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Changing Skyline: Autocratic leadership vs. community gardens

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Activist John Lindsay at the Wiota Street Garden with his sign calling out Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell. The Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority says Blackwell's decision will guide it. (ED HILLE / Staff Photographer)

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Four decades after settling in West Philadelphia, John Lindsay still speaks bluntly in the Yankee rhythms of his native Boston. After he got wind that a developer was eyeing his community garden at Powelton Avenue and Wiota Street, Lindsay responded by erecting a small billboard under one of his ornamental pear trees. "Jannie Blackwell wants 12 houses built here," it declares. For good measure, he includes a link to his "Save the Wiota St. Garden" Facebook page.



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The story is a bit more complex than his message suggests, but there is no doubt Lindsay's sign calling out Blackwell, West Philadelphia's powerful Council rep, distills the painful choice being confronted by comeback neighborhoods around the city: gardens or housing?

There are some 400 community gardens in Philadelphia, a legacy of the long decades of decay and abandonment. The folks who stuck it out here laid claim to whatever vacant land they could, with little concern for the name on the deed. Officials were only too happy to see orderly rows of vegetables rather than have the earth swallow up the city.

But that was then. Philadelphia is now undergoing a rowhouse boom the likes of which it hasn't seen since immigrants were pouring off the docks in the early 20th century. As developers scramble for any available site where they can throw up a few houses, community gardens, lovingly tended for decades, have become easy targets. At least a half-dozen are under threat of being bulldozed, including one of the oldest, the Eastwick Community Garden.

Because the building boom has been so fierce and fast, Philadelphia's mind-set has yet to catch up with the reality on the ground. The city still thinks of itself as land-rich and development-starved. It's hard to accept that community gardens, long seen as a better-than-nothing option, might be an amenity in need of preservation.

At the Department of Parks and Recreation, officials are only just starting to develop criteria to determine which gardens are worth saving and which can be sacrificed. An urban gardening coordinator has been hired to work with the Neighborhood Gardens Trust, a nonprofit that helps growers obtain clear title to their land. But the backlog is enormous.

Of the 318 gardens that have applied for legal status from the city's landholding agencies, only 17 have had their standing clarified in the last two years, notes Amy Laura Cahn, a lawyer who serves on the gardens trust board.

With stucco-covered student housing popping up faster than bindweed in his West Powelton neighborhood, Lindsay decided in February he needed to take action. He asked the garden trust to assume formal control of the Wiota Street garden.

The trust, Cahn said, was thrilled by Lindsay's request. Though it's mostly his show, Wiota Street has been a popular neighborhood fixture since the mid-1980s. Lindsay holds a weekly farmers market and supplies several local homeless shelters with crates of free produce. There's no lock on the fence, so anyone can wander amid the rows of tomatoes, collards, chard, and watermelon radishes.

To preserve Wiota Street, the trust needs to obtain a clear title from the site's owner, the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority. Cahn said she expected the application to sail through the redevelopment authority after Lindsay collected 200 signatures in support of the plan. Instead, the application languished with no explanation.

It turns out a developer also has expressed interest in the site, one of the larger pieces of open ground in West Powelton. Because of the competing request, a spokesman for the redevelopment authority informed me in a terse written statement that it was deferring to Blackwell. It won't make a decision until she tells it what to do.

Give the authority a point for honesty.

Over the last year, the city has been working to implement a new land bank that will coordinate the transfer of 40,000 vacant lots, and last week it finally presented its strategic plan. But the authority's statement is a keen reminder that land-use decisions in Philadelphia still come down to what's known as councilmanic prerogative. With a magisterial wave, a Council member can decide how a parcel of land will be used - or not used.

Blackwell invokes the prerogative regularly. She declined to help a developer change the zoning to build an apartment house at 43d and Baltimore, and instead forced it to go through a lengthy, and uncertain, Zoning Board review. (Like the Wiota Garden, the development has strong neighborhood support.) She refuses to introduce legislation that would bring West Philadelphia's zoning into the modern age. She has also ignored Spruce Hill residents who have begged for a neighborhood historic district to keep their elegant Victorian homes from being ruined by high-occupancy student housing.

At the same time, she has helped several community gardens work out ownership issues.

For some reason, that wasn't the case at Wiota Street. "I went to Jannie with a letter asking for her support, but she never responded," Lindsay said. That's when he put up his sign.

Blackwell, the Greta Garbo of City Council, didn't respond to my calls, either. I suppose you don't have to when you rule the realm. She joined City Council in 1992, taking over the family seat from her late husband, Lucien Blackwell, who was elected in 1974.

The thing is, there's a case to be made for allowing housing on the Wiota Street site. Powelton Avenue is a major city street that was left badly tattered by the years of blight. Reestablishing a continuous line of buildings could help repair the damage.

That option should, of course, be weighed against the real benefits the garden brings to West Powelton. Obesity and diabetes are major scourges in West Philadelphia. The Wiota Street Garden makes it easy and affordable to pick up healthy vegetables. In the summer, when the peaches are practically bursting, Lindsay encourages neighborhood kids to eat them straight from the trees. Wiota Street is more than a garden; it's a social hub.

As is often the case, there are two sides to the story. But we can't have a real conversation so long as one person won't take part.

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