

How can vacant properties be used to revitalize North St. Louis City?

by

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B.S., Kansas State University, 2019

A REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF REGIONAL & COMMUNITY PLANNING

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KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2022

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## **Abstract**

Cities in the United States have long been afflicted by the impacts of vacant commercial and residential properties. Buildings that once held purpose now sit empty and abandoned. Properties can be vacant for several reasons, including abandonment, fire, displacement, foreclosure, or other causes. Following the recession of 2009, a spike in vacancy spread across the nation as foreclosures surged and led to disinvestment, crime, decreased property values, and lost tax revenue. These issues cost cities and municipalities millions of dollars annually for policing, maintaining, and demolishing vacant buildings. Although vacant properties are a challenging issue, cities, residents, and organizations across the U.S. are taking action to address vacancy. In recent years, cities and local organizations have looked to improve the social and economic dimensions of neighborhoods by rehabilitating and repurposing vacant properties. This study aims to support the efforts of rehabilitating and repurposing vacant properties in North St. Louis City. By analyzing the present situation of vacant properties in Ward 27 and surveying the community, this study explores the challenges faced by the community, and how these properties can be repurposed to meet the needs of current and future residents. It was found that most of the respondents prefer reinvestment in the community and lack of funding is one of the key barriers for reusing vacant properties. They prefer purchase and restore of vacant properties over demolition, and in case of vacant lots, they prefer new construction over other uses. An area of the neighborhood is identified where any funding assistance should be targeted considering surrounding land uses and current needs of the community.

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## **Acknowledgements**

The completion of this study would not have been possible without the expertise of my major professor, MD Shakil Kashem. His guidance and advice carried through all the stages of writing my project. Thank you for your patience and help. I would also like to thank my committee members, Professor Huston Gibson and Professor Susmita Rishi, for letting my defense be an enjoyable moment, and for your brilliant comments and suggestions, thank you.

In addition, a thank you to Ward 27 Alderwoman, Pam Boyd, who welcomed me back to the community and supported my research efforts.

Finally, I would like to express my special gratitude to Dean Tim de Noble and Program Director Stephanie Rolley, for introducing me to the Regional and Community Planning program. Thank you for showing confidence in me and helping me find my purpose.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Once described as the Paris of the West and among the nation's largest cities, St. Louis has substantially declined in growth over the past century. This decline in growth is coupled with a rise in vacant properties, which negatively impact the area and make it difficult to revive core neighborhoods. According to St. Louis Vacancy Collaborative Working Group data, the city has approximately 25,000 vacant properties, 12,000 of which are owned by multiple government agencies, such as the Land Reutilization Authority (LRA) and the St. Louis Vacancy Collaborative (St. Louis Vacancy Collaborative's Data Working Group, 2019). While the South and Central corridors of St. Louis are flourish, the majority of these vacant properties can be found in North City. An array of buildings with former uses, such as commercial, residential, industrial, educational, and mixed-use, now sit vacant. The factors contributing to these vacancies include population loss, aging of housing stock, redlining, predatory investors, public policies, and other forms of disinvestment (Center for Community Progress, 2016).

Vacancy often has a negative connotation in relation to neighborhoods due to its impact on the community. Common effects of vacancy include decreased property values, increased crime, school closures, food deserts, lack of community spaces and green spaces, and increased cost for the local government, and loss of tax revenue (Baltimore City Department of Housing & Community Development, 2018). It would take a multifaceted approach and millions, if not billions, of dollars to attempt to fix the challenges North St. Louis City faces. While the re-investment of millions of dollars into these neglected neighborhoods is unlikely, vacancy can be used as a solution to transform North St. Louis. Rather than being viewed negatively, vacancy can also be seen as an opportunity for restoration, new development, and ownership.

In 2018, the East West Gateway Council of Governments conducted a study finding St. Louis Metropolitan area as the sixth-most segregated area in the country (East West Gateway, 2019). This study was based on several social, economic, and health factors. Like many of its peers, St. Louis has struggled economically as its population continues to decrease, one of many causes of vacancy. Where one lives is an important factor in many aspects of life including access to jobs and amenities, quality of schools, and exposure to crime (East West Gateway Council of Governments, 2018).

Tyler Swehla et al. (2015) prepared a book of ideas addressing vacancy in St. Louis from individual lots to entire urban districts. The authors researched “shrinking cities” through texts, case studies, and articles to recommend ideas for repurposing vacant lots and buildings. The authors offered a variety of alternative uses for urban land as well as tools and strategies for stakeholders specifically within the St. Louis area. These tools and strategies include policies to prevent vacancies, such as providing opportunities for residents to purchase neighboring vacant lots and incentivized development for developers and investors. The city is currently implementing incentivized development through creative policies of tax breaks and grants. The expected outcome from the authors’ final product was to inspire residents, planners, scholars, activists, non-profits, and change-makers in St. Louis and similar cities.

This case study focuses on identifying ways to reuse vacant properties in North St. Louis City. Specifically, this research aims to explore how vacancy can be used to revitalize neighborhoods. To understand and address this issue, current inventory and location of vacant properties are analyzed and residents are surveyed to 1) understand their perceptions of the current conditions of the neighborhood, 2) identify community needs, and 3) identify potential future re-uses for the vacant properties.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review and Background**

Vacant properties have long been recognized as an issue impacting U.S. urban neighborhoods. Since the 1950s, U.S. cities have experienced constant population losses (Swehla et al. 2015). As Americans continue to migrate back to core neighborhoods in U.S. cities, planning agencies and Community Development Corporations (CDC) look to maximize the opportunity to put vacant properties back on the tax roll. Different cities have attempted different approaches to use the vacant properties.

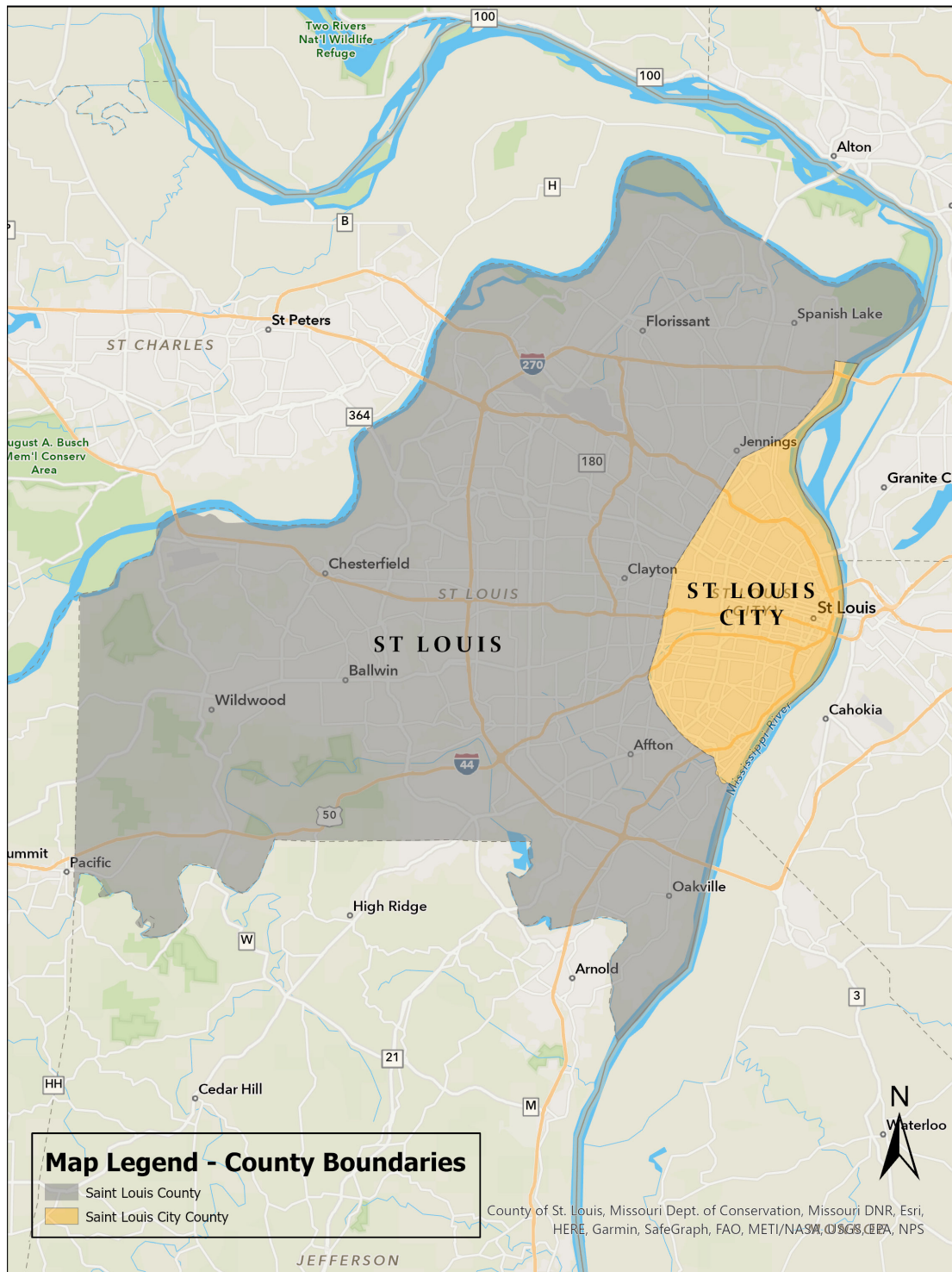
In 1933 the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), an emergency government agency, was created. Initially, HOCL's task was the issuance of bonds in order to buy or refinance mortgages at a more favorable term (Aaronson, et al. 2017). It allowed residents to purchase homes at an affordable mortgage (Faber, 2020). However, residents of color and their communities were largely excluded from obtaining affordable mortgages (Faber, 2020).

From 1935-1940 HOLC was responsible for drawing "security" maps to grade many urban areas in the U.S. to evaluate mortgage lending risks. Neighborhoods were given one of four grades: "A" being most desirable (green), "B" still desirable (blue), "C" definitely declining (yellow), and "D" hazardous (red), also the origin of the term, redlining (Nelson, et al. 2018). These maps were used by loan officers, appraisers, real estate professionals to determine who obtains access to capital to purchase their and improve their homes, buy a new house, and where. Maps were used to discourage white home-buying inside black neighborhoods and constrain black home-buying outside of black neighborhoods (Faber, 2020). Similarly, neighborhoods graded "D" hazardous (red), were predominantly black neighborhoods (Aaronson, et al. 2017).

Following World War II, the City's population peaked at 856,000 residents by 1950. With no room to build within the city boundaries and a neglected housing stock during the Great



Depression of 1930's and during World War II, quality housing was scarce. As new growth was occurring in the suburbs of St. Louis County, St. Louis City was unable to annex. With migration from core neighborhoods to the suburbs the decrease in population in St. Louis City continued throughout the century. Despite attempts at urban renewal to increase housing stock such as housing project like the Pruitt Igoe complex, the city continues to lose population to the surrounding suburbs. Figure 2.1 shows a map of St. Louis County and the City of St. Louis.



**Figure 2.1: St. Louis County and St. Louis City County Boundary**

Decreasing populations in core neighborhoods is still a problem in cities across the U.S. In a study of 43 cities with an increase in vacant land from late 1980 to late 1990, Bowman and Pagano (2004) identified that the two leading causes of vacancy were the flight of populations to the suburbs and disinvestment from the city. A third key contributor was the deindustrialization and out-migration of the labor force. The authors found that vacancy and abandonment is often spread by contagion, using the once-vibrant shopping district as an example. Store closings reduce retail traffic in the area, jeopardizing the business of remaining merchants. This creates a cyclic effect of lowered retail traffic and rising store vacancies (Bowman and Pagano 2004). If the economic viability of a locale weakens, then more vacancies will occur.

Research conducted by Goldstein et. al (2001) characterizes the causes and consequences of urban vacant land. The authors believe the issue is not vacant land itself, but rather the impact that underutilization has on urban neighborhoods and the vicious cycle it creates. This study links urban vacant land with increased fire, drugs, and gang activities (Goldstein et al, 2001). The authors then expand on fires and its effect on increasing vacancy, such as displacement of residents and destruction of buildings increasing neighborhood blight. These negative impacts of vacant properties contribute to an inevitable drop in property value.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) Office of Policy Development and Research (2014) conducted a report sharing the impacts of vacant property and their effects on city. This report highlights the link between increased rates of crime and declining property values. The report also shares municipal costs associated with maintaining and demolishing vacancy property. HUD states that cities leading the nation in vacancy rates pay out millions of dollars per year as a result. The report concluded with recommendations for

addressing vacancy by HUD through city-led reinvestment programs and community organization initiative (i.e., Community Development Corporation and nonprofit organizations).

### **Existing Practices**

Several studies have explored the existing practices for restoring vacant properties. Bieretz and Schilling (2019) researched the impacts of Pay for Success (PFS), a financing tool used by the government nationwide to restore vacant buildings and build new construction in blighted areas. Under this program, municipal governments pay community-based organizations and/or nonprofits to implement a specific program or intervention to achieve desired results. Bieretz and Schilling measure the cost and benefits for cities who look to implement PFS. For instance, an increase in property tax was collected in Cleveland as a result of the program (Bieretz and Schilling, 2019).

The City of Baltimore and the Department of Housing & Community Development have chartered and implemented a redevelopment plan titled “Vacants to Value” (Zaleski, 2016). , This program offers incentives for residents and developers to purchase vacant properties in distressed neighborhood, which allows for these properties to be rehabbed and occupied (Zaleski, 2016). Vacant to Value has been successful in eliminating blight in Baltimore communities. Since launching in 2010, it has rehabilitated 3,000 vacant properties over the course of six years (Zaleski, 2016).

### **Community Involvement**

In search of a community-based solution to vacant property, Garvin et al. (2013) conducted primary research based on 50 interviews of people living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Through these interviews, the authors found that the residents shared similar ideas for repurposing vacant properties such as small parks for the elderly and youth on empty parcels.

Subsidized housing and homeless shelters were also popular solutions among residents for vacant buildings. These interviews also found many residents struggled with maintaining vacant properties due to a lack of resources. The authors concluded the study with recommendations for researchers, practitioners, and urban planners to engage residents in the design and implementation of vacant land strategies.

Kim et al. (2020) also examined the importance of community engagement in planning for vacant property uses. The authors believe this is the first step to solving vacant land and the surrounding issues. Since community engagement is a continuous process, the authors recommend keeping residents up to date with adequate neighborhood information. This may include data and current conditions on the land, policies, and ordinances to prevent vacancy as well as incentives and other programs to repurpose vacant property.

The Center for Community Progress (2016) held community engagement meetings with stakeholders to discuss and understand challenges of vacant properties in St. Louis. Through these meetings, the authors identified some strategies to prevent vacancy and abandonment. Additionally, these meetings and the subsequent report helped stakeholders envision a strategy to address vacancy in collaboration with community leaders, St. Louis City, and the Land Reutilization Authority.

### **Vacant Properties in St. Louis City**

When compared to core neighborhoods in cities such as Kansas City, Baltimore, Cleveland, or Detroit, the redevelopment and resurgence of St. Louis' core neighborhoods is well behind. Though these other cities have a leg up over St. Louis, City agencies and organizations have created programs and incentives supporting the restoration of vacant property. These

opportunities offered to the public include discounted properties, tax breaks, grants, financing tools, and sweat equity programs (Swehla et al. 2015).

The “Back-to-the-City” movement is a trend affecting many cities as residents move back into the urban core. Like many deindustrialized cities, St. Louis joins the “Shrinking Cities” movement as depopulation continues and residents relocate to the suburbs. While other shrinking cities have implemented smart shrinkage plans to address this depopulation, St. Louis is one of many cities without a plan in place. In fact, out of the eight wards in the northeast portions of the city, only two have neighborhood plans in general. Ward 27, like the rest of the wards, does not have a neighborhood plan that has been adopted, leaving the community with stagnant space which continues this path of depopulation and abandonment.

### **Ward 27: Background**

The purpose of this research is to analyze vacancy in Ward 27 and use a holistic approach in finding how these properties can be used as assets. Comprised of five neighborhoods (Baden, Mark Twain, North Point, Walnut Park East, and Walnut Park West), Ward 27 has an approximate population of 8,215 and features 4,200 housing units (U.S. Census, 2020; (Planning and Urban Design Agency, St. Louis, MO, Research Division, 2021).

Table 2.1 presents the current demographics of Ward 27 through population by race. The most important column is the percentage (%), detailing the percentage by race. Table 2.1 shows that Ward 27 has a large presence of Black or African-American.

**Table 2.1: Ward 27: Population by Race (2020)**

<b>Race</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Total</b>
White alone	1.30%	105
Black or African-American alone	94.80%	7,787
Asian-American alone	0.20%	16
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	0.20%	13
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander alone	0.00%	2
Some Other Race alone	0.50%	39
Two or More Races	3.10%	253
<b>Total Population</b>		<b>8,215</b>

<https://dev.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/planning/research/census/data/wards/>

Table 2.2 displays the current demographics of the City of St. Louis through population by race. This tables shows the population between White and Black residents is nearly identical city wide. It is important to compare the percentage column from Table 2.1 to Table 2.2. While St. Louis has nearly the same amount of White residents as Black residents, Ward 27 is predominantly Black, implying the impacts of segregation are still present in the city today.

**Table 2.2: City of St. Louis: Total Population by Race (2020)**

<b>Race</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Total</b>
White alone	43.87%	132,292
Black or African-American alone	43.04%	129,814
Asian-American alone	4.07%	12,289
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	0.31%	948
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander alone	0.03%	102
Some Other Race alone	2.57%	7,760
Two or More Races	6.09%	18,373
<b>Total Population</b>		<b>301,578</b>

<https://dev.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/planning/research/census/data/>

Table 2.3 shoaws that Nearly 20% of the homes in Ward 27 are vacant, 3% higher than the city's average (16.5%). See Table 2.4.

**Table 2.3: Ward 27: Housing Units (2020)**

	<b>%</b>	<b>Total</b>
Vacant Housing Units	19.8%	833
Occupied Housing Units	80.2%	3,367
<b>Total Housing Units</b>		<b>4,200</b>

<https://dev.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/planning/research/census/data/wards/>

**Table 2.4: City of St. Louis: Total Housing Units (2020)**

	<b>%</b>	<b>Total</b>
Vacant Housing Units	16.5%	28,609
Occupied Housing Units	83.5%	144,870
<b>Total Housing Units</b>		<b>173,479</b>

<https://dev.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/planning/research/census/data/>

Though the community is home to many residents, it is underserved and has been disinvested by business owners and the city of St. Louis. These neighborhoods face similar challenges from the lack of amenities available to full-service neighborhoods, such as open schools, large grocery stores, and banks. Currently, Ward 27 has only one grocery store with a relatively small fresh produce section and one urgent care center. Over the past 20 years, there has been a closure of schools and banks as a result of the white flight that occurred in the 1980s.

In 1998, a Neighborhood Leadership Team (NLT) was formed to guide creating comprehensive plans for three of the largest neighborhoods in Ward 27 (Walnut Park West, Walnut Park East, and Mark Twin). Comprised of local citizens, the NLT efforts were centered around community development of physical dimensions, environmental, social service, and economic strategies to draw a single blueprint for sustainability (NLT and Thirdland Consulting, 2001).



In analyzing the neighborhoods, the NLT, and Consulting Resource Team (CRT) focused on employment/commercial development, housing development, environmental conditions, and infrastructure systems of the area.

With a substantial decline in population and abandonment of large numbers of housing units, the average population decline among the neighborhoods in Ward 27 was 24.2% (NLT and Thirdland Consulting, 2001). The NLT housing strategy plan included strengthening/supporting efforts of housing corporation through infrastructure improvements. This included significant redevelopment options providing recreational, education, and cultural opportunities in the denser areas of abandoned and LRA owned properties.

The housing plan also included ideas for maintaining sustainability within the housing realm. One of which was the recognition of addressing the significant decrease in population density, plan for lower density, and larger lots throughout the neighborhoods. Another idea was the creation of housing types to accommodate a range of incomes, family sizes, and accessibility needs. Not much has changed to housing in Ward 27 in the past two decades as this plan was not adopted and implemented. The plan required a combination of public and private resources to be directed to the neighborhoods.

The Ward has seen a handful of new construction projects over the past 15 years, with Rise STL (Rise) being the developer. In 2006, Rise completed the first phase of a two-part housing development, Lillian Park Homes I & II (Rise STL, 2020). Rise provided full turn-key real estate development consulting services for the first phase project of an 11-unit-low-income homes. These homes were tax credit financed single family lease/purchase homes located in the Walnut Park East neighborhood (Rise STL, 2020). Rise also provided full turn-key real estate development consulting services for the second phase of this project, which included the

construction of 21 new low-income single-family homes, completed in 2009 (Rise STL, 2020). Multiple clusters of land throughout the ward could be an opportunity for infill redevelopment.

School closure is another dimension of vacancy and neighborhood decline. Since 2003 alone, St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS) Advisory Board has approved the closure of 42 schools (Building Revitalization Collaborative, 2021). Currently, there are 26 school buildings listed for sale – three of which (Baden School, Banneker School, and Euclid School) are pending under contract (Building Revitalization Collaborative, 2021). The school closures are a result of declining enrollment, which has a direct relationship with the declining population of St. Louis City. Nearly 20 years later, 17 schools remain empty with no purpose or redevelopment plans. Four of these schools are in Ward 27 (Building Revitalization Collaborative, 2021).

The closure of schools continues to grow, as SLPS Admin announced nine more school closures in January of 2021 (Delaney, 2021). Similar to the reasons for the closures in 2003, the student enrollment has been on a steady decline. The SLPS Advisory Board made this decision to allocate more funding toward support services and academics rather than facilities costs. Amongst the nine school closures is the high school Northwest Academy of Law. Northwest is located 1 block (or 300 ft) to the Southwest of Walnut elementary school. The school building itself is 76,264 sqft and sits on 8.08 acres of land. Both are centrally located in Ward 27, bordering the Walnut Park East and West neighborhoods.

After discussing the closing of Northwest High School, both, Alderwoman Pam Boyd and the St. Louis Public Schools Superintendent agreed to preserve the building so as it could be used in the future for a school (Pam Boyd, personal communication, September 10, 2021). There are active conversations of repurposing these schools, but no plans are currently in place (Pam Boyd, personal communication, September 10, 2021). To compare previous studies to

now, I conducted an analysis of the area by identifying vacant properties, demographics (population, income, etc.), socioeconomic factors, affordable housing, new construction costs, homes sold prices, businesses, and guidelines for reuse via the Land Reutilization Authority (LRA).

### **The North-South Divide**

Though homes in North St. Louis City share similar characteristics as homes in South St. Louis, on average they are devalued at 20% or more than the homes in South St. Louis (Davis, C., 2021). South St. Louis has seen significantly more redevelopment projects than North City, dividing the city into two. Neighborhoods in South City have compelling comeback stories including the Grove, Shaw, the Tower Grove neighborhoods, Benton Park, and others (Grone, J., 2021). The range of redevelopment projects spans from the renovation of multiple vacant elementary schools such as the Lafayette School, new home construction by private investors, and new construction of affordable housing in Adams Groves Project.

Located in the South St. Louis neighborhood of Soulard, Lafayette School closed doors in 2004, and was listed by the St. Louis Public School Building Revitalization Collaborative (SLPS BRC) and sold in 2015 (Building Revitalization Collaborative, 2018). The school has been redeveloped into a charter school, Lafayette Preparatory Academy.

Also located in South St. Louis, Lyon School, which has been redeveloped. Following the stoppage of school operation 2004, it sat vacant for 11 years before being listed by the SLPS BRC. In 2019, the school building was transformed into 32-market rate apartments. The building's cost of renovation was approximately \$6,653,570.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

Ward 27 and the neighborhood of Walnut Park in St. Louis, Missouri were identified for this study due to my personal connection to this area. I grew up in this area, and my parents still reside in the neighborhood. Over the course of 25 years, I have seen with my own eyes the deterioration of the neighborhood. Beginning with the public library burning down, there has been closure of businesses, the shutdown of two schools, and a spike in crime. Over the past two decades, I have seen the neighborhood struggle with vacancy but also witnessed the redevelopment of 22 homes and the construction of 41 new homes (Rise STL, 2016).

This report focuses on a case study of Ward 27 using both quantitative and qualitative data. This mixed method approach also explore strategies of similar neighborhoods as well as surveys on the subject community. Data on vacant properties in Ward 27 was collected from LRA and SLPS, and they were mapped and tabulated to analyze the current pattern of vacancy in this neighborhood. For background purposes, the history of the neighborhood population and housing stock was also explored using data from the U.S. Census Bureau from prior to the school closing to present day.

I used the Vacancy Property Explorer tool (<https://www.stlvacancytools.com/>) to collect data on vacant properties in St. Louis. The Vacancy Property Explorer Tool is a mapping system that identifies vacant property in St. Louis City. It incorporates indicators from various city data sources including the Building Division, Forestry Dept, Citizens Service Calls, and Land Reutilization Authority (LRA). It includes properties that are possibly (score 30+), very likely (score 70+), and definitely vacant (LRA-owned or on city's Vacant Building Registry). We know if the property is owned by the LRA it is definitely vacant as these properties are inspected by the agency after being obtained.

The Land Reutilization Authority (LRA) of St. Louis is a government agency operating as the city's land bank. LRA receives the titles to all tax delinquent properties not sold at the Sheriff's sale. It also receives title to properties through donations. Currently, the LRA holds ownership and title of 11,500 properties (Land Revitalization Authority, 2021). These vacant properties are then listed for sale and priced based on the tax debt owed. The for-sale list can be accessed using the online land bank search tool.

Through utilization of the St. Louis Vacancy Collaborative's Vacancy Property Explorer Tool, multiple statistics, and details on vacant property in St. Louis City can be found. This data is pulled from multiple city agencies, one of which being the LRA. Data on vacant property as well as improved vacant property was collected from the City of St. Louis Open Data. Data on privately owned vacant property can also be found using this tool.

Using ArcGIS Pro, I was able to map these vacant properties and improved properties based on the open data excel files and shapefiles from the City of St. Louis. Mapping this data revealed clusters of vacant property, majority of which are located in North St. Louis City.

In order to better understand how current residents view vacancies in their community and how they propose to repurpose vacant properties, a questionnaire survey of residents was conducted. The survey was distributed at a community event and also through social media. The community event was held at the Walnut Park Branch Library on September 30th, 2021. All residents of Ward 27 were invited to participate in the survey on community vacancies at this event. There are approximately 11,300 residents in Ward 27 (U.S. Census, 2020) and multiple organizations are working within the Ward to address vacancy, including: West Florissant Community Development Corporation (CDC) and STL Vacant Collaborative. With prior experience of sharing information on the community event and online survey, I estimated

participation of 1-2% (100-200) residents in the questionnaire. However, I was able collect responses from only 20 residents.

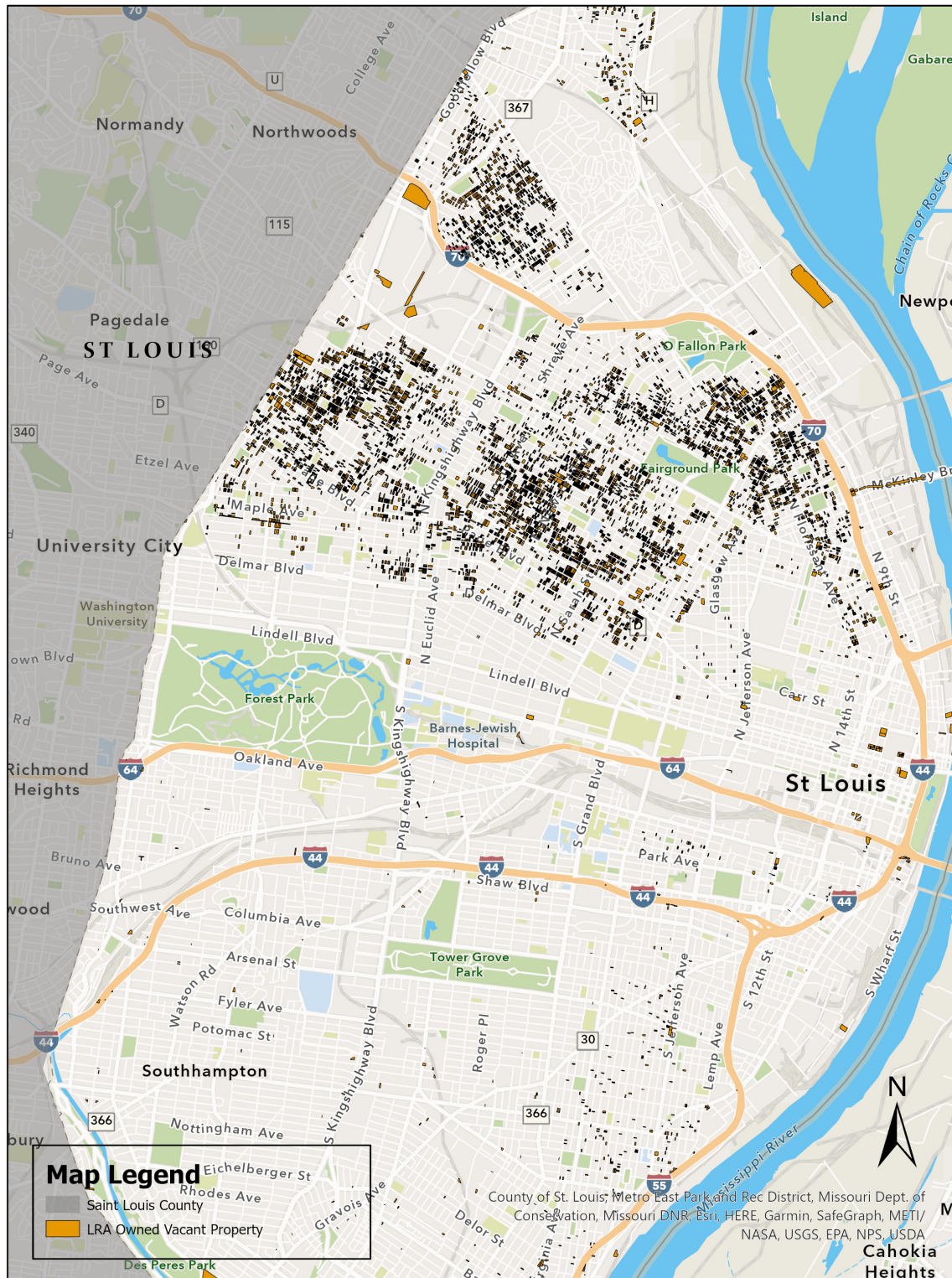
The survey consisted of multiple choice and open-ended questions that are administered electronically through an iPad and smart phones, powered by Survey Gold. A short web link to the form was shared at the community event. No personal information was collected through this survey.

After completing of the survey, all the responses were analyzed through a statistical analysis program. Charts and descriptive statistics were produced to explore the extent to which residents are positive about repurposing vacant properties and what kinds of new or renewed uses they think are most important to revitalize their community.

## **Chapter 4: Results and Discussions**

### **Mapping Analysis of Vacant Properties**

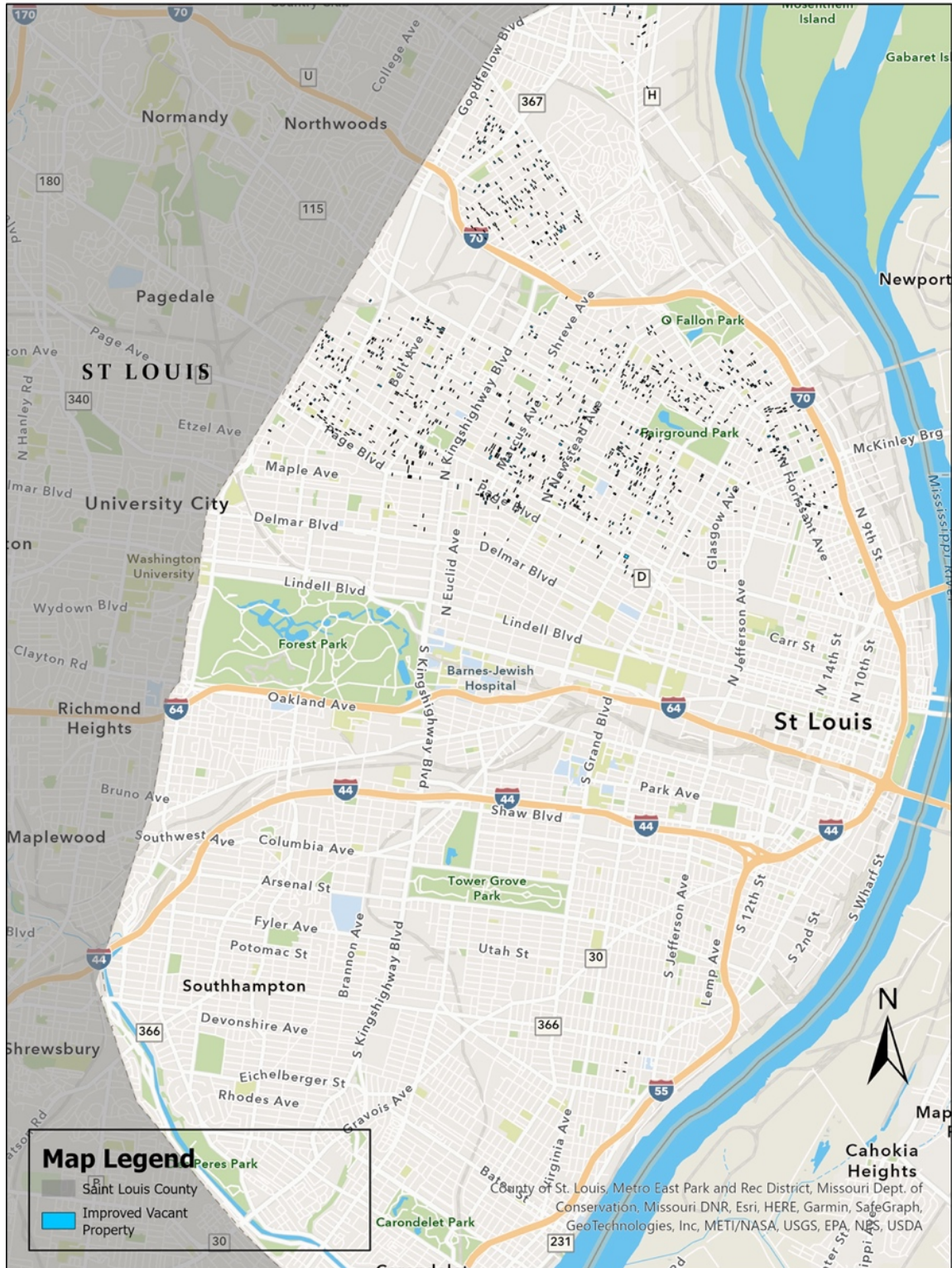
Figure 4.1 shows LRA owned vacant properties and Figure 4.2 shows the improved properties in St. Louis. According to this data, there have been a total of 1,620 LRA vacant properties that have been improved city wide. Most of the vacant properties are concentrated in the north and southeast portions of the City (Malkus, D., 2018). As can be seen in Figure 4.2, South St. Louis has been home to successful revitalization projects using vacant properties. Specifically, the Adams Groves project in the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood. Rise STL created this development with hope to provide balance and diversity in price points for the neighborhood (Groth, M., 2017). The mixed-income housing development consists of 50 townhomes and apartments (Rise STL, 2020). These new developments are in-fills in clusters around the neighborhood and lie between residential homes, some well-kept and others not so much (Images 4.1 - 4.3). With completion of the project in July 2018, these developments have transformed the neighborhood, attracting residents and builders.



**Figure 4.1: LRA Owned Vacant Property City Wide**

*Figure 4.1 shows a map of St. Louis and the LRA owned vacant property.*





**Figure 4.2: Revitalized Vacant Property - City Wide**

In Figure 4.2 displays LRA property that has been sold and revitalized.





**Image 4.1: Aerial View 1 Adams Grove Project ([adamsgrovestl.com/photo-gallery/](https://adamsgrovestl.com/photo-gallery/)).**



**Image 4.2: Aerial View 2 Adams Grove Project – Infill ([adamsgrovestl.com/photo-gallery/](https://adamsgrovestl.com/photo-gallery/)).**





**Image 4.3: Aerial View 3 Adams Grove Project – Infill ([adamsgrovestl.com/photo-gallery/](https://adamsgrovestl.com/photo-gallery/)).**

Using data from *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America* (<https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining>), Figures 4.3 and 4.4 were created to display the pattern of redlining in St. Louis. The grading of these maps were created by the Home Owners Loan Corporation between 1935-1940. When combined with current data the grades of these neighborhoods can be used today to reference the impact and influence of the HOLC.

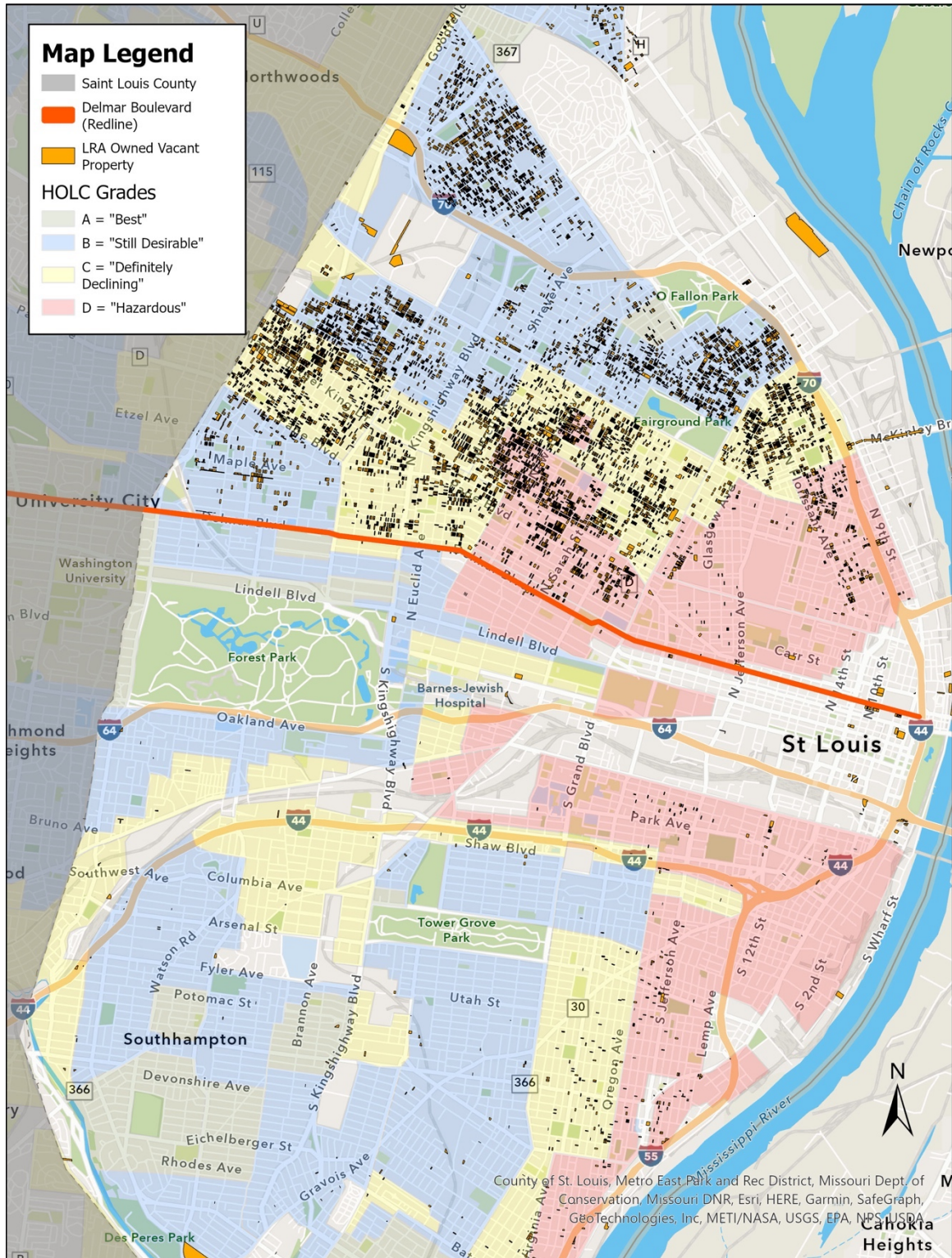




The data used to map Figure 4.3, was retrieved from researchers at the University of Richmond (Nelson, et al. 2018).

The HOLC appraised and mapped over 200 cities and towns nation wide including Detroit, Kansas City, Chicago, and St. Louis (Nelson, et al. 2018). Operations of the HOLC were terminated on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1954 (Faber, 2020). Consequently, the appraisal and grading of these cities lead to segregation and the disinvestment of redlined neighborhoods. Cities began to see segregation peak in the 1960 and 1970 (Del la Roca, et al. 2014). The effects of the HOLC maps resulted in a racial discrimination and financial exclusion of residents and neighborhoods that are still impacting cities today.





**Figure 4.4: Mapping Inequality, LRA Vacant Owned Property Overlay – City of St. Louis**

In combination with the Mapping Inequality data, Figure 4.4 overlay includes LRA Owned vacant property. It is important to recognize many clusters of vacant property are located in the B

“Still Desirable”, C = “Declining”, and D = “Hazardous” graded areas. Through the use of this overlay map it can be assumed the effects of HOLC are still impacting certain neighborhoods in the City of St. Louis.

## **Urban Renewal**

The urban renewal process is gradually spilling over into North St. Louis. Beginning at the City’s core and stretching to the county boundary, there have been a few projects. Plans for future projects are evident as permits are published by NextSTL. Majority of the neighborhoods that have begun redeveloping run parallel with Delmar Boulevard. Redevelopment projects include:

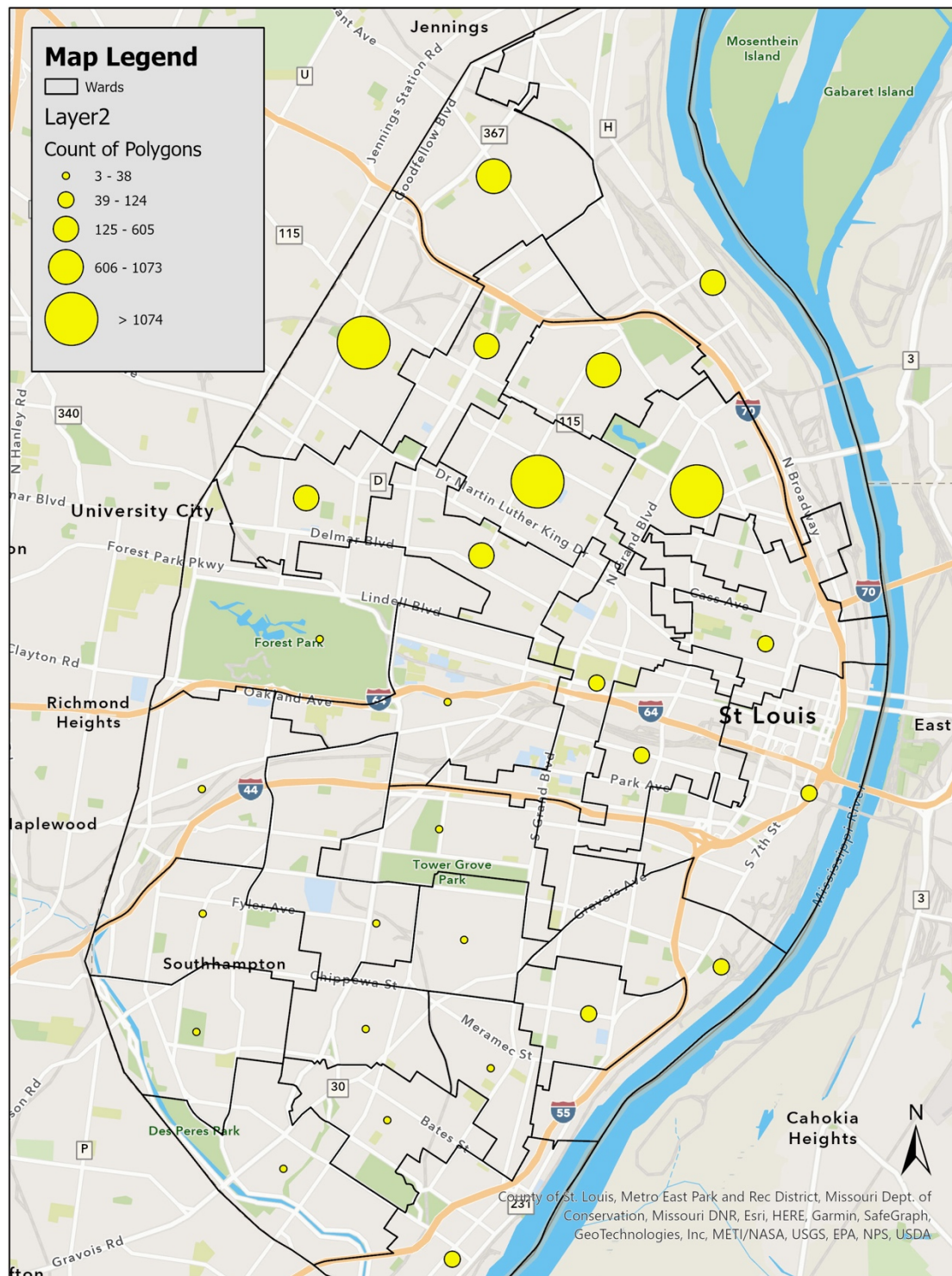
- National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, West Campus
- Old North St. Louis Pedestrian Mall
- The Loop Trolley
- Doorways on Jefferson’s
- Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis

North St. Louis neighborhoods have begun to gain traction with redevelopment projects. Although these projects do not encompass all North St. Louis neighborhoods. These projects run parallel with Delmar. Redevelopment of neighborhoods located further North of Delmar have seen significantly less, if any redevelopment projects, including Ward 27.

Figure 4.5 illustrates the number of vacant properties in each Ward. Each Ward North of Delmar has 125 or more vacant properties. While all Wards South of Delmar have less than 124 vacant properties, majority of these Wards have less than 38 vacant properties. This figure also

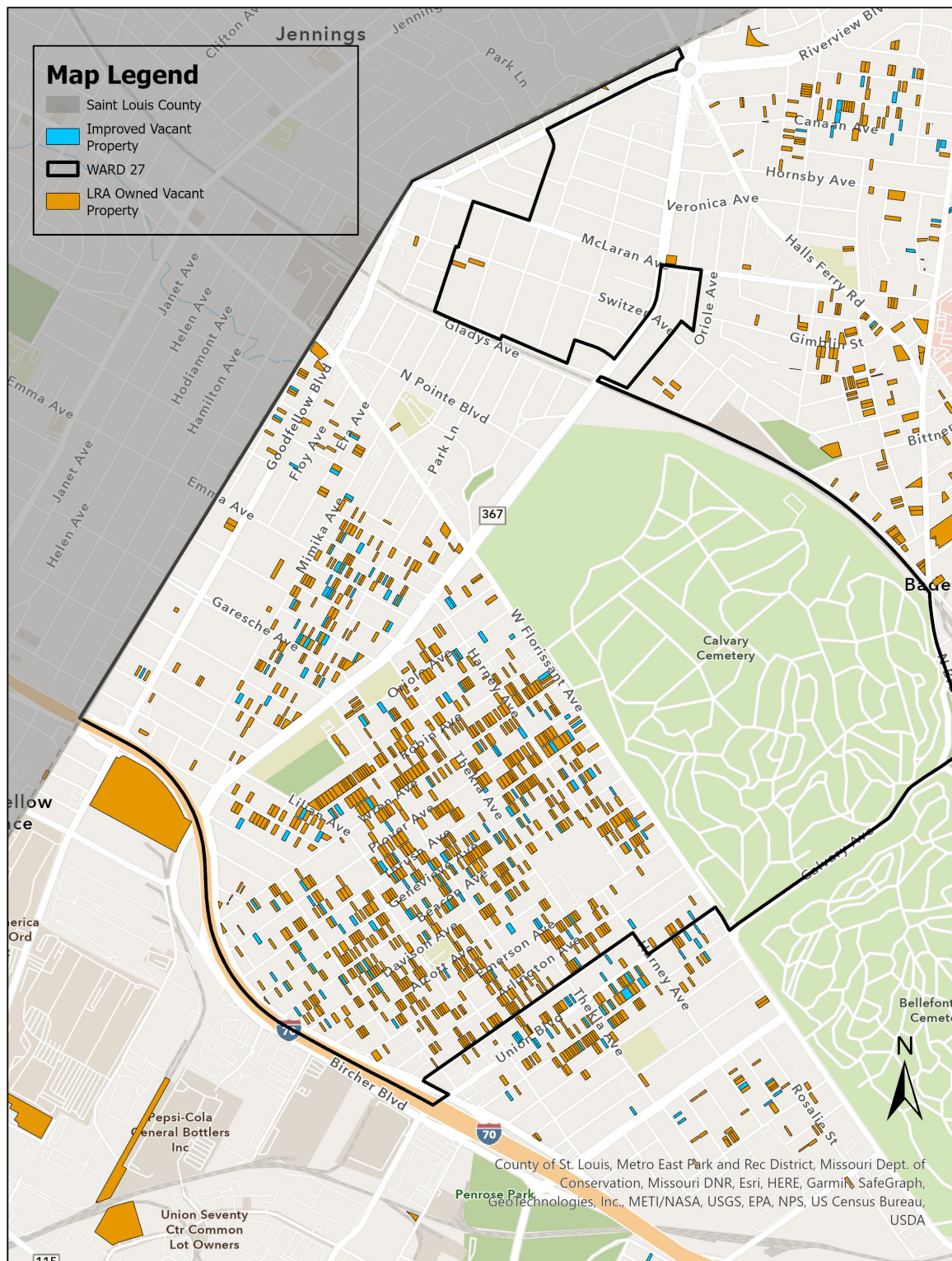


confirms the uneven divide and redlining of St. Louis City.



### Figure 4.5: Vacant Properties by Wards

Figure 4.6 shows the LRA owned vacant properties and improved properties in Ward 27. In 2001, the Ward completed a sustainability plan for neighborhoods within the ward with the most vacant properties. The goal of *The Neighborhood Vision* portion of this plan, it included housing initiatives to retain and maintain good housing stock, remove deteriorated structures, and return vacant land to private owners (NLT and Thirdland Consulting, 2001). Unfortunately, this plan was never adopted or implemented.



**Figure 4.6: Ward 27 – LRA Owned Vacant Property and Revitalized Property**

Figure 4.6 outlines Ward 27<sup>th</sup> and the current vacant and revitalized property located in the ward.

## **Results From Community Survey**

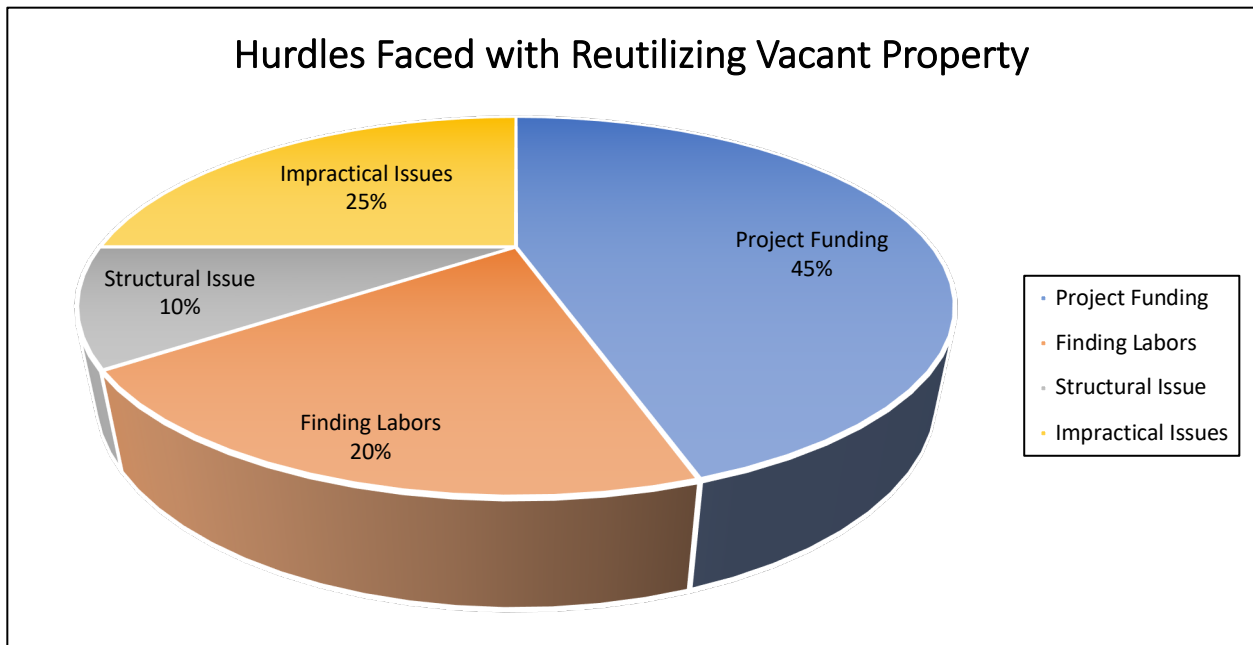
Through a community event held at the Walnut Park Branch Library on, September 30th, 2021, residents were asked to participate in a questionnaire addressing vacancy in Ward 27. In total, there were 20 respondents, all of whom reside in Ward 27. Of the 20 respondents, there was a total of 3 residents who attended the event in person, and an additional 17 who responded to the questionnaire online. These residents were reached via social media.

To address vacancy issues and obtain ideas for reutilizing vacant property, subjects were asked a combination of questions that focused on perceptions and experiences of vacant property within Ward 27 as well as suggestions for reusing vacant property.

Prior studies have shown vacant properties are considered both as opportunity and threats for a neighborhood (Belanger, B., 2015). Through the survey for this study, I found that 50% of residents view vacant property as an opportunity to rebuild in Ward 27. On the other end, 45% of residents view vacant property as an issue linked to crime.

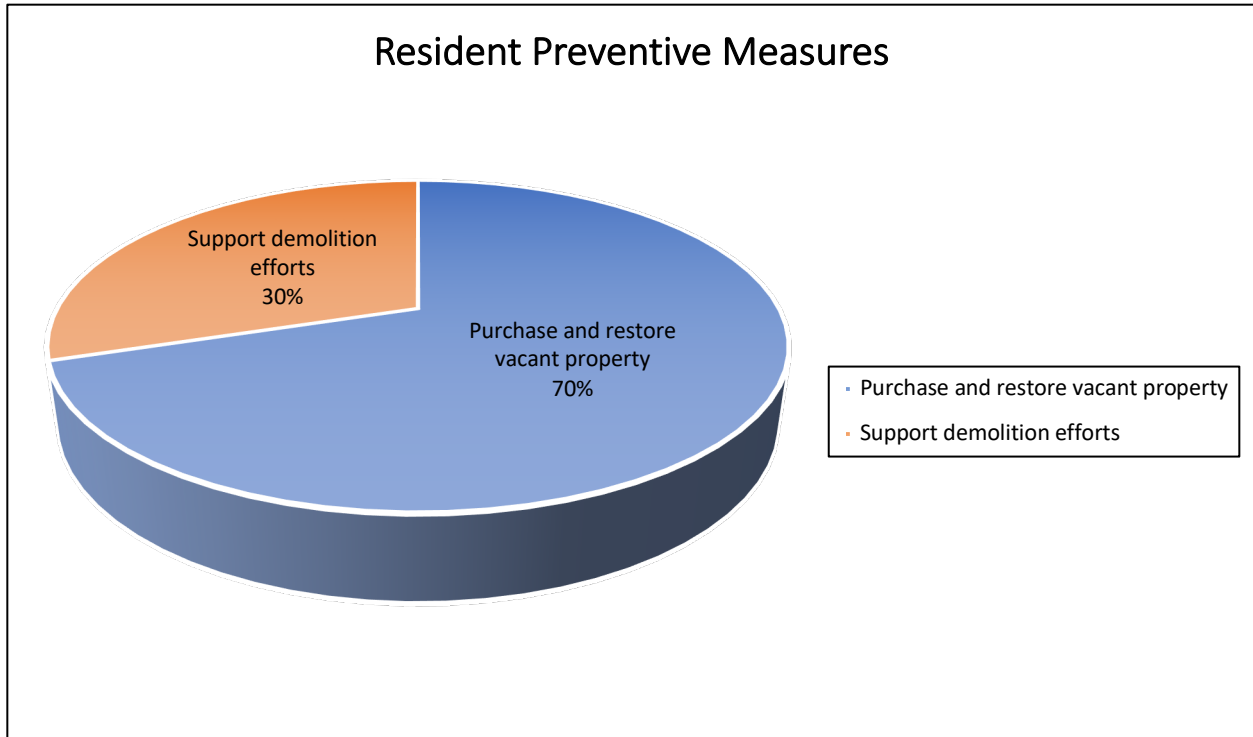
Respondents who previously owned and restored vacant property commonly encountered challenges regarding, project funding, finding labors, structural issues, and/or impractical issues, such as cost of rehabbing well exceeding the estimated repair value (see Figure 4.1). The issue of project funding is most frequently encountered, with 45% of respondents indicating this was the biggest hurdle to overcome when restoring or reutilizing vacant property. Similar problems were identified by studies conducted in Baltimore and Detroit (Friedman, 2003;Poethig, 2017).





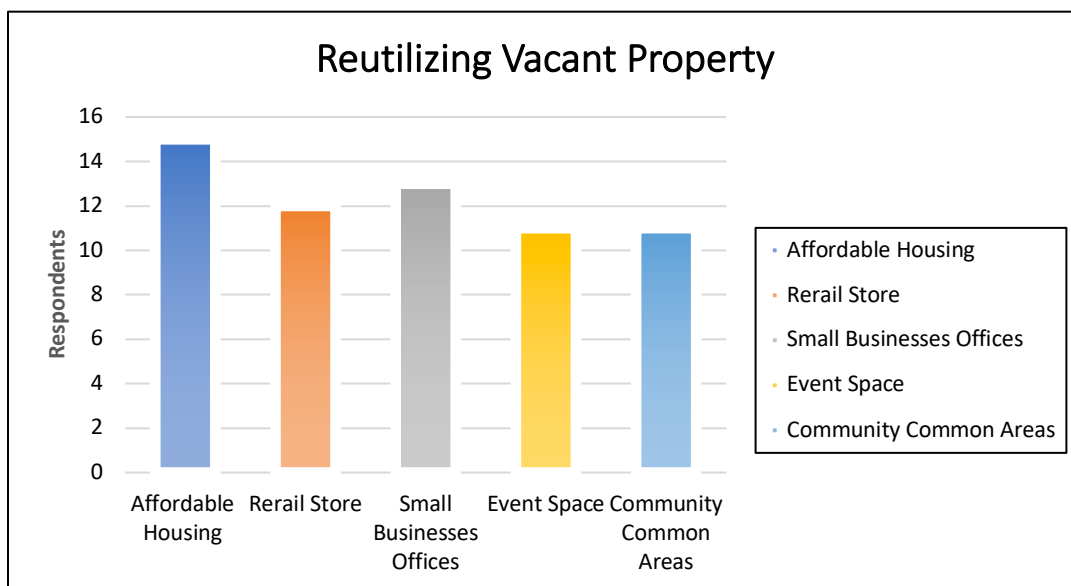
**Figure 4.7: Hurdles Faced with Reutilizing Vacant Property**

How vacant lots or properties can be addressed is always a debated issue (Brachman, L., 2005). When asked how residents of Ward-27 can address and/or prevent vacancy, 70% of respondents recommend purchasing and restoring vacant property (See Figure 4.2). This recommendation is preferable to demolition efforts to clear vacant property of abandoned structures (30%).



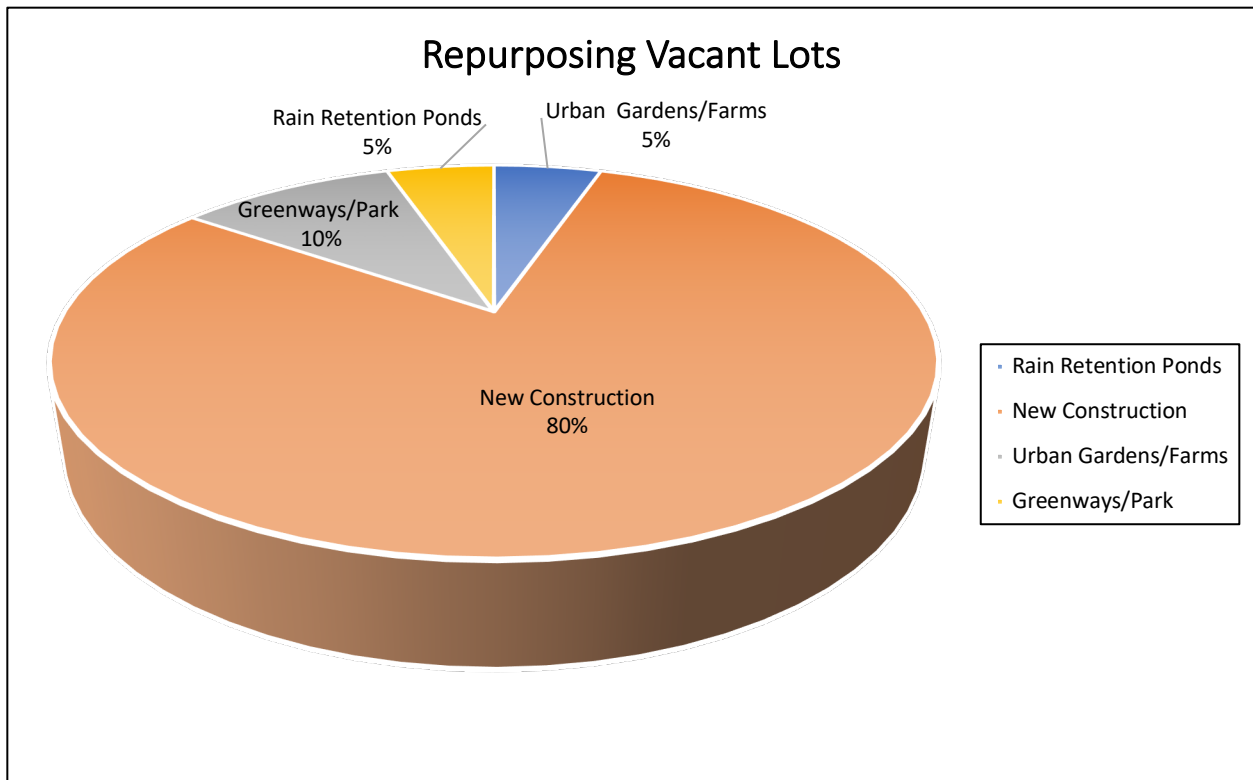
**Figure 4.8: Preferred preventive measures by residents**

As for reutilizing vacant homes, residents recommended a variety of solutions including affordable housing, retail store fronts, small businesses offices, event spaces, and community common areas (see Figure 4.3). The data indicates a slight preference for reutilizing into affordable housing (24%) compared to other suggested solutions.



**Figure 4.9: Reutilizing Vacant Property**

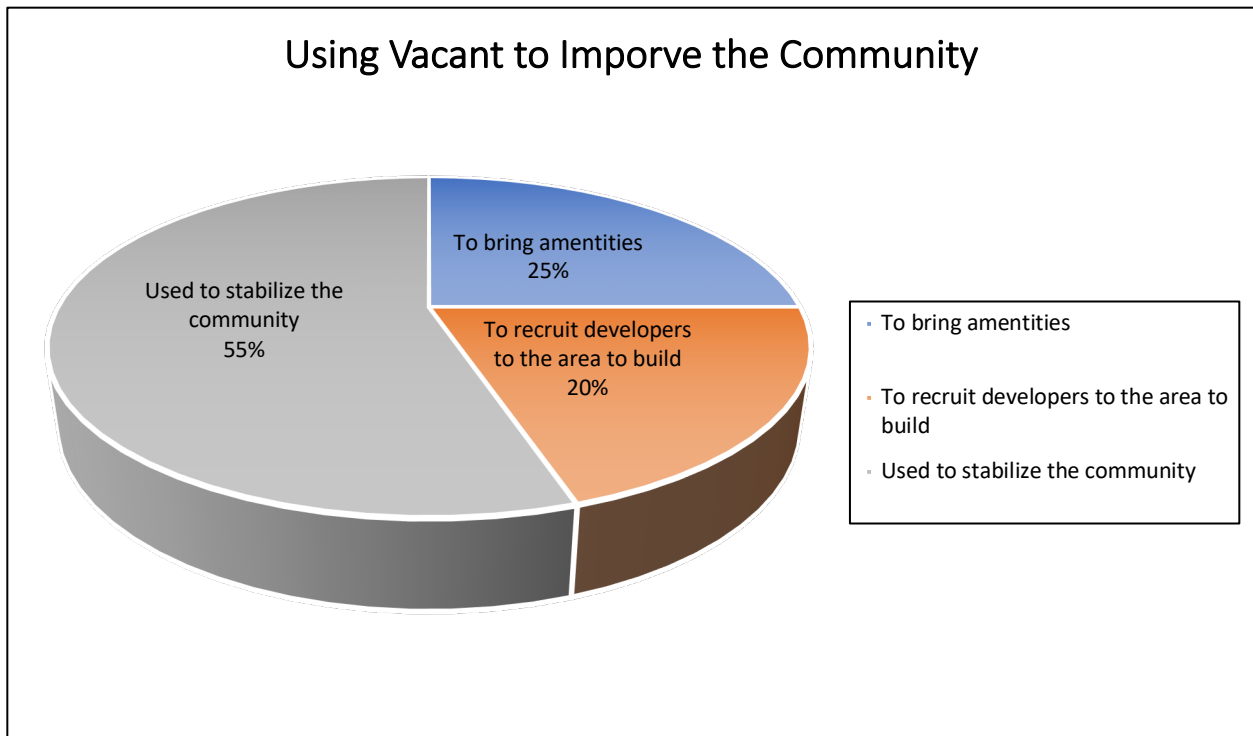
Prior to the community engagement event, background research on the neighborhood was conducted, noting lack of community amenities in the area. When addressing vacant lots in Ward 27, most residents (80%) preferred new construction of homes and retail shops (see Figure 4.4). New construction is preferable to green solutions, such as rain retention ponds, urban gardens or farms, and greenways or parks.



**Figure 4.10: Repurposing Vacant Lots**

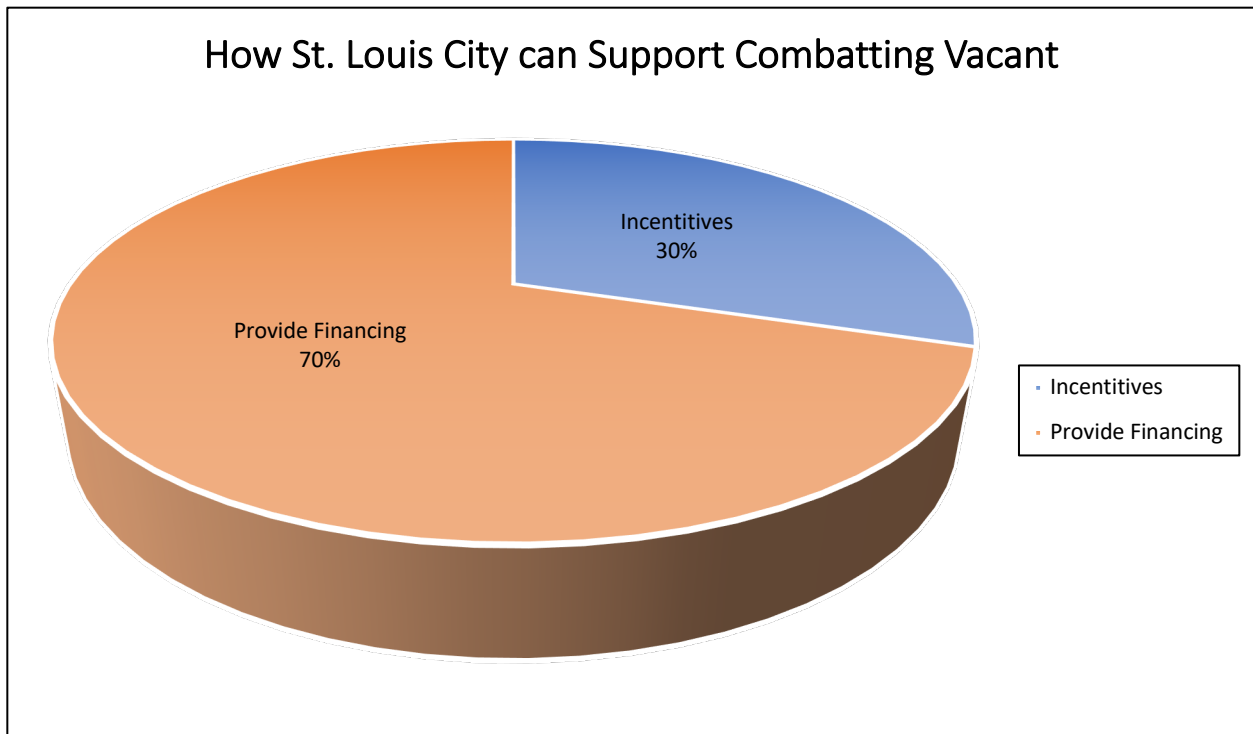
To reuse vacant property in the community's best interest, more than half of respondents (55%) feel vacant property can be used to stabilize the community. Based on prior analysis and current conditions, stabilization can be assumed as restoring vacant property and bringing amenities to the neighborhood. It was found that neighborhood was missing amenities such as small businesses, grocery stores, bank, and a school in operation. The other responses were divided between to bring amenities to the neighborhood' or 'to recruit developers to the area to build (see Figure 4.11).





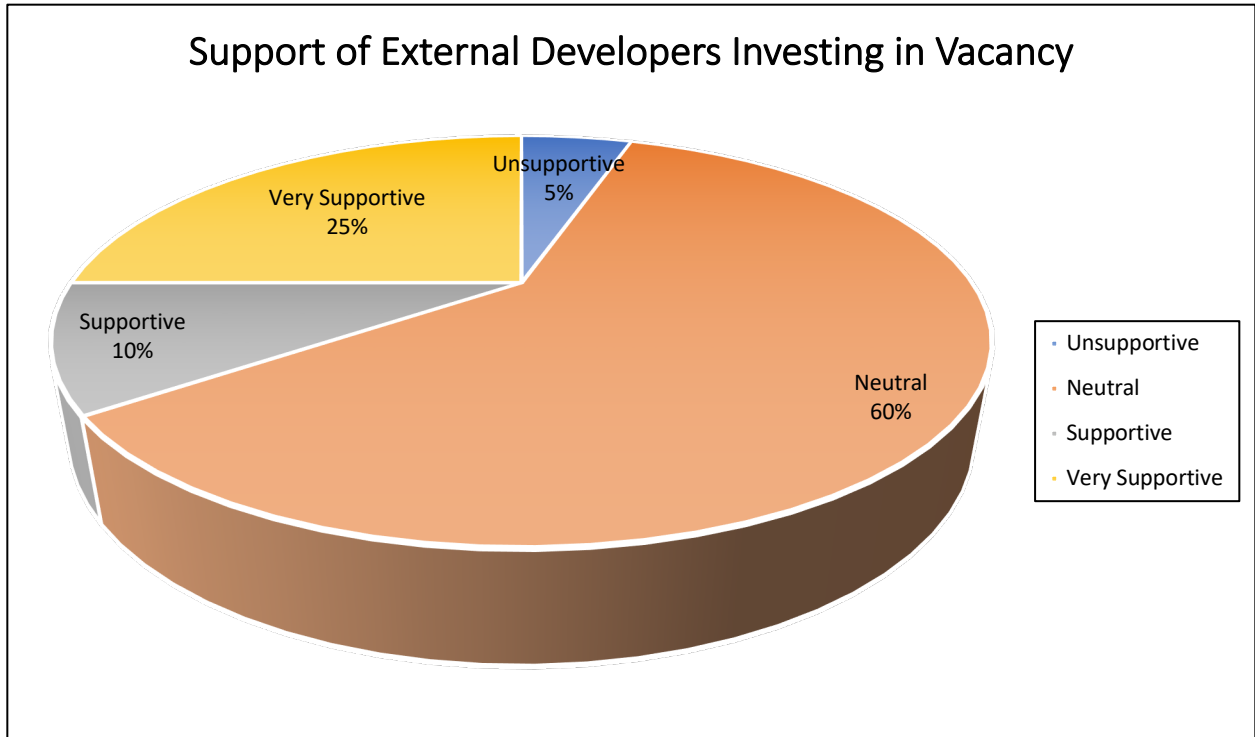
**Figure 4.11: Using Vacancy to Improve the Community**

Cities can play an active role in addressing vacant property. Incentive programs in Kansas City such as the Dollar Pilot Program, have also been implemented in St. Louis by the Land Reutilization Authority (LRA). This program allowed the LRA to list 500 vacant properties for sale for \$1 (Petrin, K. M..2020). When asked about the role of the City of St. Louis in addressing and reducing vacant property, 70% of respondents believe the city should provide funding to help combat vacancy (see Figure 4.12).



**Figure 4.12: How St. Louis City can Support Combatting Vacant**

Involvement of external developers in repurposing vacant properties is sometime contested by the residents. According to the survey results, residents have mixed feelings about an external developer repurposing the vacant property (see Figure 4.13). The majority are neutral or supportive of the involvement of these players, with only a small minority (5%) unsupportive.



**Figure 4.13: Support of External Developers Investing in the Area**

## Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusion

Based on the results of the survey, the reuse of vacant property for new construction and new businesses reflect the wants and needs for the residents of Ward 27. With 833 vacant properties in Ward 27 ( Land Revitalization Authority, 2021), there are opportunities to acquire, resue, and/or build new proeprty. Image 5.1 shows example of vacant property in Ward 27.



**Image 5.1 Vacant property in Ward 27**

Ward leaders and residents should apply the Community Capitals Framework (CCF) to analyze the community and community development efforts (Emery et. al., 2006). By using the CCF approach in Ward 27, the impacts of restoring vacant property can be further multiplied. In this approach, the community needs to focus on reutilizing existing assets. Community Capitals that can be identified include (Emery et. al., 2006):

- **Natural Environment:** This includes a community's environment, rivers, lakes, forests, wildlife, soil, weather, and natural beauty.

- **Financial Capital:** This includes the financial resources available to invest in community capacity building, underwrite businesses development, support civic and social entrepreneurship, and accumulate wealth for future community development.
- **Built Capital:** This is the infrastructure that supports the community, including telecommunications, industrial parks, main streets, water and sewer systems, roads, etc. Built capital is often a focus of community development efforts.

Strategies that can be used for applying Community Capital Framework to Ward 27 are discussed in the next section. These include multiple programs to acquire vacant land and revitalize vacant property. I propose residents use these programs to acquire vacant property for the purpose of obtaining ownership, maintaining, and/or building new construction.

### **Recommendations: Incentive Programs and Funding Mechanisms**

For residents looking to acquire property, the City of St. Louis offers programs to incentivize residents to purchase property. Residents look to acquire vacant property for multiple reasons such as: increasing parcel size, to combating vacancy of neighboring lot, gardening, and/or urban farming. The following programs and techniques can be used by residents and developers to acquire vacant property.

The ‘Mow to Own’ program is designed for St. Louis City residents who want to obtain a vacant lot owned by the Land Reutilization Authority (LRA). This sweat equity program gives immediate ownership of vacant lots to applicant residents who own property next to the vacant lot for a nominal fee. Owners will receive the deed to the property with a maintenance lien. In exchange, the applicants are required to maintain the lot, by regularly mowing and cleaning debris, for twenty-four months. Following a successful twenty-four months of maintenance, LRA will remove the maintenance lien and the owner will own the property free and outright.

Residents have the option to purchase vacant property owned by the LRA. Using the property search at [www.stlouis-mo.gov/](http://www.stlouis-mo.gov/), residents can search and map vacant property in St. Louis City. Filters vary from neighborhood, ward, lot size, zip code and usage. Offer forms to purchase a property can also be found at the website above. Following the submission, the offer is presented by the Board of Aldermen pending acceptance or denial of the offer. If accepted, the purchaser will receive the title to the property with a lien to the LRA which is removed once the occupancy permit is obtained.

Prior to being acquired by the LRA, vacant property that is tax delinquent is held at public auctioned at the Land Tax Sale. Sales are held 5 times annually and the for-sale list can be found on the LRA website and are published in the St. Louis Daily Record two weeks prior to the date of sale. On the day of the sale residents place bids on properties at the St. Louis City Civil Courts Building.

The Prop NS program (named after Proposition NS), stabilizes and sells vacant property owned by the Land Reutilization Authority. This program was created with the intent to increase the likelihood that LRA owned vacant property would be purchased who will then finish their rehab and transformation of the property. Once the condition of these properties is deemed stabilized or stabilized to the fullest amount, they are listed as available for purchase on the [Stlouis.mo.gov](http://Stlouis.mo.gov) website.

Through this program, residents can nominate and purchase vacant property. For those interested in purchasing will receive detailed information including the property condition rehab work done through Prop NS. In addition, prospective purchasers will be granted access to the property as well as photos. After being listed, the property will have a 21-day bidding window for all offers. The Prop NS program does not allow stabilization costs to exceed \$30,000 per

single family home. This allows many homes to be rehabbed to a shell. Like purchasing LRA owned property, a lien is placed on the property until the owner receives an occupancy permit.

### **Recommendations: Area of Focus**

When implementing these funding mechanisms and incentivized programs, an area of focus and strategy should be identified. Prior studies have shown that geographically targeted and clusters of renovation activities can be a valuable lever for neighborhood stabilization and revitalization (Wilson and Kashem, 2017). While identifying this targeted area of Ward 27, I used a few key factors to determine the ideal location. This included opportunity to reinvest and existing nearby amenities. The recommended area of focus can be seen in Figure 5.1, and it is referred to as the Neighborhood Square. Amenities located within the Neighborhood Square include an urgent care, fast food restaurants, a couple small businesses, and a convenience store. Amenities that are missing include: grocery store, a bank, fitness center/gym, and community center or common area. This area also has mass traffic flow as Riverview Boulevard is routed through the recommended area.





**Figure 5.1: Neighborhood Square – Recommended Area**



The recommended vacant properties are located between homes that are occupied. These are presented in Figure 5.2. This is an opportunity for owners' developer, and investor for infill projects. From community gardens, fencing in the yard, or developing new construction, neighboring lots can be purchased and revitalized. Some of the vacant properties are shown in Images 5.2-5.4.



**Figure 5.2: Recommended Vacant Properties**





**Image 5.2** Vacant property in recommended area



**Image 5.3** Vacant property in recommended area





**Image 5.4** Vacant property in recommended area

The largest vacant property in this is not marked but it is Walnut Park Elementary School. This site can be revitalized in several ways to benefit the community. In similar projects, communities and developers have agreed upon reusing vacant schools for market rate apartments and community centers. I recommend this property to be revitalized to support the needs and wants of the community. This may be the basis for a mixed-use development to provide market rate apartments, a grocery store, and a gym.

### **Study Limitations**

While conducting this research, I was able to connect with multiple groups that look to address and combat vacancy. Unfortunately, those organizations were unable to assist in distributing the survey via email or text to residents. Instead, the distribution of the survey relied on social media posts and word-to-mouth. There were a total of 20 respondents to the survey. It

was a challenge obtaining responses from a large group, however, multiple engagements with the community may increase responses in future research.

### **Future Study**

Future studies are recommended prior to redeveloping any properties zoned for commercial use. This includes the redevelopment of the Walnut Park Elementary. Studies that need to be conducted should encompass traffic patterns, traffic counts, market analysis, economic impact, and community engagements. These studies will help to identify the best proposed outcome for residents and the community at large.

Community Capital Framework (CCF) should be used to analyze the community and development efforts from a systems perspective. Capitals that were not identified in this study include Political Capital, Social Capital, Human Capital, and Cultural Capital. In any future application of CCF, these community capitals need to be identified and built upon to reap all benefits from this approach.

### **Conclusion**

North Saint Louis City will eventually be revitalized like neighborhoods in the South and Central Corridor – though it is struggling now to retain residents and resist blight. This research provides professionals, developers, and residents with 1.) a general understanding of vacancy in Ward 27 and St. Louis City; 2.) Resident wants and needs within the community; 3.) Tools and resources that can be used to combat and revitalize vacant property; 4.) Opportunities for future revitalization of vacant properties in Ward 27. The progress of revitalization is relatively slow, but the pace can be picked up when strategically utilizing the recommended tools, resources, and best practices identified in this report. Though there are city backed programs to incentivize the

purchase and maintenance of vacant properties, the city should implement more funding mechanisms to support and incentivize new construction in North St. Louis.

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## Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

<b>Guiding Questions for Community Event Survey: Vacancy Questionnaire</b>
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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are your views on vacant property?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Vacant property is an opportunity</li> <li>b. Vacant property is linked to crime</li> <li>c. No positive or negative view</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Have you ever bought a vacant property in St. Louis?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Yes</li> <li>b. No</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. If yes, what were the biggest hurdles you faced?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Project Funding</li> <li>b. Finding labors</li> <li>c. Structural Issues</li> <li>d. Impractical Issues (i.e. the property would not appraise)</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. What can residents do to address and/or prevent vacancy?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Purchase and restore vacant Property</li> <li>b. Purchase and hold</li> <li>c. Supporting Demolition Efforts</li> </ol> </li> <li>5. What amenities are missing in your community? Check all that may apply.               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Grocery Store</li> <li>b. Businesses</li> <li>c. Affordable Housing</li> </ol> </li> <li>6. How can vacant homes be reutilized? Check all that may apply.               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Affordable Housing</li> <li>b. Retail Store Fronts</li> <li>c. Small Business Offices</li> <li>d. Event Space</li> <li>e. Community Common Areas</li> </ol> </li> <li>7. How can vacant lots be repurposed?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Rain Retention Ponds</li> <li>b. New Construction (Homes and Retails)</li> <li>c. Urban Gardens/Farms</li> <li>d. Greenway/Parks</li> </ol> </li> <li>8. How can vacant properties be reused to help the community?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. To bring amenities (i.e. grocery stores, businesses, banks etc.)</li> <li>b. To recruit developers to the area to build</li> <li>c. Used to stabilize the community</li> </ol> </li> <li>9. How do you want vacancy to look like in our community in the year 2030?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. New construction of homes and buildings</li> <li>b. Increase in revitalization efforts</li> <li>c. increase in vacant property</li> <li>d. No changes</li> </ol> </li> <li>10. What can the city do to address and reduce vacant properties?</li> </ol> |
|---|

- a. Incentives
- b. Provide Financing
- c. Maintain

11. On a scale from 1 to 5, 5 being very supportive, how supportive would you be of an external developer investing/repurposing property?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

12. Have you seen vacant properties restored in Ward 27 or in neighboring wards?

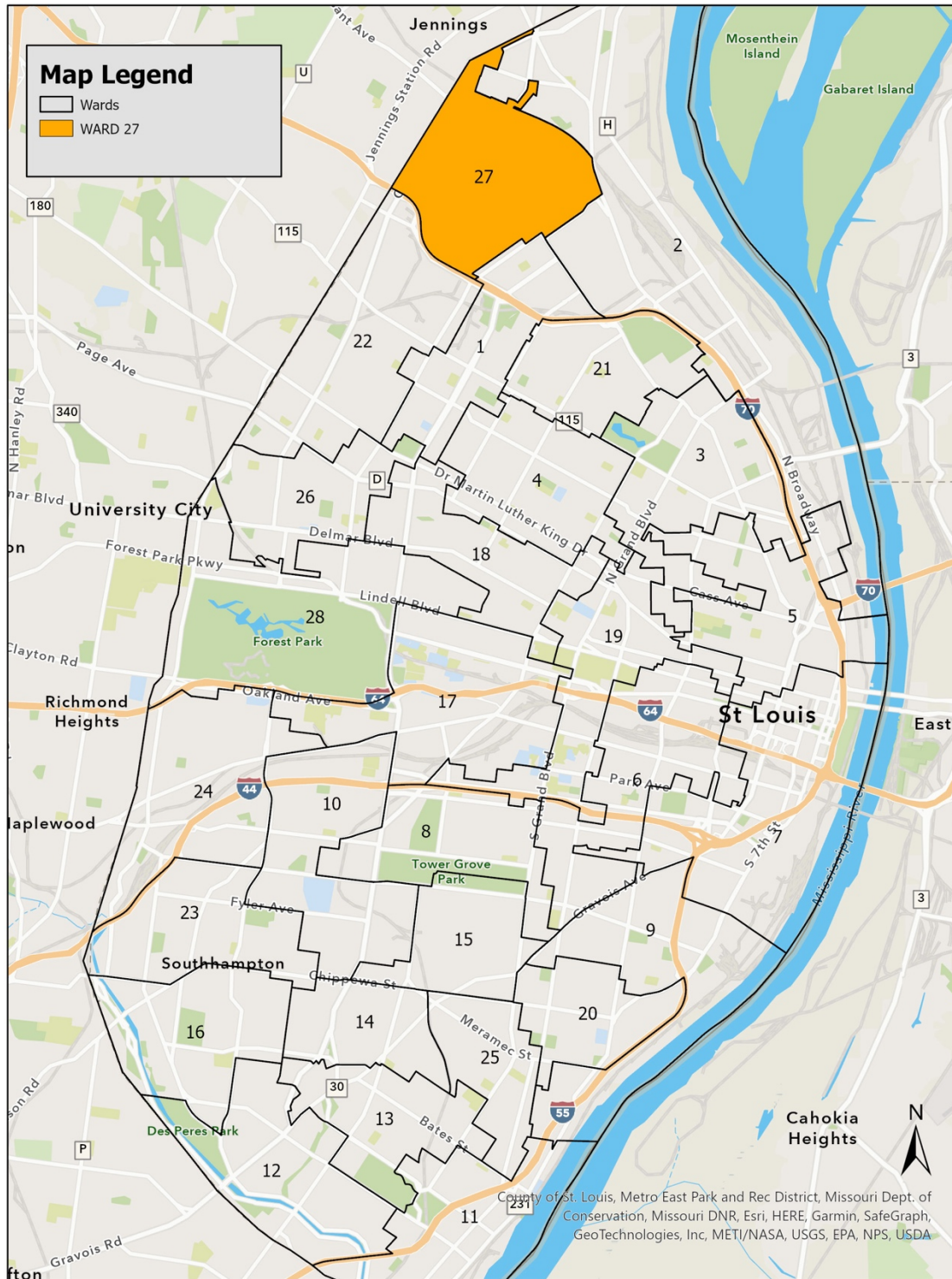
- a. Yes
- b. No

13. What is your opinion on vacancy in Ward 27? What suggestions do you have for addressing vacancy properties?

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## Appendix B: City of St. Louis Ward Boundary Map



## Appendix C: Recommended Area Zoning Map

