

Vacancy Reassessed

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-Summary

The future of Philadelphia rests on our ability to manage decline. The single best measure of that decline is the city's depopulation since 1950, and managing its effects largely defines the job facing the next mayor of Philadelphia.

- The city's population peaked in 1950 at 2.1 million. It has since declined by nearly 30 percent to under 1.5 million people.
- Depopulation leads to vacancy and abandonment. The city has more than 30,000 unmanaged vacant residential lots and at least 20,000 abandoned residential buildings.
- Depopulation has been greatest in the older core neighborhoods outside of Center City. Sections of North Philadelphia have lost one-half to two-thirds of their peak populations. With less than 5 percent of the city's land area, lower North Philadelphia has over 50 percent of the city's highest vacancy blocks.
- There is no strategic vision or public apparatus for confronting the effects of 50 years of depopulation. Responsibility for vacant property is fragmented across more than a dozen public agencies.

We recommend that the city carve out the fragmented responsibilities for vacant property from all the various agencies and consolidate its efforts in a new authority. As a first step toward this new authority, we challenge both mayoral candidates to declare their support for a new deputy mayor for vacant property to whom all relevant agencies would report on this issue.

The opportunity here is to pursue a kind of *civic speculation*. A new authority can leverage vacant land to better serve a city that feels as if it's missing half its residents. Guided by a strategic vision of a "right-sized" city for today's population, a powerful commitment by the next mayor could change the subject from decline through abandonment to growth through consolidation.

Background

Depopulation

The City of Philadelphia grew steadily for over 250 years. From its founding to the eve of the American Revolution, Philadelphia grew to become the second largest city in the British Empire. From 1790 to 1850, it grew 325 percent, from 28,522 residents to 121,376. The city's boundaries were enlarged in 1854 when what we know today as Center City was consolidated with the townships of the surrounding county. The U.S. Census of 1860 counted 565,529 residents in the consolidated city, returning Philadelphia to its traditional rank as the nation's second largest city (it had slipped to fourth behind Baltimore and New Orleans after 1840). By 1900, the population of this economic and political powerhouse had more than doubled to 1,293,697 residents. And, by 1950, the city's population had increased by another 60 percent to 2,071,605 residents. With the largely undeveloped tracts of the Far Northeast and Southwest Philadelphia beckoning, it seemed that the city's population growth would continue unimpeded.

But even at mid-century troubling signs were already apparent to some analysts. A City Planning Commission report of the period noted that many of the city's older wards had been losing population since 1920 or even earlier.¹ These planners calculated that since the population of the city's older neighborhoods had peaked in various earlier decades, the city actually had built a housing stock capable of accommodating nearly 2.5 million people by 1950. Since the actual population was only 2.1 million, it was clear that the city's older neighborhoods were being left for newer housing farther from City Hall. The city's overall population growth was hiding this depopulation in the older neighborhoods.

Some of this depopulation was the result of demolition of housing to make way for new, nonresidential uses. Perhaps the best early 20th Century example was the razing of the neighborhoods around Logan Square for construction of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Further depopulation occurred as people moved from the densely packed row-houses of Poplar and Fitzwater streets to the

twins and detached rows of Germantown, University City and the Near Northeast; leaving behind aging parents and grandparents. But whatever the cause, the process of depopulation was well under way in North and South Philadelphia even in 1950.

What no one could foresee in 1950, however, was the extent to which the city as a whole would begin to lose population. It fell modestly from 2,071,605 in 1950 to 1,948,609 in 1970, a loss of 6 percent; but then the pace became far more precipitous. In the succeeding two decades the population fell from 1,948,609 in 1970 to 1,585,577 in 1990, a loss of 19 percent. The trend continues today. In spite of all the good news about Philadelphia during the Rendell administration, the city's population has continued to fall. In a widely cited statistic, Philadelphia suffered the largest population loss of any county in the United States last year, decreasing from 1,585,577 in 1990 to 1,436,287 in 1998.²

One important aspect of the population loss after 1950 is related, of course, to suburbanization and the fixed political boundaries of the metropolitan region. While Philadelphia lost half a million residents between 1950 and 1990, its surrounding suburbs gained nearly four times that number. In effect, we are currently seeing a larger scale version of the same phenomenon Philadelphia city planners saw at mid-century. The metropolitan area as a whole has continued to grow since then, as the city, as a whole did before 1950. But within the region, the core area of Philadelphia (and its older suburbs³) has been losing residents, just like the older neighborhoods of the city have been for most of this century.

While this population loss is dramatic, it is not yet as large as that seen in other cities. Detroit, St. Louis and Cleveland have lost *half* their peak populations. Thus far, Philadelphia appears to have lost no more than a third of its peak population. Our problem, however, is that we are still in the midst of our depopulation, and a city of only a million residents is a very real possibility. That we will end the century with the same population we began it with, about one and a third million people, now seems likely.

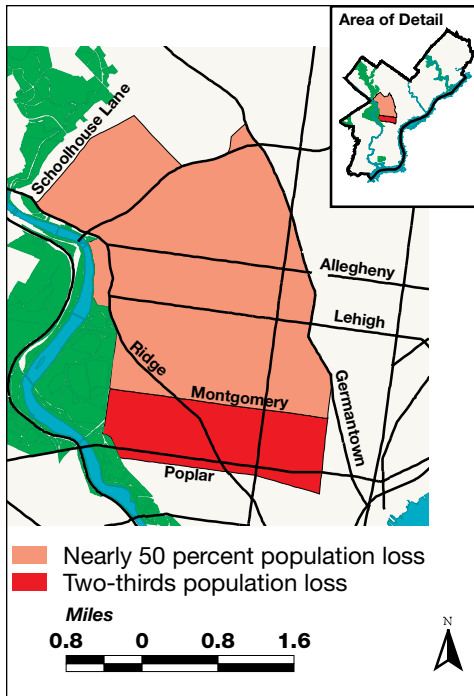
Vacant Property

The traumatic rollercoaster ride of steady, sometimes explosive, growth in the City of Philadelphia before 1950, and the steady, sometimes precipitous decline since then results from many causes. A complete discussion of this change in American settlement patterns would include good, bad and benign motivations, and both designed and unintended consequences. A partial list includes:

- Increased prosperity that allowed middle-class households to purchase privacy in suburban subdivisions, along with racial prejudice that drove whites out of cities in which minorities were present; and
- Technological innovations that made sprawling one-story business campuses more efficient than dense multi-story loft buildings, along with red-lining by lending institutions that made stability in older neighborhoods virtually impossible; and
- Public policies that fostered the growth of modern and lower-density housing, along with public policies that over-subsidized growth at the suburban edge and over-depreciated assets at the urban core.

But whatever the causes, depopulation in Philadelphia has resulted in a catastrophic loss of residents in the city's oldest neighborhoods, outside of Center City. The area of North Philadelphia from Montgomery Avenue to Schoolhouse Lane, and west from Germantown Avenue to Fairmount Park lost nearly half of its population after 1950, falling from 210,000 to 109,000 in 1990. The area of North Philadelphia just south of this, from Poplar Street to Montgomery Avenue and west of Sixth Street, lost two-thirds of its population after 1950, falling from 111,000 to 39,000 in 1990.⁴ (See Map 1)

This extraordinary depopulation has resulted in extensive vacancy and abandonment in the city. As of 1992, the Department of Licenses and Inspections (L&I) had identified 27,000 abandoned residential buildings

Map 1: Population Loss 1950-1990

in the city and 15,800 vacant residential lots.⁵ In 1999, a study by Fairmount Ventures for the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society identified 30,900 vacant residential lots in the city, about two-thirds of which are privately owned.⁶ About 1,000 residential structures per year have been demolished during the 1990s. That level of demolition activity is generally considered to keep pace, at best, with the need to demolish additional structures as long-term vacant buildings become unsafe. Thus, the total number of abandoned residential buildings is probably still close to the 27,000 figure, even after the apparent increase in vacant lots since 1992.

Philadelphia Responds

In June 1995, the Philadelphia City Planning Commission released *Vacant Land in Philadelphia*. This report provides an excellent analysis of both vacancy conditions and the administrative procedures that have evolved to deal with those conditions. (In particular, the report is the definitive source for the under-

lying state law and Home Rule Charter provisions relevant to the myriad departments and procedures affecting vacant property.) The report presents two basic recommendations:

- Build a usable information base on vacant property that is comprehensive, timely, and capable of supporting strategic decision-making; and
- Coordinate agencies and streamline procedures in accordance with a strategic plan for property acquisition and disposition.

In September 1995, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) with the financial support of The Pew Charitable Trusts released *Urban Vacant Land: Issues and Recommendations*. This report provides a state of the art review of vacant land and how it is managed in Philadelphia and other cities, with particular attention to Boston and Cleveland. The report describes a variety of vacant land management techniques with a focus on short-term techniques related to greening and gardening, and long-term mechanisms such as parcel assembly and intensive re-use. Again, the major action recommendations center on two things:

- Create an integrated land records database or an inventory that is easy to access and update; and
- Coordinate decision-making to assure that various city agencies are working toward common goals.

By the end of 1997, the City's Office of Housing and Community Development (OHCD) had issued two reports on the subject of vacant property, *Vacant Property Prescriptions* and *Neighborhood Transformations*. These reports advanced the public debate on the vacancy issue by illustrating the variety of partnerships and projects that the city and nonprofits have pursued during the Rendell administration. Distilling lessons from this experience, the reports recommend that the city:

- Tailor programs and interventions to neighborhood-specific needs, since these vary considerably; and
- Coordinate efforts, especially between the Philadelphia Housing Authority and OHCD.

Together, these reports have created considerable momentum in Philadelphia on the subject of vacant property. The William Penn Foundation has supported a far-ranging series of reports under the auspices of the PHS. The first of these has been released: a cost-benefit analysis of remediating and maintaining the inventory of over 30,900 vacant residential lots in the city.⁷ Forthcoming reports will highlight demonstration efforts in target neighborhoods, suggest changes in city policies and practices, and develop a financing plan for citywide vacant land management. This work builds on the experience of the PHS's 25-year-old Philadelphia Green program in general, and on the New Kensington Neighborhood Open Space Management project in particular, now in its fourth year of operation.

The William Penn Foundation has also supported a partnership of Public/Private Ventures, OHCD and the Cartographic Modeling Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania, which is developing an extensive database of residential vacant land and abandoned buildings throughout the city. This project, known as Philadelphia Snapshot, is discussed at length below.

Finally, in 1997 the Philadelphia City Council authorized a Select Committee on Vacant Land Re-use and Management, which first met in June 1998. Subcommittees were established on Acquisition, Financing, Neighborhood Envisioning, Demolition and Redevelopment/Re-use. A number of proposals have emerged from this year-long process. Perhaps the most notable is the new Gateway Center to be operated by the Redevelopment Authority (RDA) and scheduled to open during the summer of 1999. This new one-stop facility, based on earlier Planning Commission recommendations, will serve as a central intake point for applications to acquire vacant parcels. The goal of the Center will be to double the number of property transfers processed annually, from 1,000 to 2,000 per year.

Analysis

This activity places the City of Philadelphia in the forefront of policy analysis and action on the issue of vacant property. However, there remain several important barriers to significant and lasting progress. We highlight two in this report: informational and institutional barriers.

Informational Barriers

Without a reliable information base of derelict property throughout the city, a systematic response to the problem is impossible. Anyone who has been through the city's older neighborhoods in the last 20 years has an impressionistic sense of the extent of depopulation, abandonment, and decline that has occurred within them. Through a neighborhood-level survey of conditions across a set of blocks and streets impressions can be sharpened. Such surveys have been conducted by a number of community-based organizations in recent years. They have the advantage of improved

accuracy, but can fall short in several ways; much of the most relevant information for decision-making (ownership, tax status, etc.) cannot be gathered by a visual inspection. Rather it resides in a variety of city agencies, these databases are often inaccessible to neighborhood groups or are incompatible with one another.

Most important, the information needs to be functional for decision-makers, both public and private. That is, it needs to be accurate, timely and computerized so that scenarios and calculations can be generated. In order to facilitate analysis this kind of information base needs to be accessible for the city as a whole. Without it, there is no way to compare neighborhoods, understand the extent of various problems, design intervention strategies tailored to neighborhood-specific needs, or allocate resources appropriately across areas.

One improvement in the information base is scheduled to be completed at the end of

1999. The Philadelphia Snapshot Project will gather information from a variety of sources and make it available to decision-makers citywide. For the first time, a complete inventory of residential vacant property throughout the city will join photographic images, administrative records, and a visual assessment of condition. When completed, Snapshot will provide Philadelphia decision-makers with the most comprehensive database of residential vacant property nationwide.

However, until Snapshot data is available, the best data source for providing a citywide understanding of abandonment comes from the U.S. Census. This information is limited in a number of ways. First, it contains information only on vacant residential structures; no data on vacant land (as opposed to buildings), and no data on nonresidential structures are included. The Census also has no direct measure of abandonment; it only reports housing units that are vacant.

The Snapshot Survey

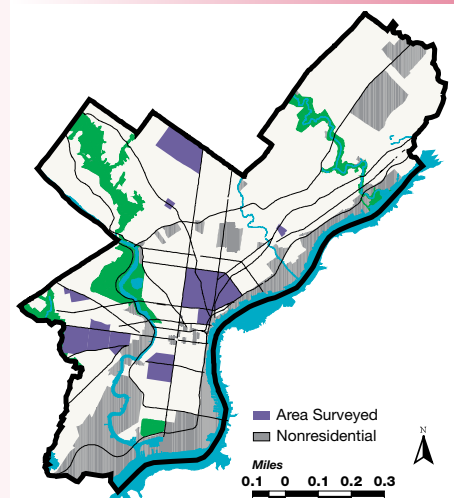
The Snapshot survey began in the spring of 1998 as a demonstration project in Southwest Center City. Today, with support from The William Penn Foundation, the project has expanded to include many neighborhoods of the city. The goals of the project are straightforward; to photograph and record digital images, collect field data, and organize administrative records on the city's inventory of vacant residential properties, both land and structures. OHCD staff members, working in collaboration with CDCs and AmeriCorps members, have completed survey work in more than 10 target areas and estimate a completion in early 2000.

The process is labor intensive; surveying is done by foot, findings must be transferred from paper to computer, and the records of a number of different city offices must be merged to produce

the end product. Finally, the database is coded into a geographic information system by the Cartographic Modeling Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania.

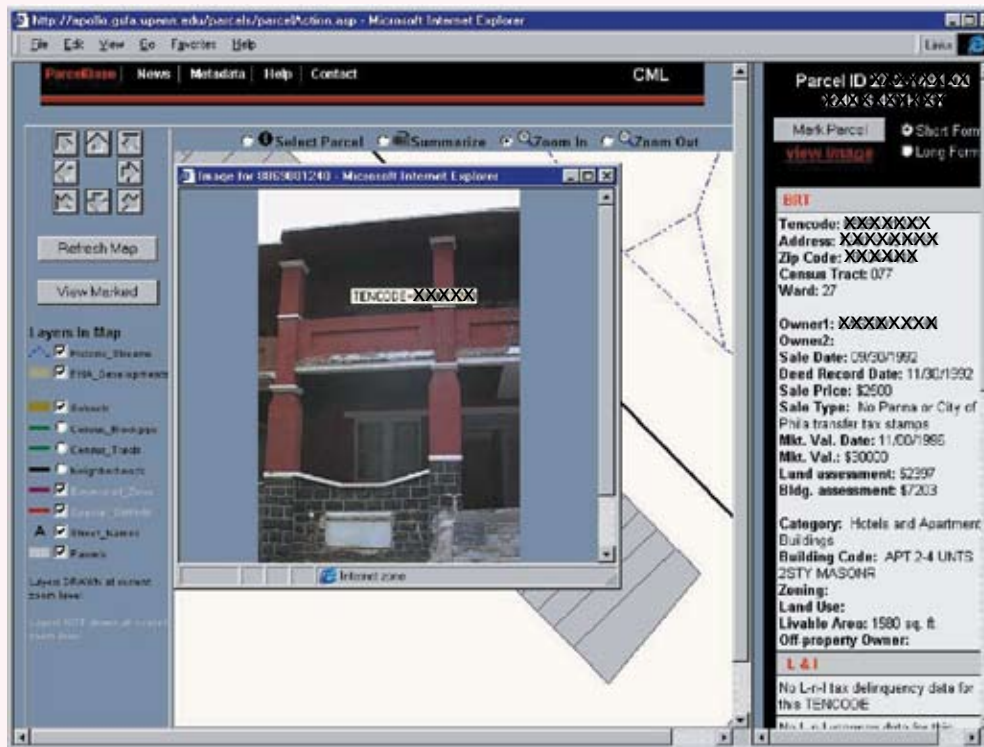
The result of these efforts is a powerful tool for both public policy and community planning. By centralizing divergent sources of public information, Snapshot makes accessible records which have hitherto been both time consuming and tedious to gather. The Snapshot database will save CDCs countless hours of research since information will be available at the click of a button rather than spread across many different city offices.

Map 2: Snapshot Survey to Date



Project Snapshot Completed Format

Screen Capture of Project Snapshot provided by the Cartographic Modeling Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania.



On the other hand, the Census does have some advantages. In particular, the Census is conducted every 10 years and thus provides historical data to measure changing conditions. Also, the Census is linked to relatively small areas (e.g., census tracts and block groups), which allows for an analysis of conditions as they differ among neighborhoods.

We present data from the 1960 and 1990 Censuses in Maps 3-6a. (We use the 1960 Census rather than the peak year 1950 Census because significant changes in census tract geography during the 1950s make the latter hard to compare with data from 1990.) Our intention is to illustrate the usefulness of a detailed citywide database. We emphasize again, however, that these data are out of date and limited to residential structures; they are intended to illustrate the uses of a superior database like Snapshot when it becomes available.

Map 3 displays the net change in population in each of the city's 366 census tracts (small areas containing of 2,000 to 8,000 people). Each dot on Map 3 represents

75 persons. A black dot represents a net increase of 75 residents in the census tract between 1960 and 1990, while a red dot indicates a net decrease of 75 residents. Given that the overall population of the city declined during this period, there are many more red dots than there are black. Note that during this period, there were parts of the city that actually increased in population: Center City, Overbrook Park, the Far Northeast, Roxborough and International City. However, most parts of the city experienced population loss: Kensington, West Philadelphia, South Philadelphia and Oak Lane. The severest depopulation occurred in North Philadelphia and Mantua.

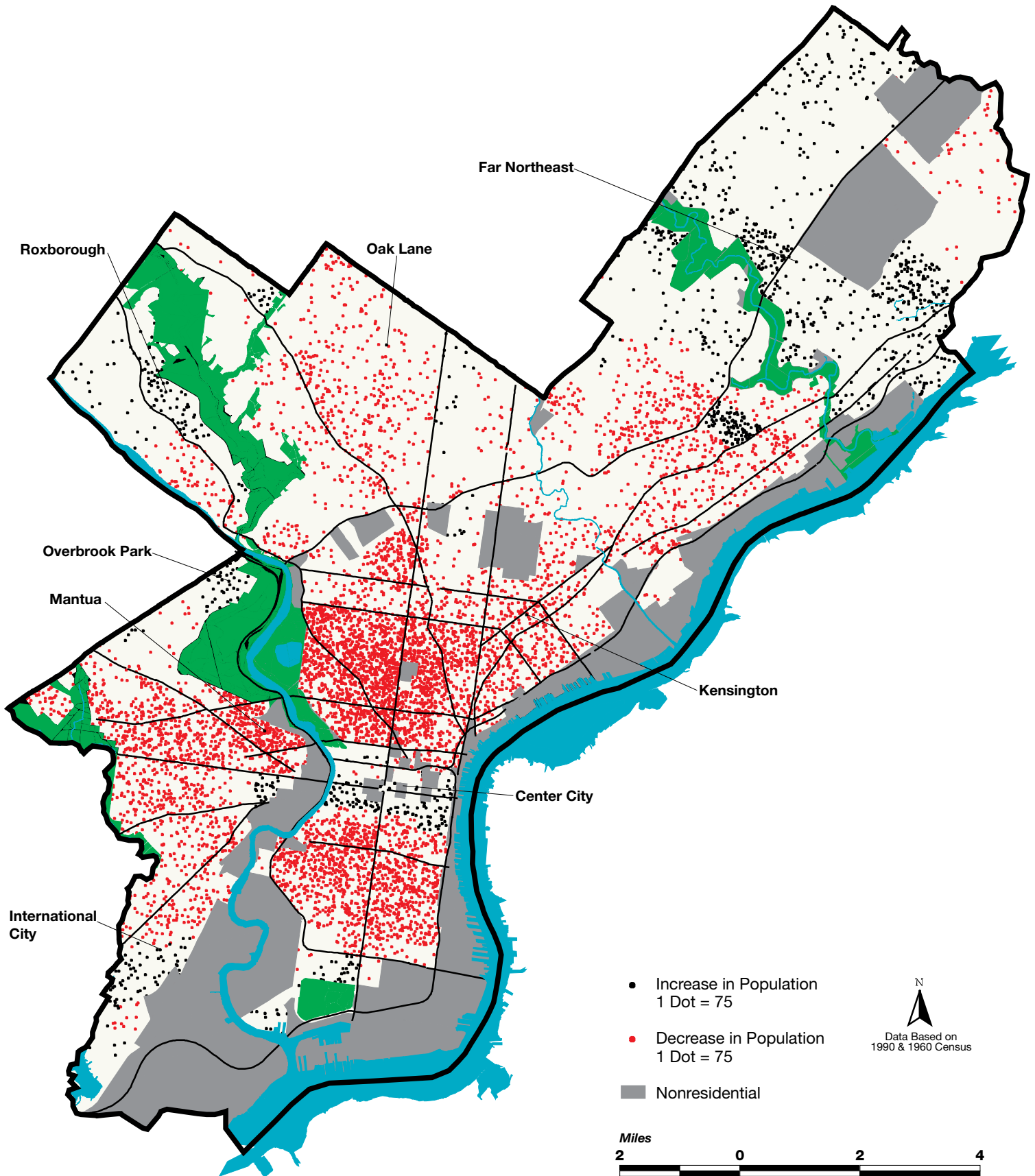
Map 4 presents the net change in housing units between 1960 and 1990. Each dot represents 25 housing units; black represents a net increase and red a net decrease. (Note that housing units are not necessarily houses. A rowhouse divided into three apartments, for example, would represent an increase from one to three housing units.) In general, the pattern is similar to that of population change, with

some exceptions. A standard model of abandonment would begin with population loss leading to vacancy and then to abandonment and blight. While the census data are simply too imprecise to track such a complex process, suggestions become apparent when we compare Maps 3 and 4.

Population change and housing change in this period suggest a "frontier" in which depopulation precedes the loss of housing stock. Moving up Germantown Avenue and across Frankford Creek, depopulation appears to be a precursor of vacancy, which may well have increased in these areas during the 1990s (after the last census). Again, these are questions that must await the completion of Snapshot.

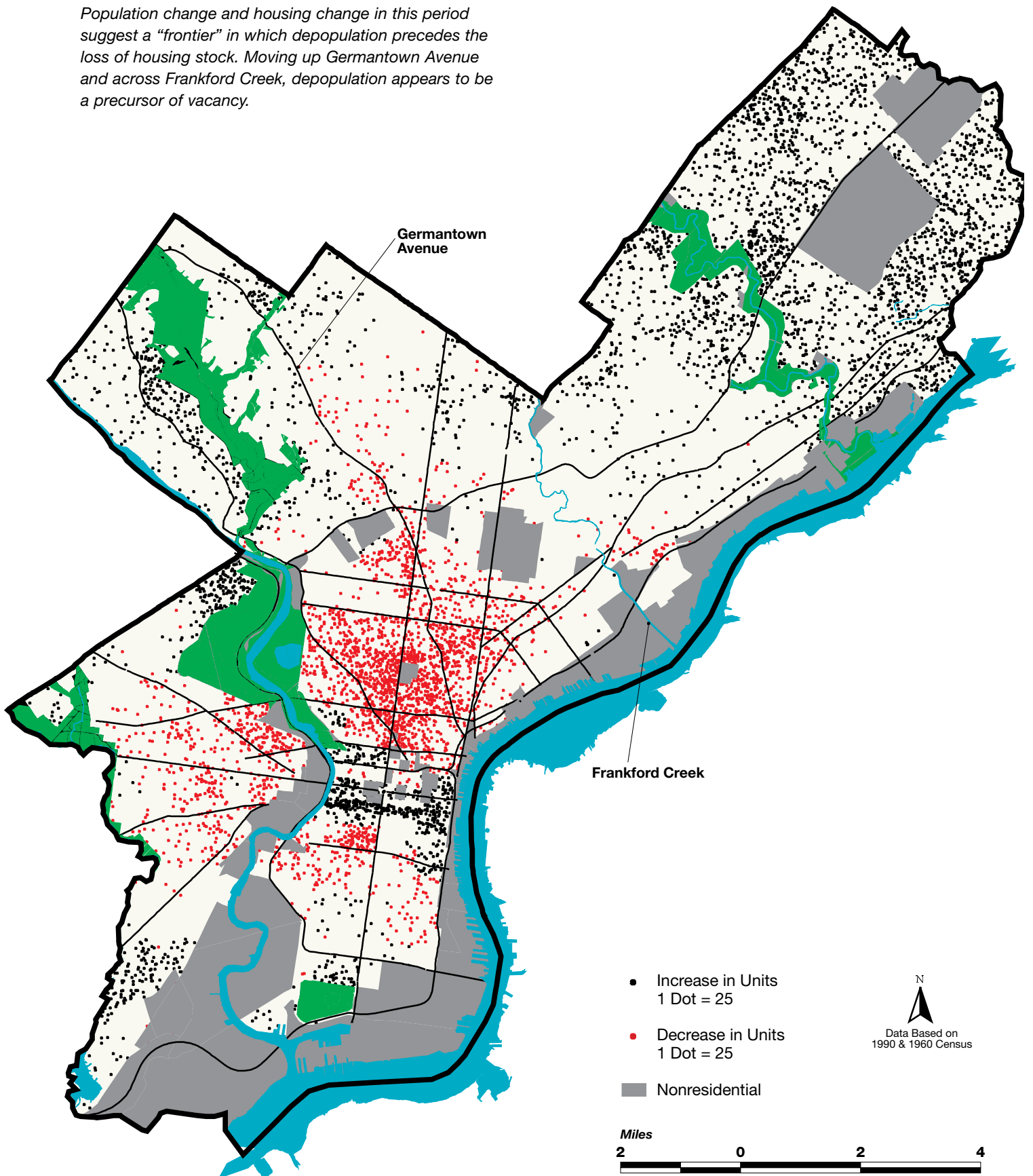
But the census data do make an important point that is unlikely to be changed by the existence of newer, more accurate data: depopulation and its consequences are not evenly distributed across the city. Map 5 illustrates this even more clearly. It displays a measure we devised for the concentration of vacant units on small groups of blocks.

Map 3: Net Change in Population 1960-1990
(distributed by Census Tract)



Map 4: Net Change in Units 1960-1990
(distributed by Census Tract)

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In 1990, the average vacancy rate for block groups citywide (a census designation for three to six contiguous city blocks) was 11 percent.

We counted the number of vacant housing units above twice that rate (i.e., above 22 percent) in each of the almost 1,800 block groups in the city. Of course, the number was zero in most block groups. However, there were a total of 4,800 such units across the city. These could be labeled “surplus” units for which there is clearly little local demand. These “surplus” units are displayed in Map 5. Each dot represents five such housing units at the time of the 1990 Census.

Agencies with Vacant Land Responsibilities:

The Bureau of Revision of Taxes
 City Council (17 Members: 10 district representatives and 7 at large members)
 The Commerce Department
 The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
 License and Inspection (L&I)
 The Office of Housing and Community Development (OHCD)
 Philadelphia Authority for Industrial Development (PAID)
 Philadelphia City Planning Commission (PCPC)
 Philadelphia Commercial Development Corporation (PCDC)
 Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA)
 Philadelphia Housing Development Corporation (PHDC)
 Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC)
 Redevelopment Authority (RDA)
 The Revenue Department
 Vacant Property Review Committee (VPRC)

As the map indicates, vacancy is concentrated within a few areas of the city. Indeed, of the 4,800 “surplus” units, nearly 4,200 are concentrated in just 5 percent of the city’s census block groups. (In many cases, these concentrations appear to be related to public housing properties.)

Map 6 presents a fourth analysis. We calculate the vacancy rate (vacant units as a percentage of total housing units in the block group) in each block group and rank the groups from highest to lowest in vacancy rates. The red-shaded block groups represent the 5 percent of block groups with the highest vacancy rates (95th to 100th percentiles). The orange-shaded groups represent the next highest 5 percent of block groups (i.e., the 90th to 95th percentiles). The yellow-shaded blocks represent the next highest 10 percent of block groups. Therefore, the red, orange and yellow shading combined display the worst 20 percent or one-fifth of block groups in terms of vacancy rates. The gray-shaded block groups represent the 50th to 80th percentiles of vacancy rates and the white-shaded blocks represent the one-half of all block groups with the lowest vacancy rates.

The red-shaded blocks are severely distressed by both depopulation and vacant property. They represented 1 percent of the city’s total population in 1990 but 7 percent of its total vacant units. These red areas had an average vacancy rate of 45 percent compared to 5 percent in the white-shaded blocks and 15 percent in the gray-shaded blocks. They had a density of 17 persons per acre, barely half that of the gray-shaded blocks (30 persons/acre) or Center City (32 persons/acre), even though the latter is heavily nonresidential.

Because the city’s housing stock varies so widely (i.e., Olney is not Mayfair is not Strawberry Mansion), it is prudent to focus on a single section of the city. The heavy outline on Map 6a shows the boundaries of an area of concentrated vacancy in North Philadelphia, from Girard Avenue to Lehigh Avenue, Sixth Street to the Schuylkill River. This area contains the single largest concentration of vacant property in the city.

Given the age of the housing stock and the demographics of the residents (especially the poverty rates), this is not surprising. With about 5 percent (3,700 acres) of the city’s land area, this part of North Philadelphia has over 50 percent of the city’s highest vacancy (red) blocks, and every fifth housing unit was vacant in 1990.

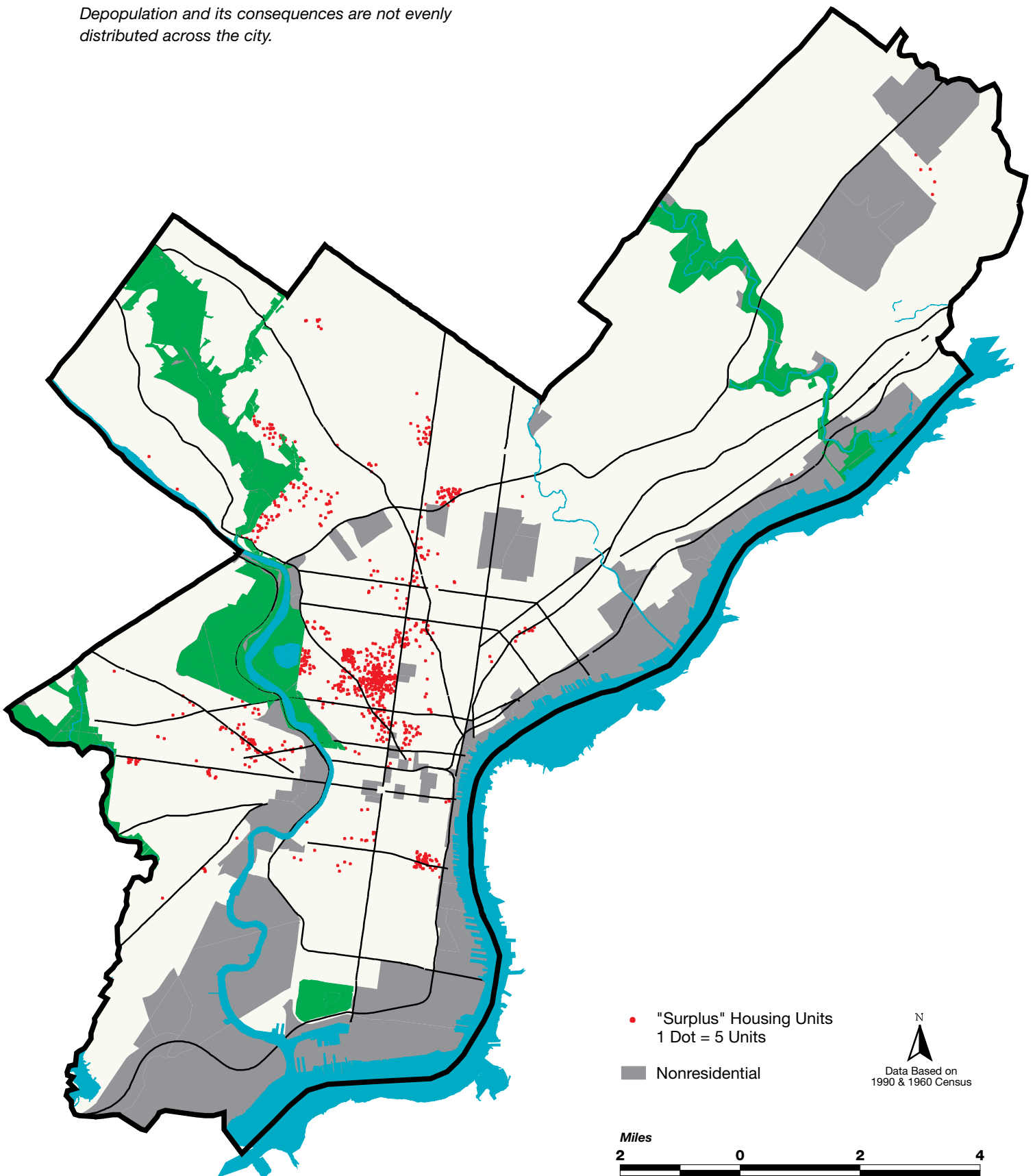
In a single area such as this, in which the housing stock was built at approximately the same time, and is of the same quality, it is much easier to compare the red- and gray-shaded tracts (since it’s more likely that the only thing varying between them is vacancy rates not housing type, income levels, etc.). In this setting, the gray-shaded tracts represent stable, less distressed versions of red blocks. The gray blocks of the outlined area in Map 6a had a population density of 45 persons per acre in 1990 while the red blocks had 23 persons per acre.

In 1990 the red and orange blocks in this area of North Philadelphia represented over 800 acres of largely contiguous land with a population of 7,500 households. The depopulation of these blocks has been so extensive that these 7,500 remaining households could be accommodated in the vacant units of the yellow and gray blocks within the boundary shown in Map 6a. That is, the remaining population of the approximately 150 highest-vacancy blocks in this area could move to the approximately 300 lower-vacancy blocks (which had a 1990 population of 30,000 households) without raising the unit density in the destination blocks, and with no moves at all into the 100 or so blocks in the area that had vacancy rates below the citywide median (i.e., the white-shaded blocks).

Obviously, the census data are not precise, detailed, or timely enough to guide an actual strategy along the lines suggested in the preceding paragraph. That exercise is intended only to capture the general extent of depopulation and vacancy in the city’s most distressed section. But the analysis also demonstrates the possibilities for strategic decision-making when a database such as Snapshot is completed.

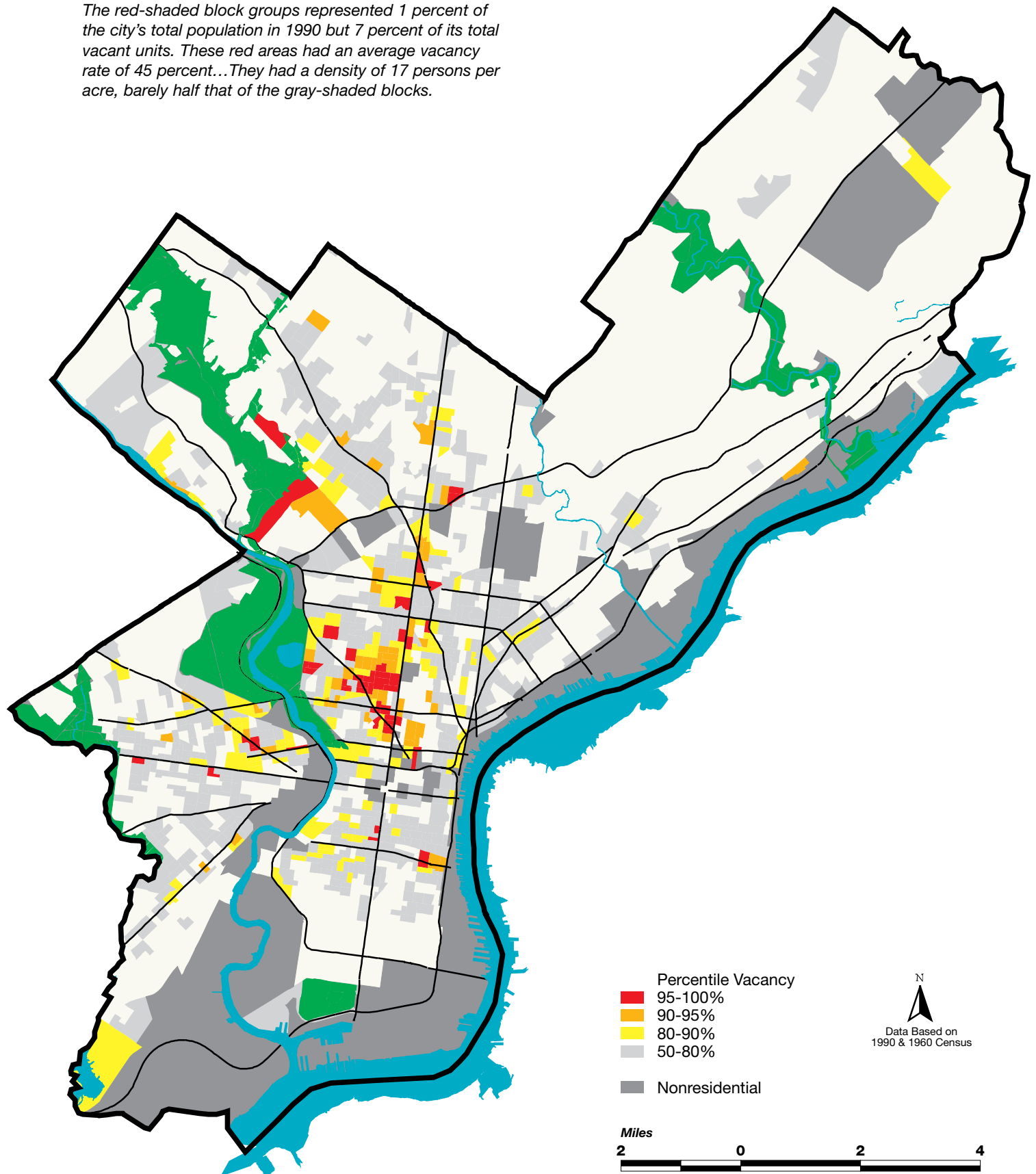
Map 5: Surplus Units 1990
(distributed by Census Tract)

Depopulation and its consequences are not evenly distributed across the city.



Map 6: Distribution of Vacancy Rates 1990
(Percentile of Rates by Block Group)

The red-shaded block groups represented 1 percent of the city's total population in 1990 but 7 percent of its total vacant units. These red areas had an average vacancy rate of 45 percent...They had a density of 17 persons per acre, barely half that of the gray-shaded blocks.



Institutional Barriers

The responsibility for vacant property in the City of Philadelphia is divided among no fewer than 15 public agencies. An individual interested in purchasing a property may spend weeks negotiating the maze of agencies just to apply, a developer can invest months in delays in order to meet the differing requirements of the various agencies.⁸ Within these city agencies, the fragmentation of responsibility can undermine decisions made by other departments. A single city block can contain homes owned by the PHA, slated for demolition by L&I, included in an RDA urban renewal project, receiving an OHCD grant for rehabilitation, and promised by a council person for a specific redevelopment project. Each of these actions, taken independently, has a profound effect upon the others.

The current system of land management was developed over time to help structure and organize a growing city. Land was divided and managed according to use, and this system continues to define the city's approach to vacant property today. The numerous checks, balances and mandatory waiting periods imposed make a complete understanding of the system virtually impossible.

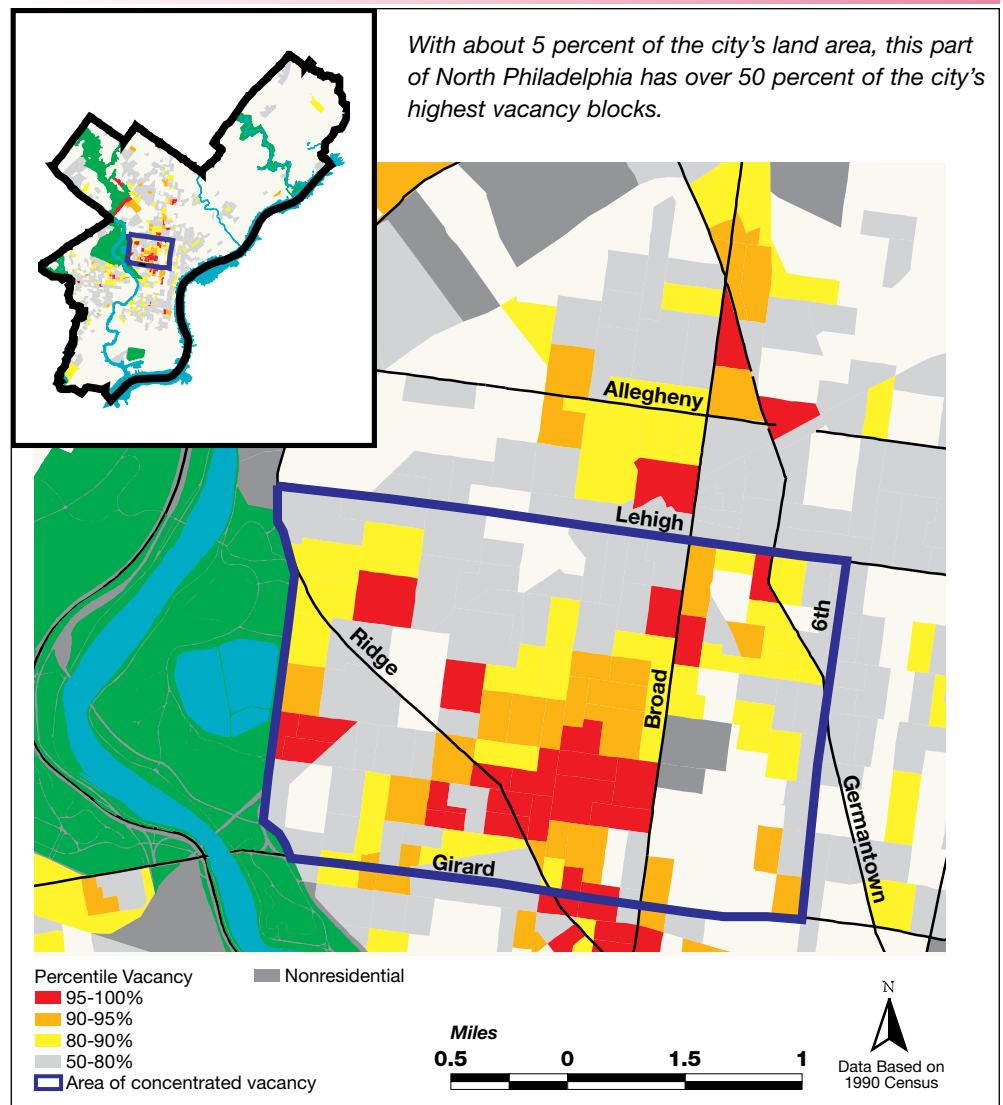
The City Planning Commission report *Vacant Land in Philadelphia* provides an exhaustive summary of the missions and procedures of the key public agencies responsible for vacant property management in Philadelphia, and we do not repeat that excellent review in this report.⁹ As one example, in order to obtain a certification of blight (which allows the RDA to condemn, acquire and ultimately transfer a property to a new owner) no fewer than six city agencies are involved: License and Inspection, the Planning Commission, the Records Department, the Redevelopment Authority, the Revenue Department and the Vacant Property Review Committee. Due to improved interdepartmental cooperation during the Rendell administration, processes such as this one have become more efficient, cutting average transfer time from two years to one year. The new Gateway Center described earlier is designed to increase the pace as well as the efficiency of transfers.

But therein lies an additional problem. Much of the recent progress on property disposition has focused on accelerating the frequency of transactions. This is a laudable response to citizen complaints regarding the often glacial processing of these transfers. The justification for an accelerated pace is presented as a market-oriented approach that tries to facilitate private transactions so they can occur as quickly as possible.

However, it should be noted that this approach to property disposition operates on an individual first-come, first-served basis and largely without reference to any strategic plan for the affected block,

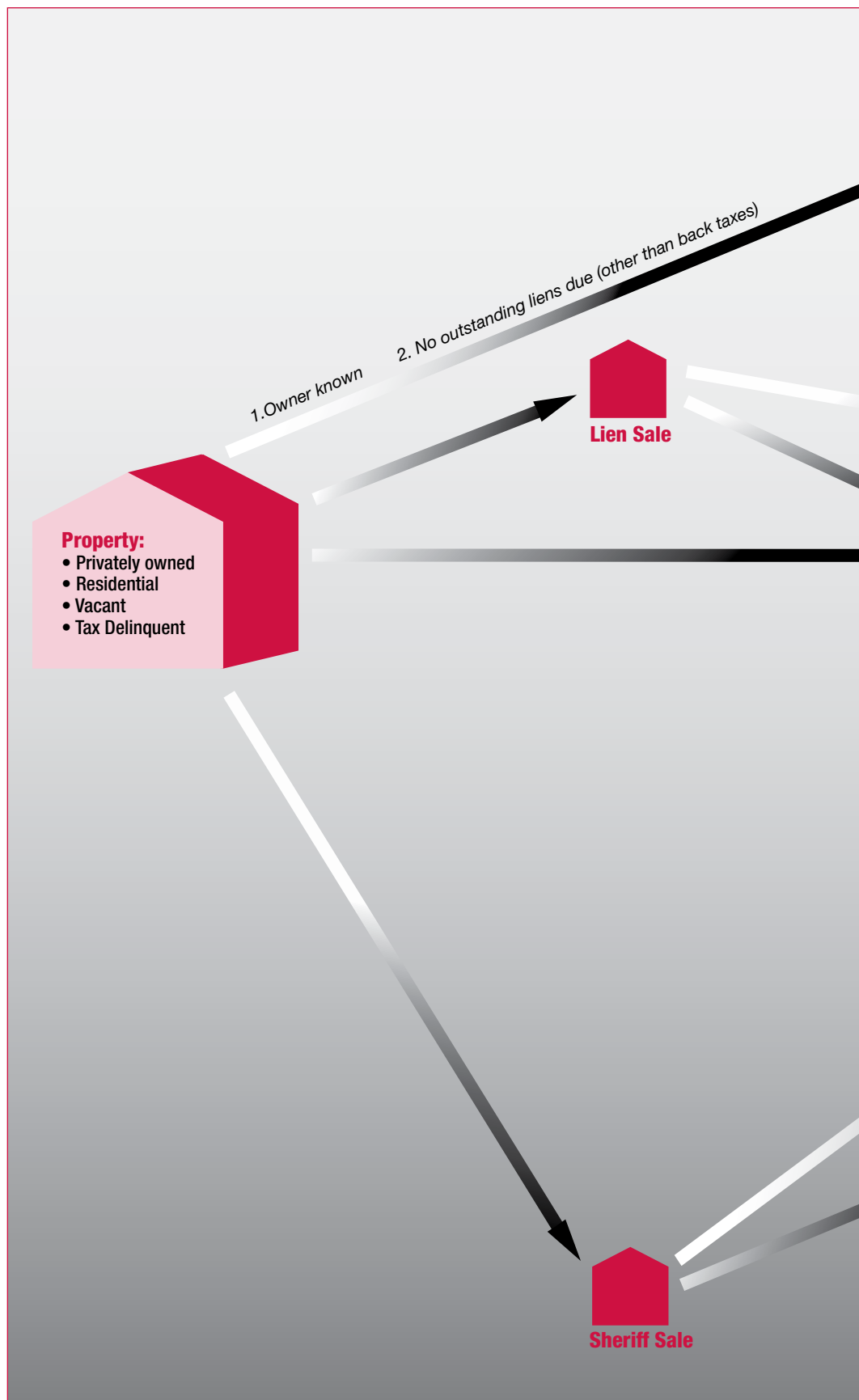
neighborhood, or the city as a whole. To the extent that these small-scale property transfers reduce the inventory of available parcels and transfer them to individual owners, such transfers also reduce the opportunity for the assembly and consolidation of parcels into larger redevelopment opportunities. It is likely that the transfer of a small parcel to an adjacent owner for use as side lot parking or to a local group for use as a community garden is probably the appropriate use for many vacant lots. But these transactions should be determined by a comprehensive strategy rather than simply by who's on line at the Gateway Center.

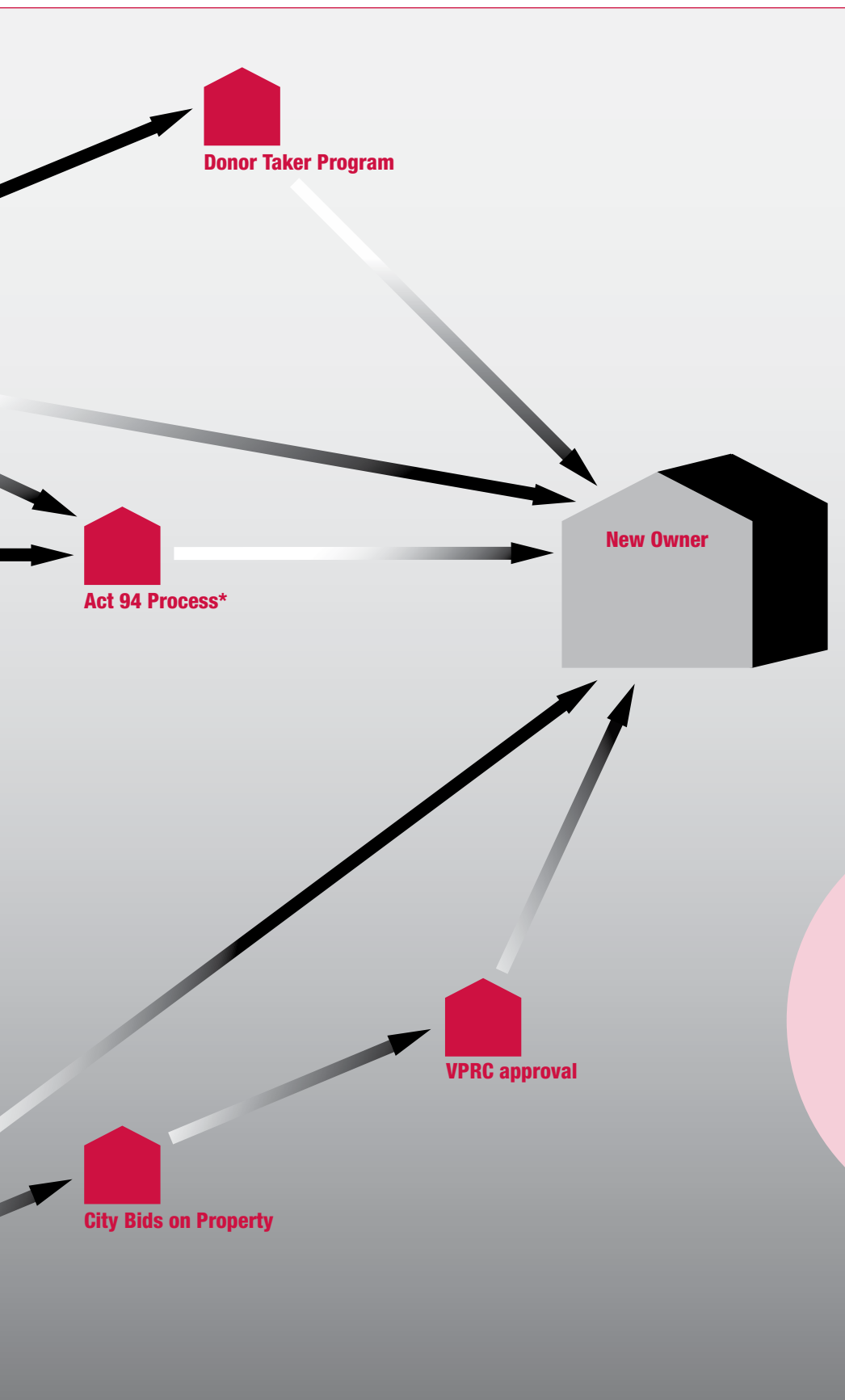
Map 6a: Area of Concentrated Vacancy Distribution of Vacancy Rates 1990 (Percentile of Rates by Block Group)



The Acquisition and Disposition of Vacant Land:

A variety of requests can initiate land acquisition proceedings; an individual or organization can apply to one of many city agencies or councilpeople in order to acquire a vacant property. Once started, the acquisition process involves many city departments. It varies depending on the circumstances of each individual property. This chart illustrates the various methods available for acquiring a property that is: privately owned, residential, vacant and tax delinquent.





Publicly owned land:

The acquisition proceedings for a publicly owned property differ from those of privately owned property. Publicly owned land can be managed by one of many public entities: the City, Public Property, the RDA, PHDC or the PHA. Each of these agencies has a land disposition policy it must follow; each policy requires the approval of other governing bodies. Furthermore, within a single agency there may be more than one disposition policy to govern the differing types of vacant land. The RDA, for example, has a streamlined disposition process developed strictly for side yards. Normally the RDA must determine the fair market value of the property, determine the applicant's financial capability, enter into a redevelopment agreement with the applicant, and have the agreement approved by the RDA board, the Planning Commission and City Council before it can reach a settlement with the applicant. In disposing of publicly owned land, many agencies must have VPRC, City Council and/or board approval in order to complete the property transaction.

***Act 94 Process:**

Intergovernmental Process:

1. Revenue Department: verifies delinquency
2. L&I: determines blight
3. PCPC: certifies the property to be blighted
4. RDA:
 - obtains title to property
 - has property appraised
 - offers fair market value based on appraisal
 - files a declaration of taking
 - 60 days later the RDA can dispose of the property

Recommendations

Our two recommendations center on the issue of improving the city's capacity for strategic and effective action on vacant property. In the words of Blaine Bonham, executive vice president of PHS, vacant properties are "a blight that diminish the quality of life, depress property values, overwhelm current redevelopment efforts, and blunt our ability to envision a brighter future for many communities."

Complete Snapshot

Before any effective action can occur on the subject of vacant property, we must improve our information base. As discussed throughout this report, much progress is under way. In particular, when Philadelphia Snapshot is completed by OHCD and the Cartographic Modeling Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania, the city, its citizens, and intermediary organizations will have a powerful tool for thinking and acting strategically.

We note two issues for consideration beyond the completion of Snapshot. First, it will be crucial to ensure open access to Snapshot for citizens, advocates, developers and public decision-makers. The lack of information has been a major impediment to progress (and therefore, a force behind unmanaged decline) on the subject of vacant property. With the completion of Snapshot, the issue will shift to access. We strongly support the commitment of Professor Dennis Culhane at the University of Pennsylvania to build community access into both the Snapshot project and the larger Cartographic Project at Penn.

Second, a database like Snapshot ages very quickly. A commitment should be made by public and private funders to maintain this and other information resources once they are completed. Resources now being used for a variety of high-quality efforts (especially the cartography and aerial photography under way at the Streets and Water Departments of the city) should be leveraged into an integrated information system so that our command of vacant property information stays timely and relevant.

Consolidate, Not Coordinate

During the past five years, at least three major reports on vacant land have made a central recommendation: improve coordination among these many agencies. While such coordination has arguably improved in the last year or two, there remains no strategic vision or public apparatus bold enough to confront the effects of 50 years of depopulation.

Coordination—even if it could be achieved—is unlikely to provide a strong enough response. The dozen or so agencies to be coordinated evolved during an era of growth and remain oriented to the obsolete land uses that abandoned properties had 10 or 50 years ago. Prior use too often determines jurisdiction under this administrative regime. It is a weak criterion for determining responsibility and authority for vacant property. To be sure, there are some cases in which prior use has technical implications for vacant property's future disposition (e.g., remediating the contamination of some former industrial properties; preserving the historic character of some former residential properties). But in the face of 50 years of depopulation and its accumulated effects on vacancy and abandonment, we need an administrative capacity that can think strategically beyond prior use and understand vacant property as a generic resource.

We recommend that the city carve out the fragmented responsibilities for vacant property from the various agencies now involved and consolidate efforts into a new authority.

A consolidation of authority would replace the duplication of the current fragmented efforts. Its key function would be the acquisition, management, consolidation and disposition of the abandoned buildings and vacant land that depopulation has created in our core neighborhoods of North and South Philadelphia. As noted by the City Planning Commission, a de facto land bank has been created in Philadelphia in the past two decades. As of 1994, 23,000 properties were listed in the City Owned Real Estate Inventory (CORI).¹⁰ These properties, plus the 20,000 unmanaged

vacant lots in private hands, and the comparable number of privately owned but abandoned residential structures, must all be considered as a single asset base.

Furthermore, as our analysis of the 1990 census data illustrates, these vacant properties must be placed in the context of their surrounding neighborhoods. In areas where half the housing sites are now empty lots and where half the houses that remain are vacant and effectively abandoned, we must consider some meaningful alternative to the unmanaged decline of the past 20 or 30 years. This would likely include the consolidation of abandoned areas and, in some cases, the relocation of those households that remain in blocks that too often look like Dresden after the Second World War.

As a first step toward this new authority, we challenge both mayoral candidates to declare support for a new deputy mayor for vacant property to whom all relevant agencies would report on this issue. The current administration has displayed an inordinate affection for this technique, establishing 13 deputy mayors, at last count. But this "czar" approach has been a way to demonstrate political will, on issues from new capital projects to gun trafficking. Political will is a necessary condition for effecting the kind of consolidation we propose here.

Between now and the beginning of the next administration, a bipartisan working group could make use of political backing from the two candidates and work through the details for consolidating authority under the new deputy mayor. Such a working group could be funded by philanthropic support and would ensure that the next mayor would be prepared to begin his term ready to act on this crucial issue.

The opportunity here is to pursue a kind of civic speculation. A new authority can leverage vacant land to better serve a city that feels as if it's missing half its residents. Guided by a strategic vision of a "right-sized" city for today's population, a powerful commitment by the next mayor could change the subject from decline through abandonment to growth through consolidation.

Endnotes

- 1 "Population Peaks by Wards, Philadelphia, 1860-1950," *Public Information Bulletin No. 5* (Philadelphia City Planning Commission, June 1952).
- 2 Genaro Armas, "Philadelphia tops nation in loss of population," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 12, 1999.
- 3 Barry Seymour, "The Future of First Generation Suburbs in the Delaware Valley Region," *Greater Philadelphia Regional Review* (Pennsylvania Economy League, Winter 1998, pp1-4).
- 4 See footnote 1. Also, 1990 U.S. Census.
- 5 As reported in *Vacant Land in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia City Planning Commission, June 1995, p12).
- 6 *Vacant Land Management in Philadelphia Neighborhoods: Cost Benefit Analysis*, Fairmount Ventures, Inc. for the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (April 1999).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 There have been numerous discussions in the popular press of this confusing and frustrating administrative regime. Cite Lotozo in the *Weekly*, Young in the *Daily News*, and Seplow in the *Inquirer*.
- 9 See pages 23-28.
- 10 See footnote 5.

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