

from blight



a comprehensive toolkit for pennsylvania

to bright

# PA Communities Are Fighting Blight

- We are no longer willing to accept abandoned properties as part of our landscape
- We understand that we can change the culture of blight by aggressively, consistently and proactively using all tools available under PA law
- The status quo is not an option. We are taking PA's 300,000 vacant properties from liability to viability



# Status Quo is not an Option

## Mon Valley Study by Tri-COG (2013):

- \$11 million a year in direct costs for municipal services
- \$9 million a year in lost tax revenue
- \$8-10 million in lost tax revenue due to reduction in surrounding property values
- \$8 million a year loss in investment and economic development
- *And another \$12 million in one time costs as well*

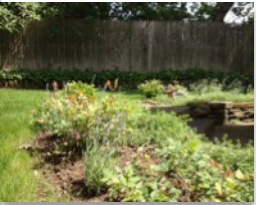
# Huge Benefits when Eliminate Blight



- Reduces crime, in particular gun-related violence



- Improves health of residents



- Raises surrounding property values by up to 30% just by greening a vacant lot



- Increases tax revenue for city and school district



## Fighting Blight Pays

### 2014 Study of Anti-Blight Philadelphia Windows and Doors Code Enforcement Program Found:

- Compliance by owners of long-term vacant structures created \$74 million in increased sales prices of surrounding properties
- Increased values raised \$2.34 million in additional transfer tax revenue for city
- Fees can fund inspections and enforcement

# Finding the Needed Funding



**Fees:** Can be equal to total cost to administer program

**Fines and Penalties:** Incentivize compliance through fee structure. The longer the violation is unabated, the bigger the fines get.

**Private Asset Attachment:** Authorized under Act 90, requires judicial action, based on good record keeping/data.

**Blight Fund:** In November 2013, Mahanoy City adopted a two-mill increase in their real estate tax to create a blight fund. The tax increase will dedicate approximately \$47,000 annually to the blight fund.

# PA Has Two Categories of New Tools

Over the last decade, we have developed new state laws and proven local tools to fight blight.

1. Tools that enable you to establish a data-driven, strategic code enforcement system to prevent and address blight.
2. Tools to address long-term vacant properties that pose a threat to health and safety where code enforcement has been ineffective.



# Gain the Owner's Attention

The goal for strategic code enforcement is to change the owner's stance

*from:*

**I'm going to  
ignore You**

*to:*

**How much time  
do I have to get  
my property into  
compliance?"**





**What does it do?**



**How do we pay for it?**



**What types of property are covered?**



**What challenges will it solve?**



**Where does it apply?**



**How does it work?  
What is needed to use the law effectively?**



**What policies and practices will increase our chances of successfully using this tool?**



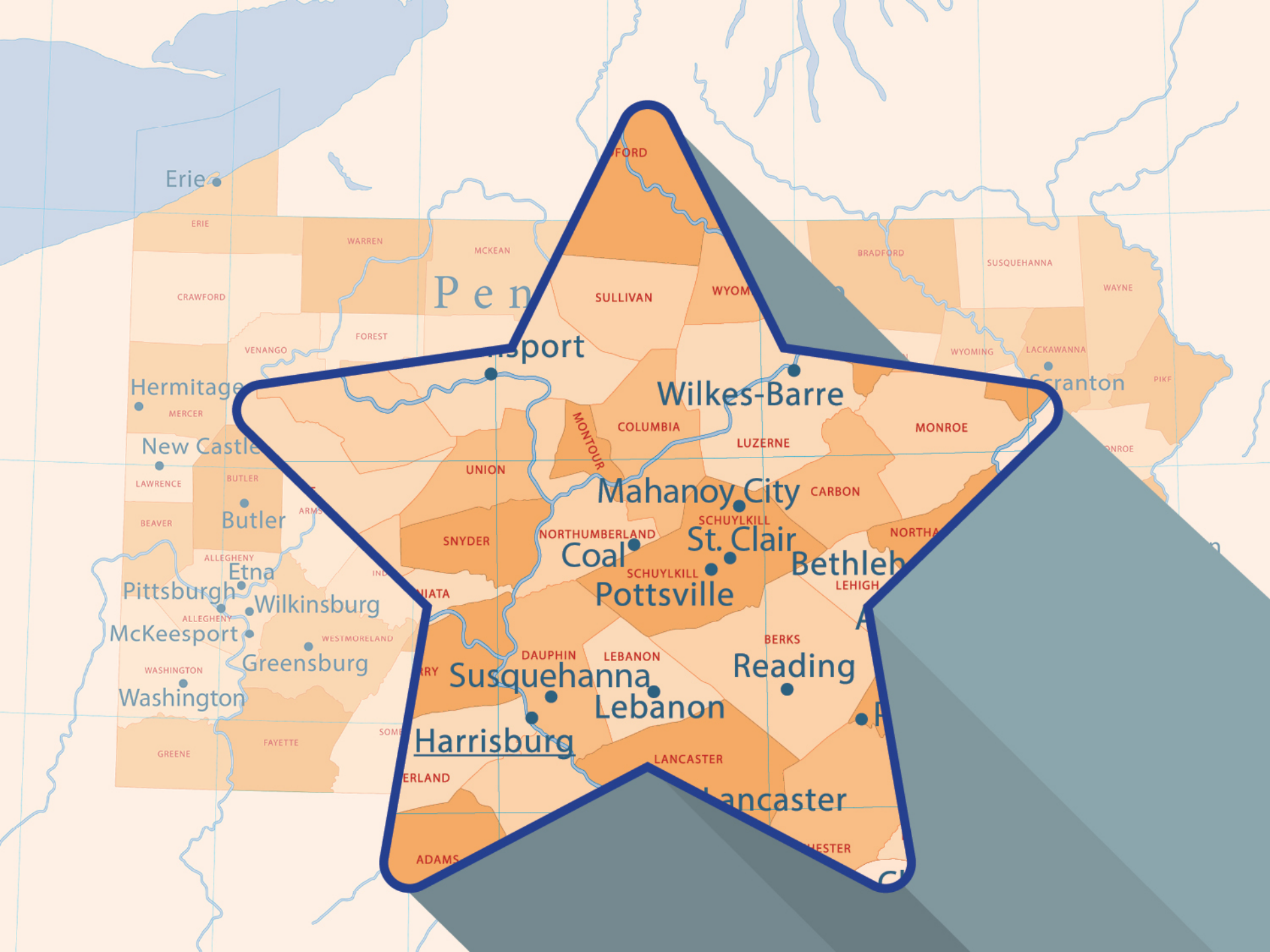
**What legal documents will we need?**



**Who is using the tool now?**



**How can we combine this with other strategies?**



Erie

Penn

Scranton

Wilkes-Barre

Scranton

Hermitage

New Castle

Mahanoy City

Butler

Coal

St. Clair

Bethlehem

Pittsburgh

Wilkesburg

Pottsville

McKeesport

Greensburg

Susquehanna

Reading

Washington

Lebanon

Harrisburg

Lancaster

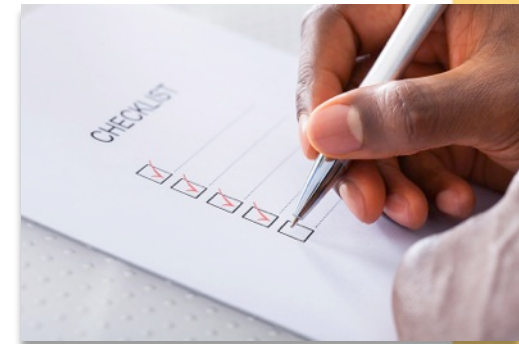
Greene

Adams

Chester

# What is Strategic Code Enforcement?

- Proactive and systematic, augments complaint-driven
- Database identifies owners
- Detailed records of every action taken to show a pattern of violations to a judge
- Can identify owners of more than one problem property and areas to target enforcement
- Enforce registration and permit laws
- Bundle enforcement actions for the magistrate (blight court model) to be able to see patterns and take appropriate action
- Track noncompliance, fees, and penalties





**Four Key  
Blight Elimination Practices  
for Strategic Code  
Enforcement...**



## **Create and Proactively Enforce a Framework of Clear Standards That Requires Owners to Care for their Properties**

- **Transform the maintenance of building exteriors from optional to required**
  - International Property Maintenance Code
  - Local ordinances



# *Progressive, Data-Driven Enforcement*

**Dealing with a violation swiftly and consistently is most cost-effective approach to preventing blight**

*Enforcement Examples: Quality of Life Ticketing*

**Allentown SWEEP Begun 2005. In 2011:**

- Issued >5,800 tickets for \$25-\$100. 60% of tickets were paid
- Where fine unpaid, city requests a court hearing

**Coal Township – Northumberland County Begun 2012**

- Tickets between \$25-300 have improved general cleanliness of township
- Magisterial District Judge fined owner \$4,331 after refused to fix properties



# *Strategic Data-Driven Enforcement*





**Assess property condition routinely when property changes hands, becomes vacant or requires a permit**

- Permit Denial
- Presale Inspections: Easton requires inspection before sale. \$150 inspection fee and \$75 certificate of occupancy fee
- Registration of Vacant/Rental Properties



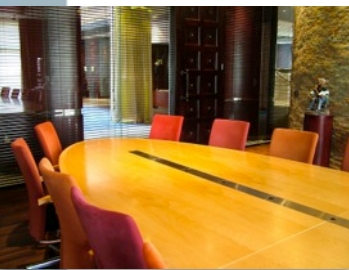
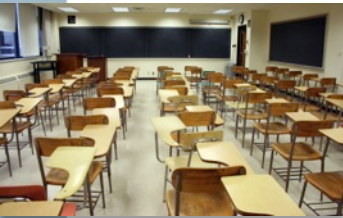
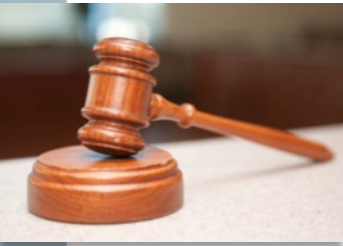


## Target Limited Resources and Recruit Partners and Allies

-  Target enforcement efforts to 3-5 worst properties that have greatest negative impact
-  Reserve harshest penalties for absentee owners who have clear assets but refuse to invest in their properties.
-  Do not impose severe fees and penalties on good owners or owners without money who will walk away from their properties
-  Publicize actions taken to motivate other owners



# Recruit Partners and Allies



- **Judges/Prosecutors:** Assign single jurist to hear all property related cases – *Blight Court*
- **School Districts:** Waive past taxes to reactivate property
- **For Profit Companies:** Foreclosure Registration – for profit implements law for a fee, alerts city when foreclosure imminent and contacts lender re code violations and registration fees
  - Susquehanna Township: Enacted 2011 with \$200 one-time fee to be split with for-profit. By 1/1/2014 had 157 registered properties. Generated \$16K for part-time inspector



## Change the Culture and Hold Properties to Clear Standards

- Consistent enforcement creates a real threat
  - Searchable code enforcement database
  - Progressive Fines
- Impose an increasing cost on properties that are non-compliant
  - Hall of Shame
  - Criminal Misdemeanors
  - Asset attachment
  - Permit Denial





## Demolish or Transfer the Worst Properties to Responsible New Owners

Use the tools that state law gives you and require owner to pay for action taken wherever possible

- Asset attachment
- Eminent domain
- Conservatorship
- Open Estate to Transfer Property
- Land Bank



# Sample Ordinance, Pleadings, Petitions, Documents and Updates Online

Blight to Bright is a Living Dynamic Document  
[www.pablightlibrary.com](http://www.pablightlibrary.com)



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