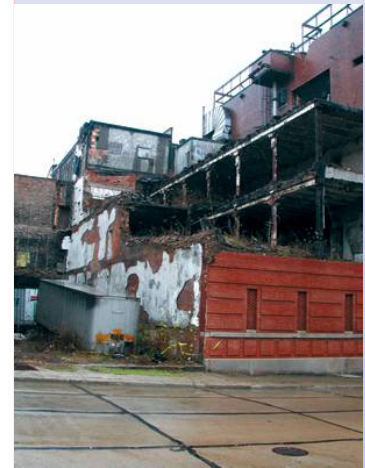
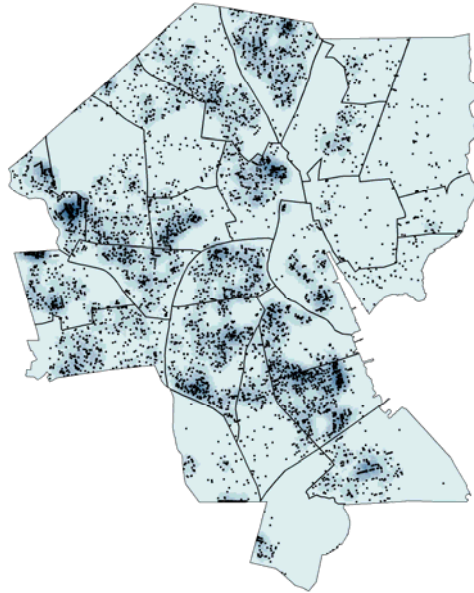


# Neighborhood Inequalities



Vacant Properties in Providence,  
Rhode Island, 1996-Present

# What are Vacant Properties?

- According to the *National Vacant Properties Campaign*, vacant properties are defined as vacant residential, industrial, and commercial buildings and lots that pose a threat to public safety or are neglected by their owners

## *In Providence*

- Providence Tax Assessor classification: residential vacant, industrial-commercial vacant and vacant-other
- 1997 Vacant Land Task Force definition: healthy vs. unhealthy
- 2004 Providence Plan Street Survey definition: unutilized and suspected abandoned

# Why do vacant properties exist?

- Metropolitan-wide trends, such as sprawling development, consumer preference, job loss, and demographic shifts



- On an individual level, the most common reason a property is abandoned is that the cost of maintenance and operation exceeds the apparent value of the property

# Where do vacant properties occur?

- Vacant properties exist everywhere but are most concentrated, and therefore more problematic, in core cities
- A survey done in 1999 examining 83 U.S. cities indicated that the average city possesses over 12,000 acres (or 15 percent of its area) of usable vacant land

Source: Paul C. Brophy and Jennifer S. Vey. "Seizing City Assets: Ten Steps to Urban Land Reform." Center on Urban & Metropolitan Policy: The Brookings Institution and CEOs for

Cities. October 2002.



# How do vacant properties harm neighborhoods?

In addition to being neighborhood “eyesores,” research has shown that vacant properties have many detrimental neighborhood impacts, including:

- \*Environmental Risks
- \*Decreased Property Values
- \*Reduced Tax Revenues
- \* Increased Crime
- \*Environmental Justice Problems

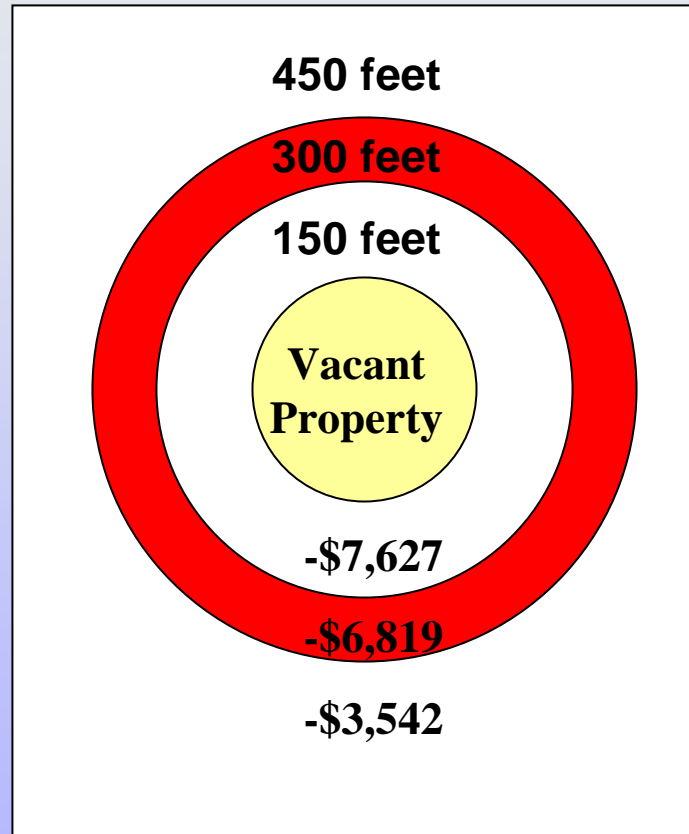


# Environmental Risks

- Magnets for trash and illegal dumping
- Contaminated with hazardous pollutants
- Provide the perfect habitat for vermin



# Decreased Property Values



Source: Temple University Center for Public Policy & Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project. "Blight Free Philadelphia: A Public Private Strategy to Create and Enhance Neighborhood Value." Philadelphia, 2001.

# Reduced Tax Revenues



- Decreases the number of tax-producing properties in municipal tax base
- Grow Smart Report states that since 1995, Providence has lost over \$23.3 million in tax revenues annually due to vacant lots
- It also calculates that present and future vacant lots could result in further depreciation of real property in the city by up to \$565 million with real property tax losses of \$17 million by the year 2020.

Source: Grow Smart Rhode Island. The Cost of Suburban Sprawl and Urban Decay in Rhode Island.

December 1999.

# Increased Crime

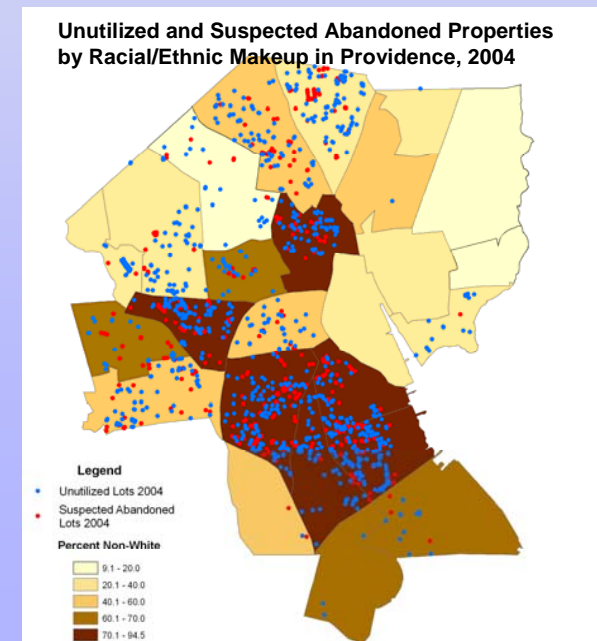
- Research has found illegal use and criminal activity to be rampant on vacant properties
- A study in Richmond, VA, showed that of all demographic variables tested, vacant and abandoned properties had the highest correlation to the incidence of crime



Source: "Vacant Properties: The True Costs to Communities."  
National Vacant Properties Campaign. August 2005.

# Environmental Justice

- “The fair treatment of people of all races, income, and culture with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies”
- Vacant properties are disproportionately clustered in low-income, minority neighborhoods

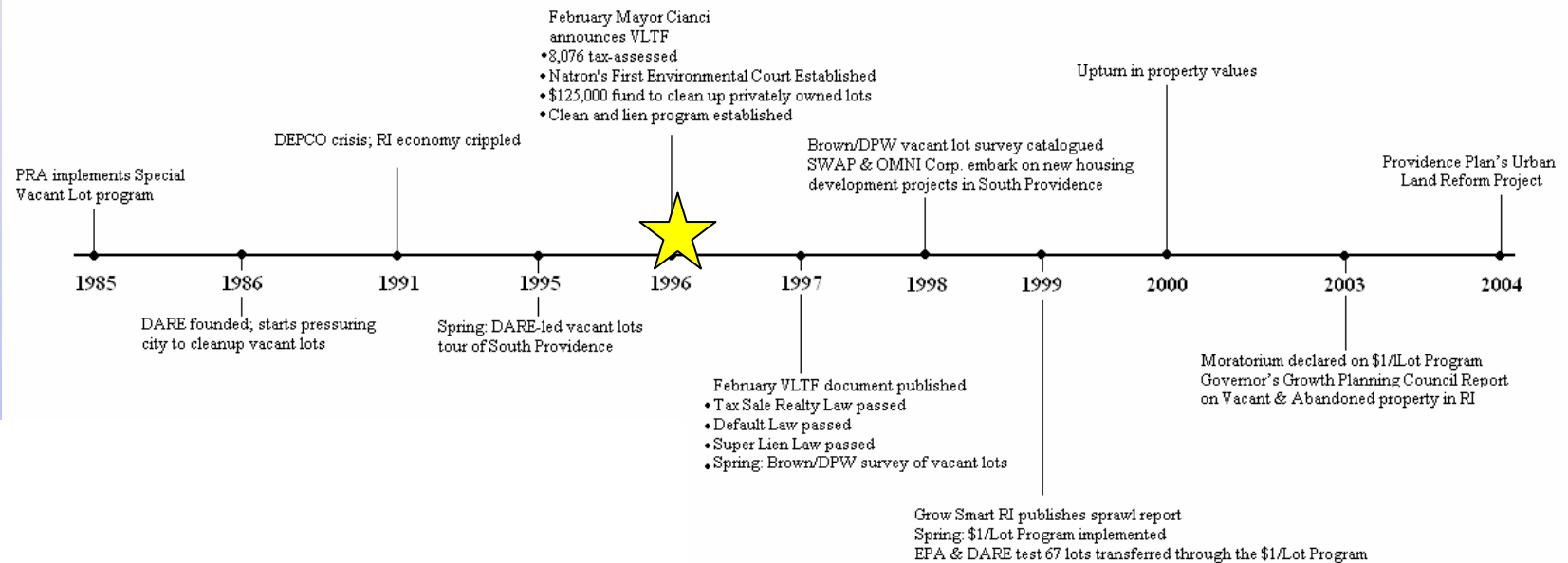


# History of Vacant Properties in Providence, RI

- 1940s-50s: Demographic changes, decline in industry, and new consumer preferences arise
- 1960s-70s: Urban property values plummet
- late 1980s: Property values begin to rise again
- 1991: Banking crisis cripples RI's economy
- 1940-1990: Population of Providence declined by 92,776 people (-36.6%)



# Citizen Response & 1996 as a Crucial Historical Moment



QuickTime™ and a TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor are needed to see this picture.

# The Vacant Land Task Force

- Comprised of a number of stakeholders, including nearly every nonprofit in the city
- Charged with a number of tasks in regard to vacant properties
- By 1997 a Vacant Land Task Force (VLTF) Report to the Mayor was produced

# Research Questions

- Have the goals of the 1997 Vacant Land Task Force Report to the Mayor been achieved?
- Have the explicit enforcement, institutional, and legal reforms of the document been implemented?
- Has the broader goal of reducing the number of vacant properties in Providence been achieved?

# Methods

- Literature review
- Archives review
- Data analysis
- Visual survey
- Interviews with key actors

# Research Questions

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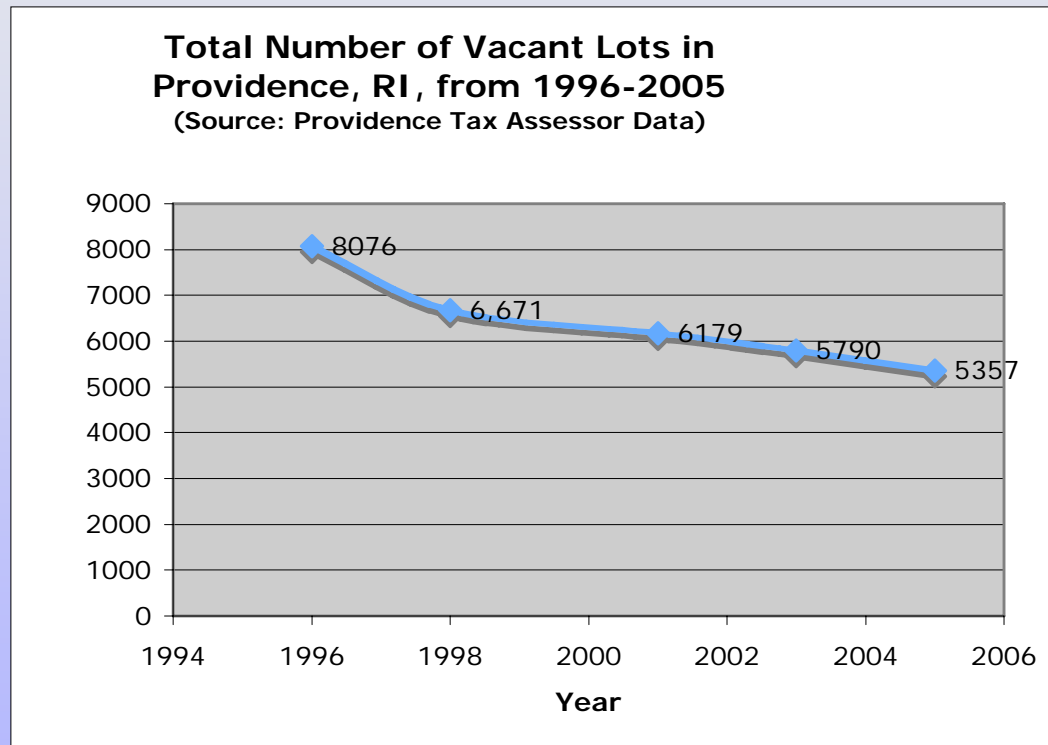
# Enforcement and Legal Reforms of the VLTF

<b>Enforcement</b>	Country's first environmental court founded
	Arrest warrants for scofflaws (or repeat violators who fail to appear in court) as well as illegal dumpers issued
	The Clean and Lien program was established
	City contracted CleanScape and South Providence Development Corporation (SPDC) to clean up city-owned lots
<b>Legal</b>	1997 law allows the judge to default any violator who fails to appear in court and submit resultant fines to a collection agency
	1997 city ordinance was passed that raised the environmental lien to first position
	\$1/Lot Program in the spring of 1999
	Tax Sale Realty law passed in 1997 allows PRA to pull vulnerable lots

# Research Questions

- Have the goals of the 1997 Vacant Land Task Force Report to the Mayor been achieved?
- Have the explicit enforcement, institutional, and legal reforms of the document been implemented?
- **Has the broader goal of reducing the number of vacant properties in Providence been achieved?**

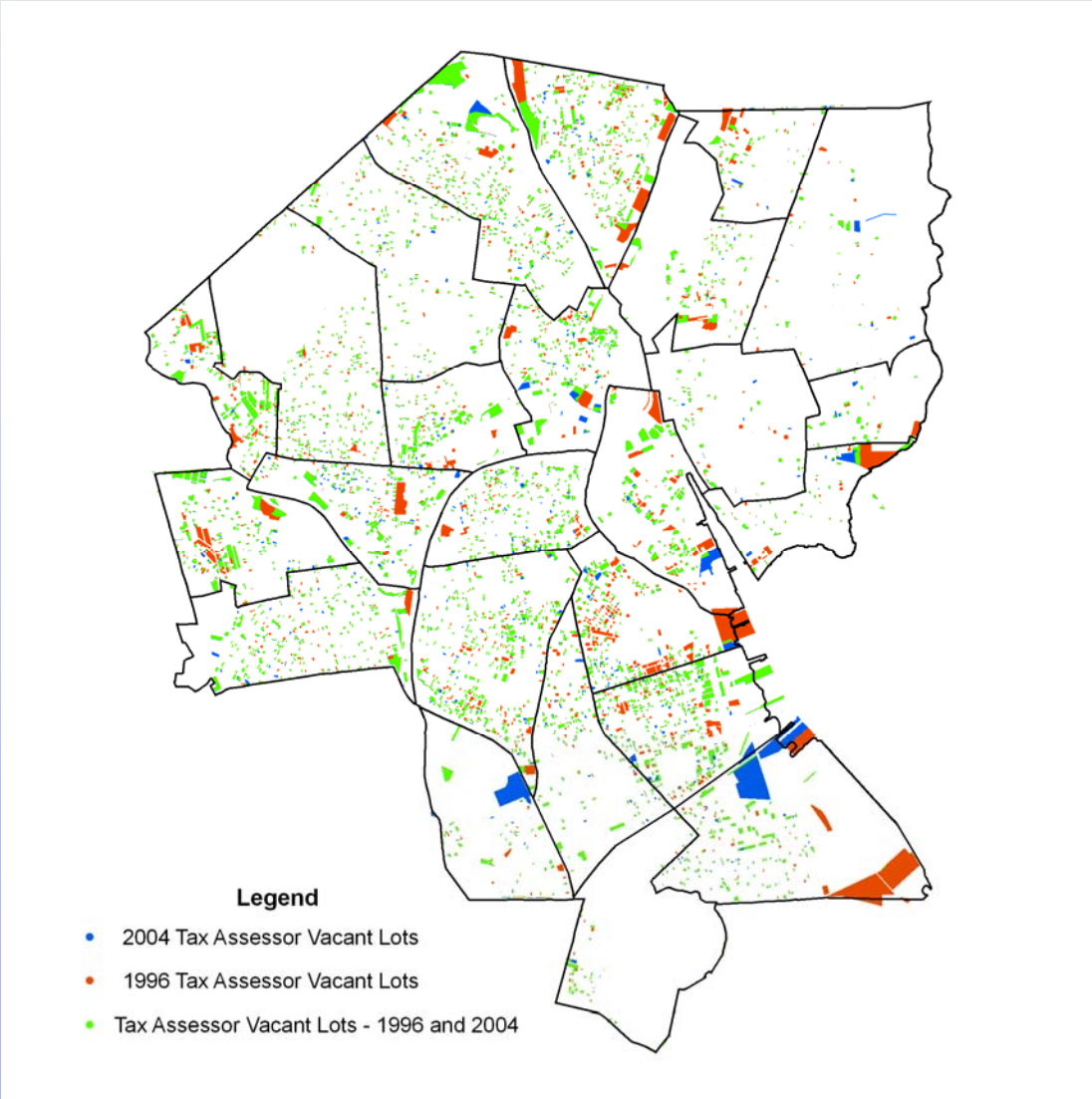
# Citywide Trends in Vacant Lots



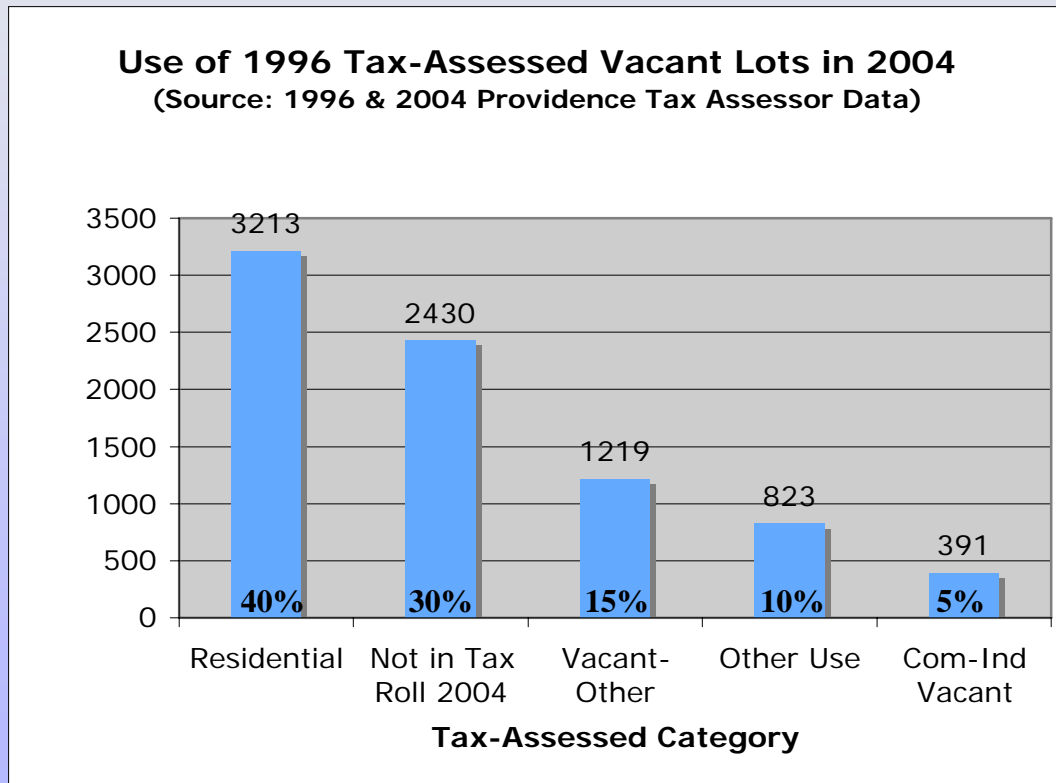
1996-98:  
**-17%**

1996-2005:  
**-30%**

# Citywide Trends in Vacant Lots



# Problems with Tax Assessor's Data



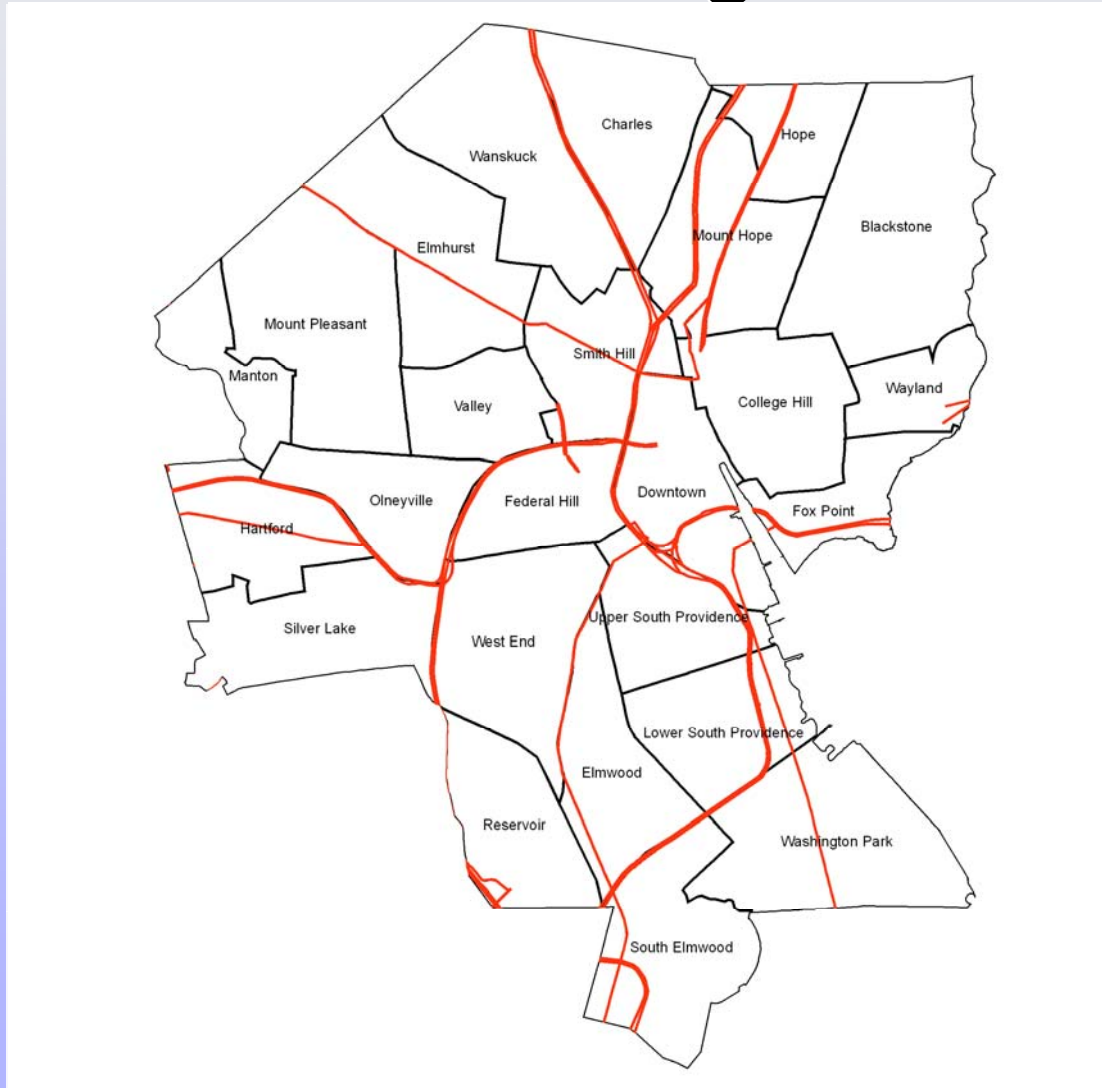
# Population Trends By Neighborhood, 1990-2000

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

# Market Changes After 2000

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (LZW-compressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

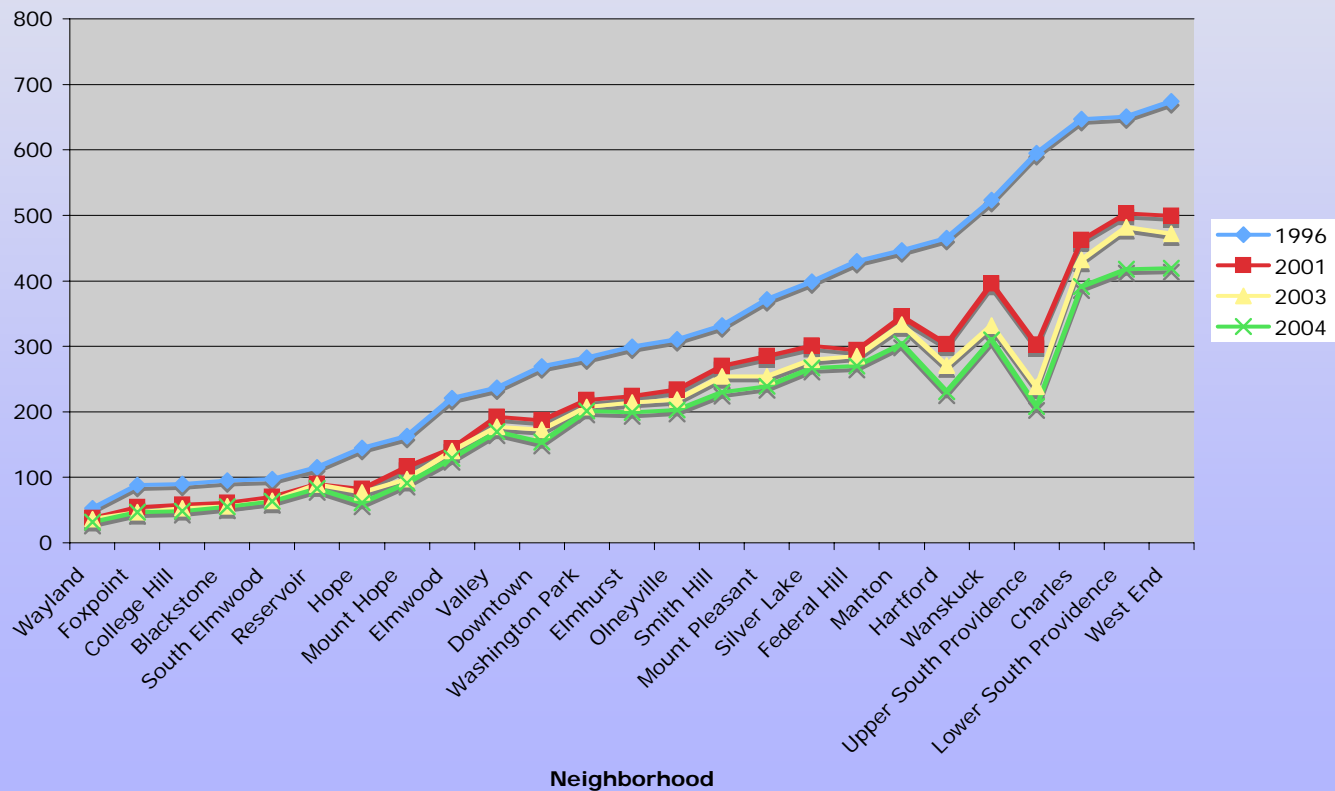
# Providence's Neighborhoods





# Neighborhood Trends in Vacant Lots

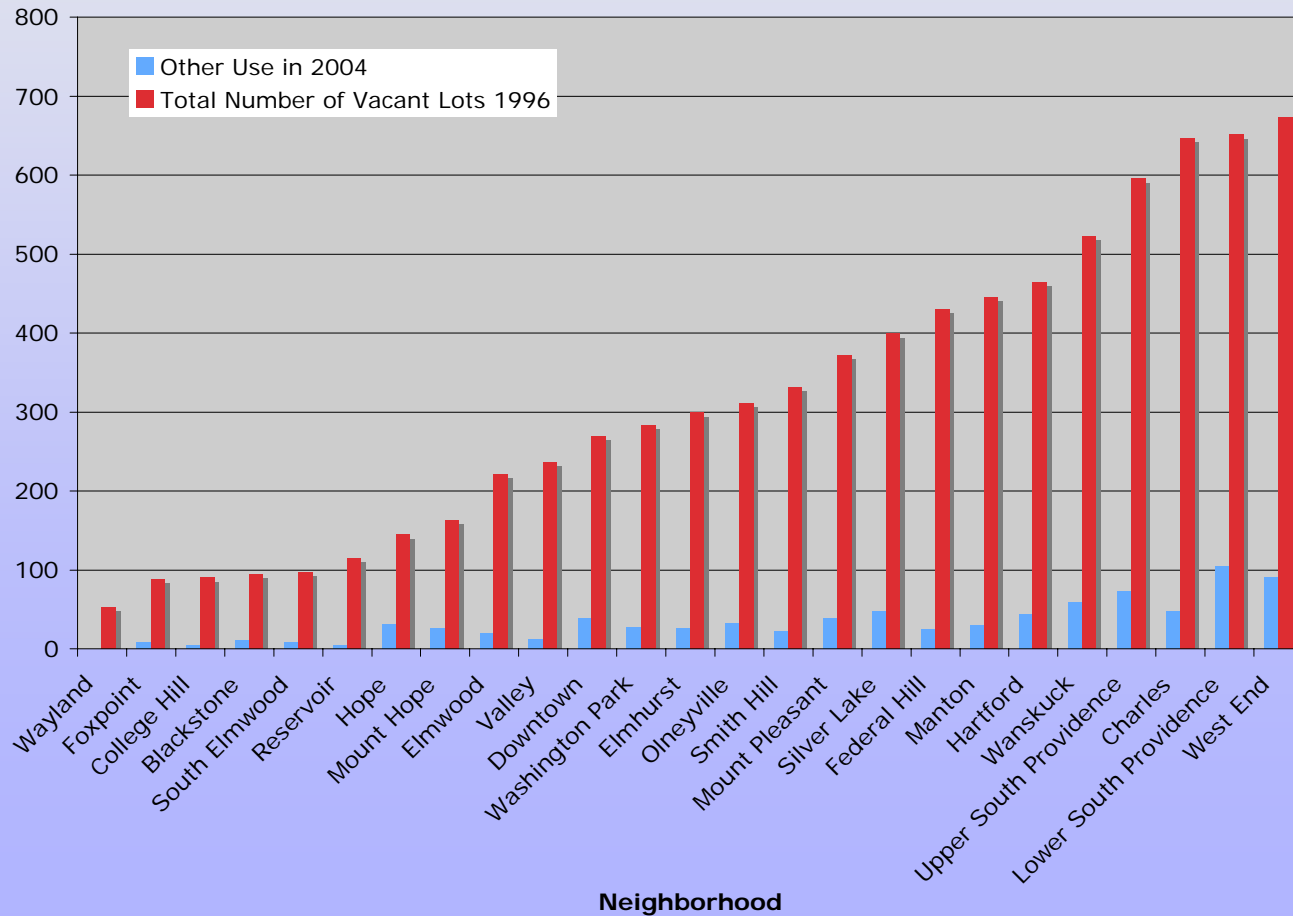
Tax-Assessed Vacant Lots by Neighborhood, 1996-2004 (Source: Providence Tax Assessor Data)





# Neighborhood Trends in Vacant Lots

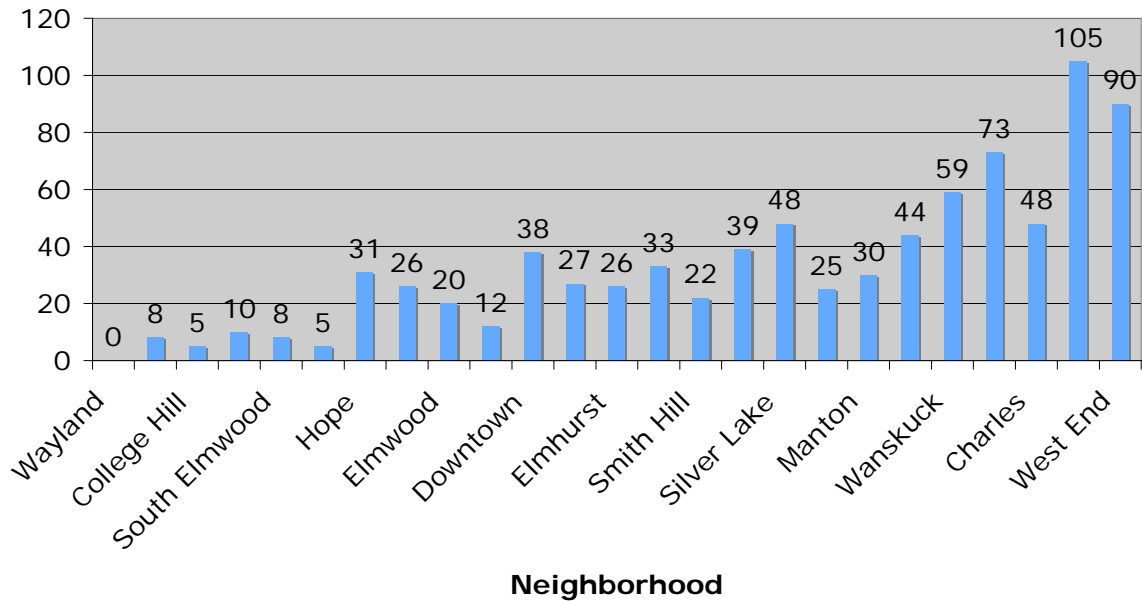
Number of 1996 Tax-Assessed Vacant Lots as Some Other Use in 2004  
(Source: Providence Tax Assessor Data)





# Neighborhood Trends in Vacant Lots

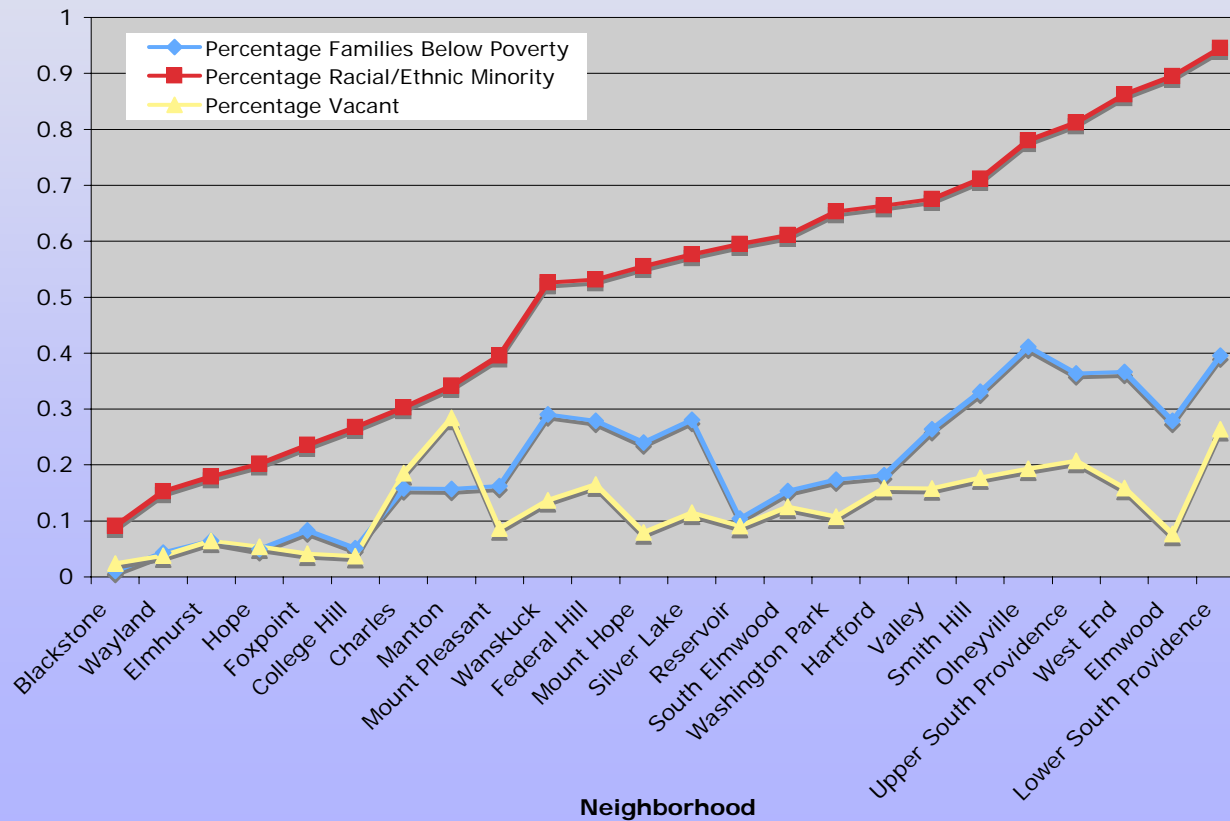
**1996 Vacant Lots Redeveloped in 2004**  
(Source: Providence Tax Assessor)





# Race, Poverty, and Vacancy by Neighborhood

Race, Poverty, and Vacancy Rate by Neighborhood in Providence, RI  
 (Sources: 2005 Providence Tax Assessor Data; 2000 Census)



# Other Data Sources

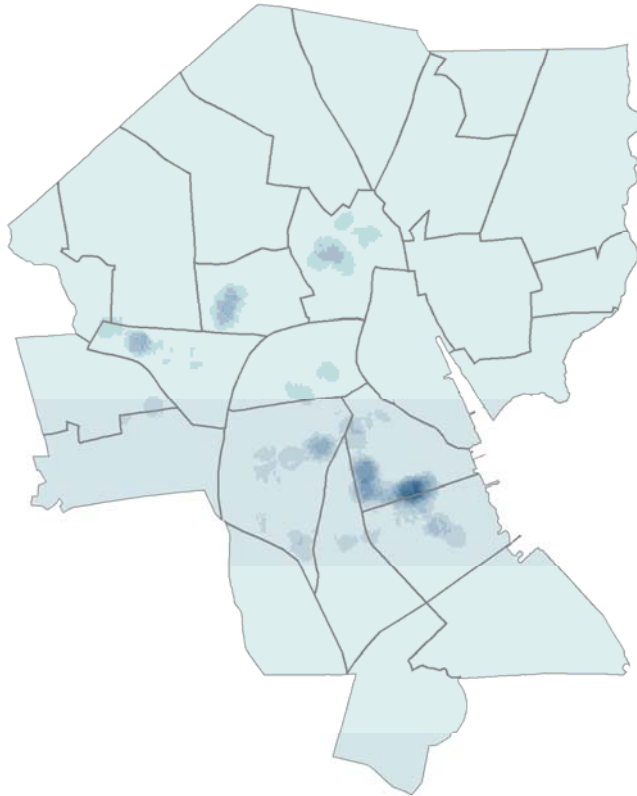
- 1997 Brown University/DPW risk survey
  - Risk categories 1-3 (with 3 as the highest risk)
  - Risk 3: immanent danger to health; 595 lots
  - Risk 2: moderate health risk; 1,350 lots
- 2004 Providence Plan Unutilized and Suspected Abandoned Street Survey
  - Unutilized: properties without an obvious current use; 987 lots
  - Suspected abandoned: properties that are not only unutilized but also marked by physical disinvestment; 464 lots



# Results of the 1997 and 2004 surveys

## 7 Risk Code 3 Properties

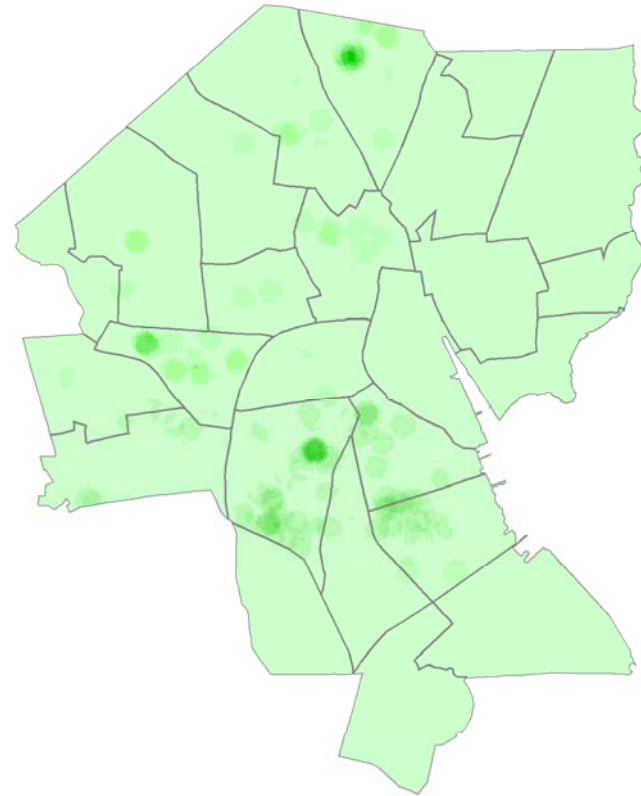
(Source: 1997 Brown University/DPW survey)



Risk Code Density

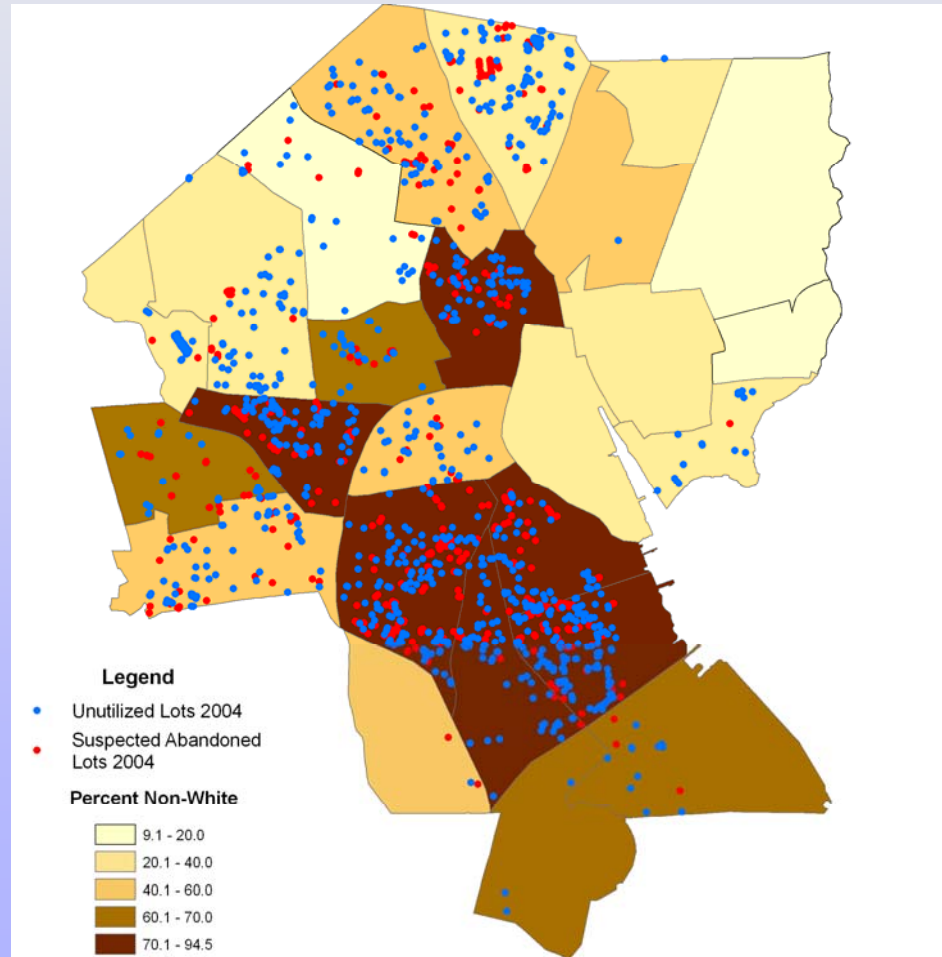
## 2004 Suspected Abandoned Properties

(Source: 2004 Providence Plan survey)



Suspected Abandoned Density

# 2004 Unutilized and Suspected Abandoned Properties



Conclusion: Have the goals of VLTF document been achieved?

**YES**

- A significant number of the VLTF's enforcement and legal reforms were implemented
- Today there are 30% fewer tax-assessed vacant lots than in 1996 with 17% of that decline occurring between 1996 and 1998 (when the majority of the VLTF reforms were implemented)

Conclusion: Have the goals of VLTF document been achieved?

**BUT...**

- Population in Providence grew 8% between 1990 and 2000
- In addition, in 2000 the upturn in the housing market
- Data problematic as true indicator of change

# Looking Ahead: Recommendations for the Future

- The VLTF document provided a broad, multi-pronged framework for addressing vacant properties at the time; however, vacant properties stand as a new challenge today and need to be re-evaluated in light of past accomplishments and trends
- Some of the document's key recommendations that were not implemented at the time of the Task Force as well as some new recommendations should be implemented today in order to establish the framework for properly addressing vacant properties

# Looking Ahead: Recommendations for the Future

- A universal definition of vacant and abandoned property should be developed and used in legislation and by all Providence city agencies that track and handle vacant and abandoned properties; this definition should be tailored to meet the needs of the community and include properties that act as a public nuisance and/or exhibit signs of neglect
- Citywide data collection that is currently being done by Providence Plan should be maintained with continued city funding and used as an example for statewide data collection
- A Providence Vacant Property Task Force, comprised of a wide range of stakeholders, should be convened to reassess the problems of vacant properties and build a comprehensive citywide strategy for addressing them that includes ideas of smart growth as well as racial and regional equity

# Looking Ahead: Recommendations for the Future

- Neighborhood revitalization plans should be developed that cater citywide strategies for fighting blight to the market conditions of individual neighborhoods
- One or two individuals should be appointed to coordinate the City's vacant property strategies among all municipal offices
- The PRA should be established as a land bank so that city-owned properties can be more efficiently assembled and marketed
- The city should continue to foster relationships with local CDCs in order to encourage redevelopment of problem properties
- Providence should adopt housing preservation and replacement ordinances to ensure that housing units destroyed in redevelopment efforts are replaced to ensure that the city meets the 10% affordable housing requirement under RI's Low and Moderate Income Housing Act

# Acknowledgements

- My advisor, Caroline Karp
- ProvPlan staff, Eben Dowell, Jim Lucht, and Amy Pettine
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