On October 24, 2017, we celebrated the five year anniversary of Act 153 — the monumental bill which allowed for the creation of land banks in the Commonwealth. Also known as the Land Bank Act, this bill gives local governments a flexible tool to help them return vacant, abandoned and tax-delinquent properties to productive use.

A land bank is a locally created and controlled quasi-governmental entity that can acquire blighted properties. Its sole objective is to create a uniform and transparent process for private individuals and organizations to buy

neglected properties and turn them into community assets, whether it be a new store on Main Street, a home or a community garden.

In just five years, Pennsylvania land banks have seen numerous successes, and have been well received in communities both urban, suburban and rural. A big reason for their success is because they are run by community residents and leaders – ensuring every decision is made with the best interests of the local community in mind.

Local community members have a vested interest in their town’s development, unlike the often absent landlords.
and developers who buy up vacant property with no immediate plan or intention of developing it. Land bank boards are able to cut red tape, acquire long underused parcels and choose to whom to sell, transfer, lease or mortgage the property.

The Land Bank Act officially became law on October 24, 2012, but the Housing Alliance’s advocacy efforts started nearly a decade before. In 2003, we started a campaign to help local authorities reclaim Pennsylvania’s abandoned land. First, we pushed for bills that gradually eliminated state barriers to local blight restoration efforts. Then, once state legislators were more familiar with blight issues, we began introducing legislation that would give local governments the tools they needed to fight blight.

We partnered with nonprofits, for-profits, local and state government and businesses to create a broad coalition of stakeholders to work for land bank legislation. This coalition organized conferences and hearings, bringing in outside experts to educate community members and local legislators about the positive effects land banks bring.

Finally, after several drafts spanning three legislative sessions, we built enough legislative support around the bill. We found advocates in State Representatives John Taylor, Chris Ross, and Curtis Thomas, all former Chairs of the House Urban Affairs Committee, and State Senators Gene Yaw and James Brewster, former Chairs of the Senate Urban Affairs and Housing Committee. Since then, a growing number of state representatives and senators have championed Act 153 and the good it brings to communities.

As of today, there are 17 land banks in Pennsylvania. The 17 land banks, which spread from Erie to Philadelphia, have helped local governments and their constituents retake control over their communities, making them more beautiful, productive and financially viable.

In Lackawanna County, the land bank has acquired over 132 properties and sold 31 since its inception in December 2015. One particular success story includes a property in Scranton, which had condemned houses sitting on a single and double lot. The land bank acquired the property and, with the help of the City of Scranton, demolished the tax-delinquent houses and sold the land to United Neighborhood Centers, which has begun construction of an independent living center for seniors.

In Philadelphia, where there were more than 40,000 vacant parcels when the Land Bank Act was passed, the land bank has been helping to create, as well as save, more green spaces. As the city’s property values have been increasing in recent years, absentee landlords have gradually reclaimed land they left vacant for years. Community members had decided to turn some of these vacant lands into beautiful, sustainable gardens, only to see developers suddenly reclaim the property and build over the gardens. Since 2013, the Philadelphia Land Bank has identified over 32,000 vacant parcels, and with this knowledge and the tools it possesses to acquire the land, the organization has helped community members plan for not only more permanent green spaces, but also more highly needed affordable housing.

Before and after pictures of the Westmoreland County Land Bank’s work on the former Monsour Medical Center in Jeannette.
The Westmoreland County Land Bank’s purchase of the former Monsour Medical Center in Jeannette is a prime example of how a land bank can turn eyesore properties that have often been vacant and abandoned for years back to productive use. It is the special powers given to the Westmoreland County Land Bank — one of Pennsylvania’s very first land banks — by the Land Bank Act that helped make this possible.

Among a land bank’s special powers is the ability to present a clean and marketable title for the property, positioning it for reuse in the private sector. After decades of sitting idle, this property is under contract with a local developer to develop the site into a $3 million complex for retail and commercial development.

The Tri-COG Land Bank – with 28 members including Allegheny County, 21 municipalities, and 6 school districts – is an example of how data turned the tide for support of the Land Bank’s creation. According to An Lewis, Executive Director of the Tri-COG Land Bank, the data analysis and subsequent conversation in the land bank’s formative process cast an important light on the problem of blight, the cost of inaction and the interventions needed to address it. A critically important tool, land banks work best when combined with strategies such as code enforcement that create a comprehensive community plan to tackle blight.

The Washington County Land Bank was created in part to reestablish a sense of community pride. When there are numerous unattractive building and properties in a community, it is difficult for members of that community to feel that sense of pride. The main impact of the Land Bank will be in restoring properties to the tax rolls.

One of the current properties that the Land Bank has acquired is a prime example. The property owner of one commercial property in Charleroi Borough had not paid taxes in three years and did not make necessary renovations. Because of the special powers of the Land Bank, it acquired the property and is now able to seek a responsible property owner to maintain the property and pay taxes.

In Schuylkill County, the Land Bank has quickly become the go to organization to address blight. A nominal initial participation fee ($1,000) from each of the seven participating municipalities served as seed money to start up the Land Bank and leverage additional dollars. One of its early accomplishments is the acquisition of three blighted and tax delinquent properties at a recent judicial sale. Using the land bank’s priority bid power, the Land Bank was able to acquire these properties without having to compete against other bidders. Of the properties acquired, one will be rehabbed, one will become a rear yard for the rehabilitated property, and one will be conveyed to the borough for demolition.

Success stories like these help us to see how far we have come in only five years. We recognize there is still a great deal of work ahead of us. But as communities create their own land banks and utilize other blight-fighting resources, we will continue to empower communities and create an even more vibrant commonwealth.