



**OPPORTUNITY SITES**

- Recreation centers and underused PPR sites
- Private underused land
- Schoolyards
- Public underused land

## MAKE LITTLE PLANS

### FOR URBAN GREEN SPACES, SMALL IS THE NEW BIG.

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As planners and community leaders look to the future of urban parks and green spaces, many are thinking small. Iconic is out, or on hold, for now; immediate is in. And in some distressed cities, scattered parcels of vacant land are serving as the canvas for green innovation and transformation.

Baltimore Green Space, established in 2007, is a land trust for community-managed open spaces. It works within urban neighborhoods to support community gardens, pocket parks, and other small landscapes. "We have a lot of vacant property here," says its founder, Miriam Avins. "The city owns some lots, but the rest are just abandoned. Often neighbors want to clean up these places, but they don't know who the owner is."

Recent policy changes by the city government have made it easier for groups like Baltimore Green Space to buy vacant properties for a nominal fee. The group provides some management services, liability insurance, and technical support; community groups or neighbors do the day-to-day maintenance work.

But with the city eager to turn over the management of vacant lots to others, there is some concern that it will sell off lots that neighbors have revitalized to speculators. Keeping track of thousands of properties is a big job, and without good record keeping, revitalized lots could fall through the cracks. Fortunately, Avins says, advances in smartphone technology have made sophisticated mapping possible even for nonprofit groups reliant on volunteer labor. Volunteers can snap photos on their phones, which automatically log geographic data for the site. "Now we can sort through the data and figure out what's out there, whether sites are gardens, parks, or



**LEFT**  
 The Green2015 plan envisions 500 acres of additional parkland, mostly in small packages, for Philadelphia.

**BELOW**  
 Baltimore Green Space is helping community groups manage vacant parcels of land.

**IMAGE CREDITS**  
 Courtesy PennPraxis, plan; courtesy Baltimore Green Space, photo



**ABOVE**  
 The report notes that schoolyards can be more sustainable and inviting...

**INSET**  
 ...than old-school paved playing courts. The improvements would be affordable and easy to implement.

**IMAGE CREDITS**  
 Courtesy PennPraxis



horseshoe pits, and register block and lot numbers with the city."

Vacant land is also a long-running issue in Philadelphia. But a new plan prepared for the city's Parks and Recreation Department by PennPraxis, an arm of the University of Pennsylvania's design school, aims to transform vacant spaces to city-owned parks. The plan, Green2015, would satisfy a 2009 pledge by Mayor Michael Nutter to add 500 acres of parkland to the city by transforming vacant or underused sites into parks, some as small as a quarter acre. The parks would be collaboratively planned, built, and maintained by the city with a lot of help from neighbors, businesses, developers, and Philadelphia's strong network of nonprofit community groups.

The process of drawing up the plan has already sparked widespread interest, says Harris Steinberg, executive director of PennPraxis. "We worked with as many constituencies as possible in different ways, getting them to vet ideas and circulate them so we could analyze and synthesize the feedback," he says. One of

the main objectives of the plan, based on that feedback, is to give all city residents access to a park within a half-mile, or a 10-minute walk. Currently, about one of every eight residents lacks this kind of access.

The report, available at <http://planphilly.com/green2015-action-plan-first-500-acres>, identifies available sites and potential partners and funders. It builds on successful existing programs, such as the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Philadelphia Green. That effort has, with financial support from the city, transformed vacant lots around town with modest improvements such as fencing, grass, and trees (See "Thinking Big...and Small," LAM, March 2010). Green2015 is also designed to fit with the city's 25-year comprehensive plan and other environmental goals, such as better stormwater management. ●

