

TOOLKIT

Accessing Vacant Land in the
City of Vancouver

November 2017

This **toolkit** provides engaged citizens and organisations various pathways for accessing vacant and underutilized sites in the City of Vancouver for temporary use.

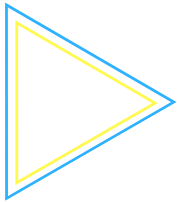
"CITIES HAVE THE CAPABILITY OF PROVIDING SOMETHING FOR EVERYBODY, ONLY BECAUSE, AND ONLY WHEN THEY ARE CREATED BY EVERYONE"

-JANE
JACOBS

Vacant Land Overview

It is estimated that there are over 300 vacant sites in the City of Vancouver. There are 30,000 vacant sites across Canada. Research suggests that most of us walk past these vacant, often fenced off sites, not registering their vacancy, much less thinking of their potential for community use. Vacant sites attract criminal activity, dumping and are often located in disenfranchised neighbourhoods.

A vacant site is a portion of land that is unused or underused in a given community. A vacant site can range in size from a small sliver of land to large multi-acre parcels. They often look abandoned, can be fenced off and inaccessible, and may contain some visible remnants of their former use.



One common identifying factor for all vacant sites is that there is little or no visible sign of use throughout the day. Some vacant sites are cyclical, used for periodic events or activities and left unused in between. Other sites might be in transition - they may be zoned for a particular future development but in the meantime will be vacant for months or even years. Vacant sites have varying surfaces. They can be paved, infertile, fertile, overgrown and sometimes even manicured. They have varying shapes and sizes, such as: a median dividing streets, any corridor, narrow, or connecting space between two buildings or otherwise occupied lots, a large empty lot, or unstructured street space, parts of an existing park, unused or underutilizes space located beneath a sky train, or overpass.

The activation of vacant sites is a proactive way to restore urban environmental quality, provide revenue for land-activators and landowners, and increase community safety and cohesion. A few environmental benefits of vacant site activation include: restoration of nature, increasing green space in urban areas, habitat creation, and recreation opportunities for community members. Some secondary benefits of vacant site activation include reducing urban sprawl, restoring environmental quality of communities, improving air quality, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions (National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, 2005).

Activation Inertia



Vacant sites often remain un(der) used for long periods of time, from months, to years to decades! Many reasons explain the lack of use, including the current owner of the land, its history, the zoning and value of the land. If the vacant site is owned by the City, depending on what department it is governed by, it may not fit their department's specific need. Many land owners wait on their vacant sites to increase value prior to selling it. Some landowners may be waiting for approval for new zoning and often if sites were used by industry (as a gas station, shipyard, or heavy commercial areas) then a site may need to be remediated. Remediation costs may be substantial and if a site is not remediated, land use may be limited.

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take the
resources
provided
here, alter &
curate them
to create a
project best
suited for
your
community.

A. Identify a problem or something missing in your community.

Step 1
How to start



WHAT IS MISSING IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

WHAT PROBLEMS DO YOU WANT TO SOLVE IN YOUR
NEIGHBOURHOOD?

WHAT TYPE OF PROJECT COULD MEET THE NEEDS IN YOUR
COMMUNITY?

What does your neighbourhood need ?



Health & Fitness



Green Space



Dog Park



Art Space



Skateboard Park



Play Park

B. Identify a vacant site

Did you know most sites sit vacant for 5-20 years prior to development?

SOME VACANT SITES ARE PUBLICLY OR PRIVATELY OWNED

It has been estimated that there are roughly...
300 vacant sites in the City of Vancouver!



Some vacant sites are cyclical, used for periodic events or activities & left unused in between.

Other sites might be in transition - they may be zoned for a particular future development.

But in the meantime they will be vacant for months or even years.

How to identify a

vacant site

OPEN YOUR EYES

Walk around your neighbourhood looking for empty, unused, underutilized, fenced off, overgrown parcels of land. Trust us, you will find some!

DETERMINE VACANCY

Ask yourself whether the parcel of land you have identified is truly vacant. Make sure that you assess the use of the site throughout the day. Some uses are easier to identify than others. Make sure your parcel of land is not a natural habitat (for other humans or creatures) during the day or at night.

TALK TO YOUR NEIGHBOURS

Reach out to neighbours and fellow community neighbours in order to identify vacant site options. You don't have to do this alone!

USE ONLINE RESOURCES

Identifying vacant sites is easy to do online. Use Google Maps Satellite View to look for vacant parcels of land around the City. The City of Vancouver's VanMap tool also provides satellite imagery of the city and other important information such as property lines, zoning, and utilities (to name a few) for all parcels of land in Vancouver. Using VanMap, it is also possible to identify all City-owned property by clicking on the "Housing and Properties" option to enable "City-owned Properties."

A. Have you identified a vacant site? Great! Here is what you do next.

Step 2
Dive Deep:
Identification



ASK YOURSELF WHO OWNS THE SITE

It is important to identify and approach the owner of the site before determining that the site is right for you or your organisation. Is it a privately-owned site by someone in your neighbourhood? Is it a site owned by the City or some other level of government? The answers to these questions will help you assess how appropriate and how easily (or not) the site can be activated. Step-by-step guide found in the appendix (pages 22 through to 26).

WHY AND HOW LONG HAS THIS SITE BEEN VACANT?



Try to determine why and how long the site you are considering has been vacant or unused. Has it always been vacant? Answering these questions will help determine whether there are any obvious reasons that the site is vacant. Perhaps the site cannot be used due to serious contamination that poses a threat to user safety.

Perhaps the City or private owner are about to begin development of the site. Or perhaps nobody has identified a purpose for the site yet.

Knowing why and how long the site has been vacant will allow you to determine whether your proposed use is viable for the site.



WHAT ARE THE RISKS OR BARRIERS TO USING THIS SITE?

It is important to identify the various roadblocks that could arise in your endeavour to activate a vacant site. Activating a site could be both a time consuming and long process. A number of permissions and permits could be required in order to achieve site activation. Various stakeholders may need to be consulted (i.e., the owner, the neighbours, the community, etc.) before a vacant site may be used. Liability insurance will need to be purchased before

any event takes place on the site. It's important to familiarize yourself with City bylaws and policies in order to ensure that your "activation" isn't prohibited. Before approaching the vacant landowner, you should have an answer to many (if not all) of these questions.

IS THIS VACANT SITE RIGHT FOR ME ?




A.

Take time to consider whether the vacant site you've identified is a good fit for your activation. Not every vacant site is the same and not every vacant site is appropriate for all uses. Do you want to build a garden? You'll need a site that has water access and has decent sun exposure.

Will you be growing vegetables?



Consider the implications of waste and organic disposal and the unwelcome critters that may find their way up your trellises.

- 
- B.** Make sure you understand the profile of your vacant site and permissions to use or change the current state of the site.

These may include, but are not limited to:

- physical alterations to the vacant site (i.e., modifying entry points to the vacant site, incorporating utilities (water, electricity, sewage, etc.)
- understanding City bylaws, zoning or permit information that may affect your site activation;
- will your activation have negative impacts on the community?
Understand the vacant site's economic and social benefit or burden on the surrounding community;
- determine your environmental impact and opportunities;
- determine potential social implications and opportunities; and
- always consider the safety of land use.

Authentic Engagement

Step 3 Engagement

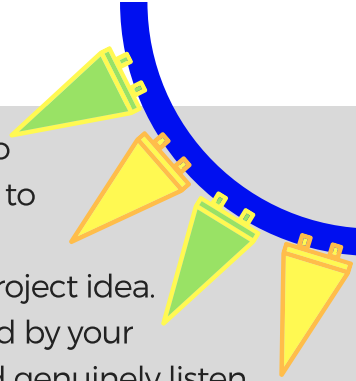


During the early stages of your project development, it is important to find key champions to help your idea move from ideation to fruition. These should be community stakeholders invested in community engagement and your site activation project.

Try to create a team of individuals to support the idea. These should be people who live near the site, and perhaps have an expertise in an area (i.e., grant writers, urban planners, community leaders, or champions in the local community with strong networks or connections that can promote the project).

TURN STRANGERS INTO NEIGHBOURS

So you have already shared your ideas to some of your neighbours. Now it is time to bring them together, to share and collaborate! Host an event about your project idea. Remember not everyone will be inspired by your vision. That is okay. Ask for feedback and genuinely listen to the ideas and concerns of your community members.



A. Where are you getting the money?

Step 4 The Guts

Hope you have been extra kind to your grandparents, because you are going to need their money. Similarly, you are going to need to call all of your relatives, friends and ex-partners for money, too!

We suggest launching a crowdsourcing campaign. If you have not launched a Indiegogo campaign before, connect with a friend who has, and pick their brain. If your relatives and friends are broke, then you will need to turn to grant writing and the world of philanthropy. There is a lot of money out there, the trouble is always knowing where it is and who to ask for it.

LOCAL GRANTS

- Greenest City Grants: Grants up to \$100,000 for projects & programs.
- Greenest City and Vancouver Foundation's- Neighbourhood Small Grants: Grants \$500-\$1000 for Vancouver residents to support and build grassroots action on Greenest City Targets
- Activation of Underutilized Vancouver Civic Theatre Space Grant

Ask yourself: Who cares about what I am doing? And, will the people who care, pay for it?

B. Budget for scale

Design simply, build sustainably

- utilize upcycled and reusable materials
- use reclaimed resources, structures & building materials
- seek sponsorship
- use local businesses & resource centers
- tap into social networks
- align your project activation with businesses in Vancouver doing similar work. Don't reinvent the wheel!

C. Risk management

Identify the risks associated with your activation. Have a strategy to address those risks. For example, what if your activation is defaced or destroyed? How will you prepare for this?



KNOWING ALL THE THINGS THAT CAN AND COULD GO WRONG IS NOT PESSIMISM, IT IS BEING PREPARED AND ONE STEP AHEAD OF YOUR FUNDERS!

C. Legalities

Identify all the legal considerations necessary and familiarize yourself with your obligations in relation to the site activation. Have you obtained proper permits? Even if your project is on a privately owned site, you still might require special permits from the City of Vancouver.



D. Know your value

What value do you offer to the land owner? If your project is being activating on City land, know and be confident to speak to how your project connects with Vancouver's Greenest City goals. The Healthy City Strategy is a fantastic place to start. Perhaps your project is helping leverage existing City goals.

Communicate your impact and celebrate. If your project is on privately owned land, can you share the impact of your project with the owner? Did you know that private landowners may receive a significant tax benefit from the Province of British Columbia for providing value to the community?

So you think you're ready?

Step 5 Launching

A. Avoid permanent structures, always

Ensure that all items erected on your site can be easily moved off site. For large installations, ensure that all materials are fork-lift ready.

B. Share knowledge & anticipate

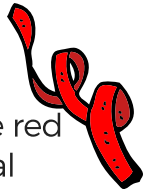
Clearly communicate your intentions and plan. Communicate with all your stakeholders, partners and continue to engage in conversation with all your neighbours. One fear city staffers have shared time and time again is that they fear complaints from residents. How can you be one step ahead of the angry cat-lady who is ready at any moment to call 3-1-1 and complain about all the new people in her neighbourhood, since your site activation.

C. Be innovative & accept the rain

Remember that things change day-to-day and that it rains sometimes! Be ready to face new challenges and find ways to maintain your momentum.

D. Share your success

On your launch day, who will be there to cut the red tape with you? Perhaps invite your MLA and local media sources to share in your success and create traction?



Move from the micro to the macro

Step 6 Inspirations



In the City of Vancouver there are many examples of site activation. Many organisations have launched gardens on vacant sites. Shifting Growth and Sole Food utilize a business model to enhance green space and in the case of Sole Food, provide equitable employment opportunities.

Gap Filler is a “creative urban regeneration initiative that facilitates a wide range of temporary projects, events, installations and amenities” in New Zealand. This is a collaborative initiative that sprung out of the Christchurch earthquakes as a way to get people back into the city and working together.



HERE IS ONE TEMPORARY ACTIVATION CALLED THE “DANCE-O-MAT.”



596 ACRES

There is 590 acres of vacant land in Brooklyn, NYC! With over 50 activations, and counting, 590 Acres is definitely at the heart of vacant lot transformation.

Appendix (the good stuff)

WHO OWNS YOUR VACANT SITE?

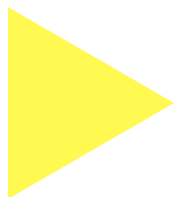
Identifying the owner of a site can may prove to be a challenge. Here are some helpful resources to help you identify the owner of your vacant site:

Identify the civic address of your vacant lot. If you don't know the civic address of your site, use VanMap to enter the intersection. Once you locate the site in VanMap, hover over the property, press CTRL + click to open the link. The link open a page that provides a number of important information about your site, including the civic address and Parcel Identification number ("PID").

Google the civic address or the PID of your vacant lot. Believe it or not, a simple google search may reveal the owner of your vacant site. In particular, a number of larger vacant parcels have received media attention in the past and information about their owner and their history is readily available online.

Conduct a title search for your vacant lot. If your google search doesn't reveal the identity of the owner, conduct a title search using the appropriate LTSA service at <https://apps.ltsa.ca/iam/signup>. This will require signing up for an account and the search service costs a fee. You can also contact the appropriate BC Land Title Office and request a title search by mail. This service will also cost a fee (less than \$10.00).

Don't underestimate the power of 3-1-1. If you're having trouble identifying the owner of your vacant lot, try calling 3-1-1, a City of Vancouver service that provides information about and access to non-emergency municipal services. The operators at 3-1-1 will not give you the identity of the vacant lot owner, but may help you navigate through a sea of information and send you in the right direction.



HOW TO APPROACH VACANT LAND OWNERS

There are many strategies to approaching a vacant site owner. We offer a few tips on how to get the ball rolling, but you may have other (better) ideas on how to approach landowners and seal the deal.

If your vacant site is [City-owned](#):

A. Call 3-1-1 to try to determine which City department is responsible for the parcel of land. The City of Vancouver does not have an inventory of vacant sites. Many departments (Real Estate, Parks, Engineering, etc.) have control over city-owned property. To determine whether your vacant site can be used it is important to reach out to the proper department.

B. Send an email or letter explaining who you are and why you are interested in using the vacant site. Be forthcoming and open about your intentions.

C. Determine whether your proposed site use promotes any of the Cities strategies or policies (Check out: Vancouver's Greenest City 2020 Action Plan, Healthy City Strategy, Housing Strategy, Food Strategy, etc.) Convince the City that your proposed vacant site use will promote City goals to make your community a better, more sustainable place.

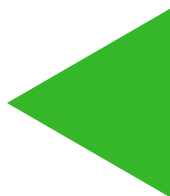
D. Identify other incentives to encourage the City to allow you to use their vacant land. City-owned vacant land is not making the City any money. Identifying a use that could benefit the City either financially or in promoting its goals and strategies is important.

E. Present a serious and thorough proposal. Don't waste the City's time if you haven't prepared a proper business case.

F. Don't re-invent the wheel. The City has "activated" many sites in the past and is accustomed to providing temporary use permits for the use of its sites. Ask the City for templates and actively identify next steps with the City for your site activation.

G. Ask questions. If you don't know the answer to something, don't be afraid to ask. The City is there to help and has an interest in making better use of its vacant sites.

If your vacant site is privately-owned



A. Send an email or a letter to the registered address of the owner (found in the Land Title Search) explaining who you are and why you are interested in using the vacant site. Be forthcoming about your intentions.

B. Private landowners may be reticent to answer your queries, but don't give up that easily. Try to get a definitive answer. If sending an email or letter doesn't work, pick up the phone!

C. Find out what motivates your private landowner. Unlike the City, most private landowners will not be interested in meeting City goals or strategies or providing a selfless community benefit. Private landowners are usually financially motivated and will want any use of their property to be hassle-free. Depending on your project, its purpose and duration, you may be able to have it recognized as a charitable event or purpose, which may allow the private property owner to obtain a provincial tax break by declaring the site as used for a charitable purpose. Be creative! Come up with other incentives that will help you connect with and make better use of privately owned vacant lands.

D. Present a serious and thorough proposal. You likely only have one chance to impress the private landowners. Try to predict the questions they may ask of you. If you don't have an answer immediately, offer to find it as soon as possible. You are the leader in this process. Try to address the private landowner's concerns, such as a fear of your temporary activation becoming permanent, or restricting the development potential of the vacant site, or creating unnecessary risks to safety and security. Private landowners will likely require added incentive to allow you to activate their land, given that it is often more simply to let a site remain vacant.

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