



Testimony Regarding City Council Bill # 210838
Regarding Barriers and Solutions to Preserving Community Gardens and Open Spaces
Andrew Toy for PACDC
October 29th, 2021

Good morning Chairperson Gauthier and Members of City Council's Committee on Housing, Neighborhood Development, and the Homeless. My name is Andy Toy and I am the Policy Director for the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations (PACDC). Thank you for listening to PACDC's testimony regarding Resolution Number 210838 that addresses our need to find solutions to preserving community gardens and open spaces in Philadelphia as well as a broader issue of properties currently tied to Real Estate Tax liens sold many years ago.

As someone who has worked closely with our great local organization, Neighborhood Gardens Trust, and Councilman Squilla on the Growing Home Gardens in South Philly, I saw how important the preservation of these critical assets are to the health and well-being of the community, especially in the last 19 months during the pandemic. The process of assembling lots for a community garden is already very complex and challenging. Adding on uncertainty caused by having these liens, which may be higher than the current value of the properties, makes it more difficult for communities to make deeper investments of time, sweat equity and money to improve these properties.

In a more general way, the properties tied up in the lien sale have been a detriment to the predominantly low-income BIPOC neighborhoods where they are located because these properties cannot be easily redeveloped for affordable housing, small businesses, gardens or community space. The fact that there are still more than 2,000 properties encumbered by these tax liens 24 years later indicates that these properties are still in limbo. In fact, when the Tax Lien Sale was proposed for a short term gain, there were many of us in City government at the time with concerns that this is exactly what might happen in the longer term.

PACDC calls on the City to spend the resources to reacquire all of these properties or to at least find ways to target those properties currently being utilized or which have plans to be utilized positively within communities. We agree that one part of the solution would be to authorize the Land Bank to acquire lien sale parcels at Sheriff Sale, which they are currently prohibited from doing. This also requires levels of funding that we see as important investments in our communities. Some of this will be returned in tax revenues over time as properties are redeveloped. More importantly, it will positively impact other properties and neighbors around these vacant properties when ownership and responsibilities are clear and these properties are promptly and positively reused and redeveloped as assets within their communities.