee owners	17
Obtaining compliance from owners on fixed incomes	16
Insufficient staff	10
Owner is deceased	9
Need for more information on best enforcement tools	7
Landlords/conditions of rental properties	7
Court system too lenient in resolving cases	6
Lack of property maintenance code	2
Legal process is long and expensive for compliance	1
Owner has mental illness	1
Foreclosure property	1
Bank-owned property	1
Lack resources	1
Costs associated with relocating owners when property is condemned as unfit for human habitation	1

EXHIBIT D

PHONE SURVEY INTERVIEW FORM FOR IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH MUNICIPALITIES

(THAT INDICATED A BLIGHTED PROPERTY PROBLEM)

Name of Municipality:

Person Interviewed:

Title:

Date of Interview:

1. In your survey you indicated that you have (less than 3 blighted properties, 4-10 blighted properties , more than 10 blighted properties) How do you identify these properties? Do you have a list of these properties that you can provide to me?

2. Are blighted properties in your municipality…
   Ones that involve commercial or residential properties or both?

   Ones that include owner occupants as well as residential rental units?

   Ones that involve vacant or occupied properties or both?

   Ones that involve properties that are tax delinquent?

3. In your survey you indicated that the most challenging issues in addressing blighted properties are (challenges listed by municipality in initial survey form)
   Can you elaborate on these challenges?

4. Can I send you a follow-up survey to get more information on the characteristics of the blighted properties?

5. What is the most challenging blighted property that you're dealing with that you haven't been able to resolve?

   How long has that property been blighted?
   Has the current owner been in the picture the whole time?

6. Is there anything else I should know about blighted properties in (name of municipality)

Notes: