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**City Council Committee on Public Property and Public Works Hearing
December 1, 2014
Testimony of Amy Laura Cahn, Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia
Resolution Number 140915**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Amy Laura Cahn. I am a staff attorney with the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia. I work on environmental justice and direct our Garden Justice Legal Initiative, which provides legal and policy support for community gardening and market farming. I have participated as part of the Land Bank Alliance and Campaign to Take Back Vacant Land coalitions. This past summer, my office convened Philadelphia gardeners and farmers to participate in the Land Bank Strategic Planning process.

I am here, today, to voice my support for the 2015 Proposed Strategic Plan and Disposition Policy of the Philadelphia Land Bank. There are others here who will talk about the substance of the plan. I want to spend a moment on process, leading up to this hearing and moving forward.

The Strategic Plan was the result of significant public participation. I think many of us were concerned that there would not be sufficient mechanisms to ensure adequate community input into the Plan. And, of course, there can always be additional input and from a more diverse set of constituencies. However, this planning process exceeded expectations. Interface Studio and Land Bank staff worked hard, within a condensed schedule, to provide multiple opportunities to offer feedback and suggestions, both through focus groups and public meetings. Furthermore, the process culminated in a large public hearing. While I would have preferred that the full interim Land Bank Board be present for that hearing, the public was definitely present. The SEPTA board room was packed and many provided verbal and written testimony, including several who spoke about urban agriculture and open space.

As you consider whether to pass this resolution, it is important to know that the plan evolved because individuals and organizations stepped up to participate and the planners listened. The plan directly reflects meaningful changes made as a result of public feedback.

Now, what happens next?

First, you will hear from several people today that the plan lacks targets for each of the priority end uses and that subsequent plans should include these targets. I agree. Even modest targets would help set and manage expectations for how we wish the Land Bank to function. Targets will help the public understand how the Land Bank board views the different priorities relative to each other and how they intend to allocate resources across different uses.

Second, we need a permanent Land Bank board. The interim Land Bank board has been a working board. Many could be asked to remain. The point is that the law calls for a permanent board within three months of the passage of the law. We need continuity of leadership to shepherd the strategic plan into action. I also suggest, as others may, that the board needs someone with expertise on urban agriculture and open

space, to reflect the priorities set by the plan.

Third, we need opportunities for community engagement and education about the land bank. To quote the recent Center for Community Progress study, *Take it to the Bank: How Land Banks Are Strengthening America's Neighborhoods*

Successful land banks have found creative and consistent ways to inform, engage, and empower these active residents to help prioritize land bank interventions and develop long-term solutions. Whether establishing a community advisory board, regularly hosting neighborhood meetings, or partnering with existing civic groups and resident associations, land banks should explore and implement practices that affirm a strong commitment to inclusiveness, engagement, and empowerment.

Tomorrow, the Law Center is partnering with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, the Healthy Foods Green Spaces coalition, and a host of other organizations to present a workshop on land access for community gardeners and farmers that we are calling Vacant Land 201. We have 99 people signed up. Residents throughout the city are clamoring for information about how to get legal access to land and to fully understand the impact the Land Bank may have on their neighborhood.

Councilwoman Quiñones-Sánchez has begun offering land bank town halls in her district. This model could be replicated citywide, through partnerships between Council offices, city agencies, and community-based organizations. Engagement and education can be further bolstered as the district planning process continues and by supporting community plans in areas that do not have them. We need this engagement to ensure equitable access to land and to build trust in the Land Bank's role in our city.

Finally, the Land Bank will only work with the leadership of this City Council. It absolutely relies on you to use it, both as a mechanism to responsibly acquire privately owned tax delinquent land and to consolidate existing public land held by other agencies. I know there might be an instinct to wait and see if it works. But someone needs to take the risk and take the lead. I urge you to pass this Resolution, to fully resource the Land Bank moving forward, and to use it so that your constituents can do so, as well.

Many thanks for the opportunity to speak today.