

WEST TUSCALOOSA Community Inventory

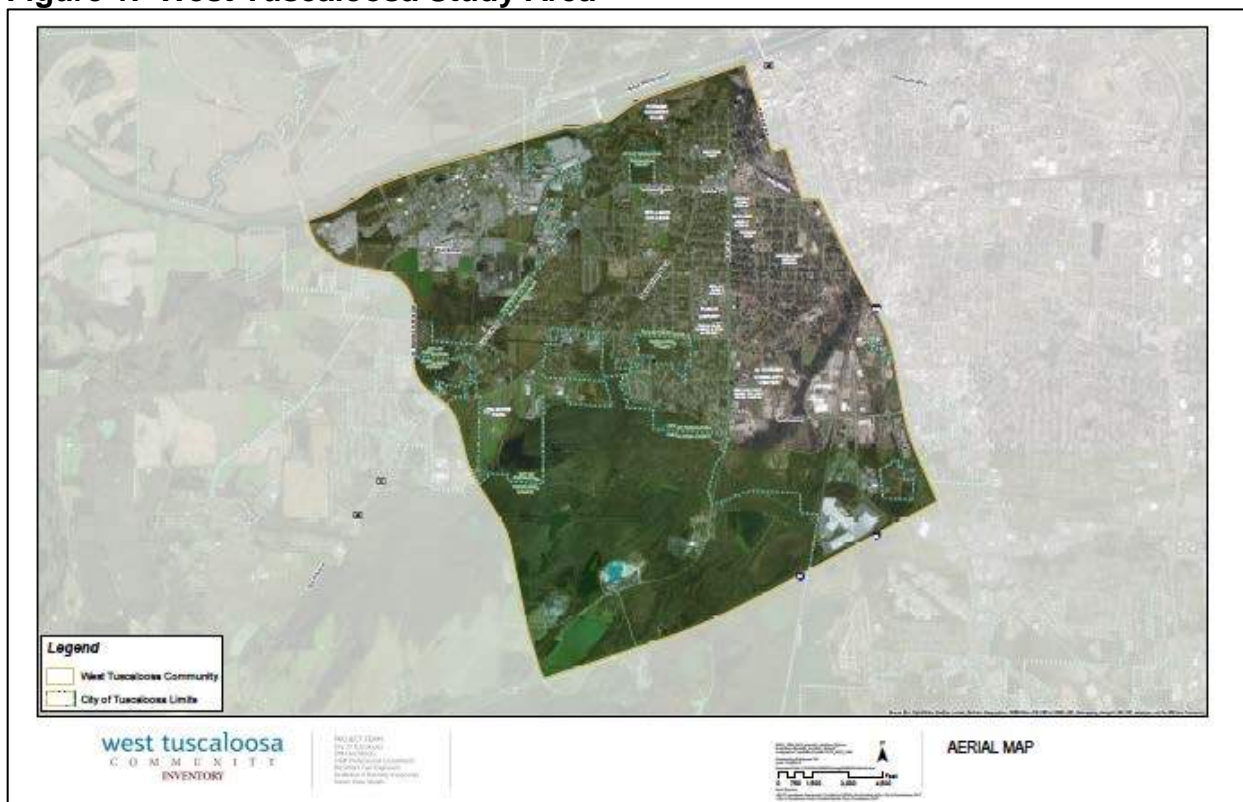
Final Study
Documentation
Elements

Blight Study

Introduction

In 2017, Mayor Walt Maddox and the Tuscaloosa City Council engaged a consultant team to conduct planning and engagement activities in an approximately 10 square mile area, herein referred to as the "West Tuscaloosa Study Area" or "Study Area". The Study Area is delineated by the Black Warrior River to the north, I-359 to the east, I-20/I-59 to the south, and Joe Mallisham Parkway, as shown in Figure 1¹.

Figure 1. West Tuscaloosa Study Area

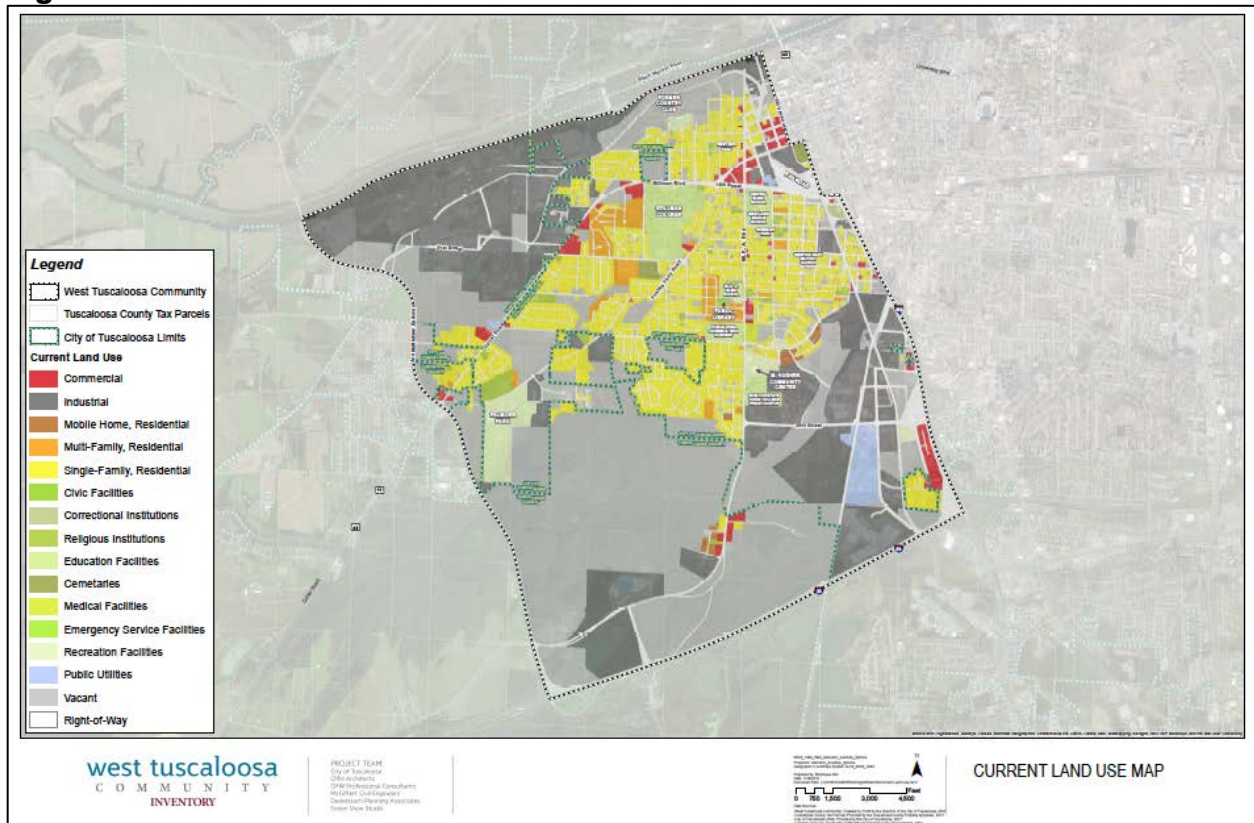


West Tuscaloosa has a rich history as an African American community and the home of Stillman College. Established in 1876, Stillman College is an historically African American private liberal arts college. Its 105-acre campus is an influencing presence in the West Tuscaloosa community.

¹ For ease of use, maps are reproduced in a larger format at the end of the report.

The land use pattern in the West Tuscaloosa Study Area is predominately Industrial (23%) in character. The second most prevalent land use is Residential (17%). This mix of Industrial and Residential land uses creates the potential for incompatibilities, such as noise and lighting. Finally, while there are clusters of commercial activity, such as the Piggly Wiggly grocery store plaza, most commercial properties are scattered through the West Tuscaloosa Study Area as neighborhood-scale commercial, in the form of corner stores, for example. Some of these corner store locations are convenience stores or package stores that contribute to conditions of disorder and crime within the Study Area. The distribution of current land uses is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Current Land Uses



The West Tuscaloosa Study Area faces many challenges – crime, abandoned and dilapidated properties, lack of complete infrastructure systems. The City of

Tuscaloosa wishes to establish an urban renewal and redevelopment district for the West Tuscaloosa community. The first step in that process is to determine whether or not conditions of blight exist within the Study Area. The following report will identify and analyze conditions of blight that exist within the West Tuscaloosa Study Area.

Urban Renewal/Redevelopment Statutes

The State of Alabama provides a process through which cities and counties can establish urban renewal districts to promote reinvestment and redevelopment.² As a predicate to the establishment of urban renewal districts, the local government must first determine whether conditions of blight exist within the proposed district. Blight is generally defined as a deteriorated urban condition. Blighted properties and conditions can perpetuate stigma and cause further disinvestment. Alabama Code Section 24-2-2 lists the following conditions that constitute blighted property:

- *The presence of structures, buildings, or improvements, which, because of dilapidation, deterioration, or unsanitary or unsafe conditions, vacancy or abandonment, neglect or lack of maintenance, inadequate provision of ventilation, light, air, sanitation, vermin infestation, or lack of necessary facilities and equipment, are unfit for human habitation or occupancy; and,*
- *The existence of high density of population and overcrowding or the existence of structures which are fire hazards or are otherwise dangerous to the safety of persons or property or any combination of the factors; and,*
- *The presence of a substantial number of properties having defective or unusual conditions of title which make the free transfer or alienation of the properties unlikely or impossible; and,*
- *The presence of structures from which the utilities, plumbing, heating, sewerage, or other facilities have been disconnected, destroyed, removed, or rendered ineffective so that the property is unfit for its intended uses; and,*
- *The presence of excessive vacant land on which structures were previously located which, by reason of neglect or lack of maintenance, has become overgrown with noxious weeds, is a place for accumulation of trash and debris, or a haven for mosquitos, rodents, or other vermin where the owner refuses to remedy the problem after notice by the appropriate governing body; and,*

² Alabama Code Section 24-2-1, et seq (1975) (Redevelopment Projects) and Alabama Code Section 24-3-1, et seq (1975) (Urban Renewal Projects)

- *The presence of property, which, because of its physical condition, use, or occupancy, constitutes a public nuisance or attractive nuisance where the owner refuses to remedy the problem after notice by the appropriate governing body;*
- *The presence of property with code violations affecting health or safety that has not been substantially rehabilitated within the time periods required by the applicable codes;*
- *The presence of property, which, by reason of environmental contamination, poses a threat to public health or safety in its present condition.*

In addition to the indicators for blighted properties, blight can exist in the form of harmful land uses, obsolete layouts, aging infrastructure, economically depressed areas, high vacancies, and combinations of other factors considered detrimental to the public safety, health, or welfare of the community.

Inventory and Analysis of Blight

The Consultant Team conducted an inventory of blight conditions. Using the City's GIS databases, a series of maps was created to document historical patterns of violent and property crimes, vacant properties, property maintenance, and infrastructure networks. From these maps, the Consultant Team was able to spatially represent areas of concentrated blight conditions. The depiction of spatial patterns led to the selection of target areas in which the Consultant Team conducted site visits in January 2018.

While blight conditions appear throughout the West Tuscaloosa Study Area, the Consultant Team focused site visit efforts in areas of concentrated blight conditions. The West Tuscaloosa Study Area is approximately 10 square miles in size. Therefore, efforts to document conditions of blight were focused in the following target areas, as depicted in Figures 3, 4, and 5 below: North Area Central (north of Stillman Boulevard and west of Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard) and portions of the Central Core (south of 15th Street/Stillman Boulevard and east of Fosters Ferry Road).

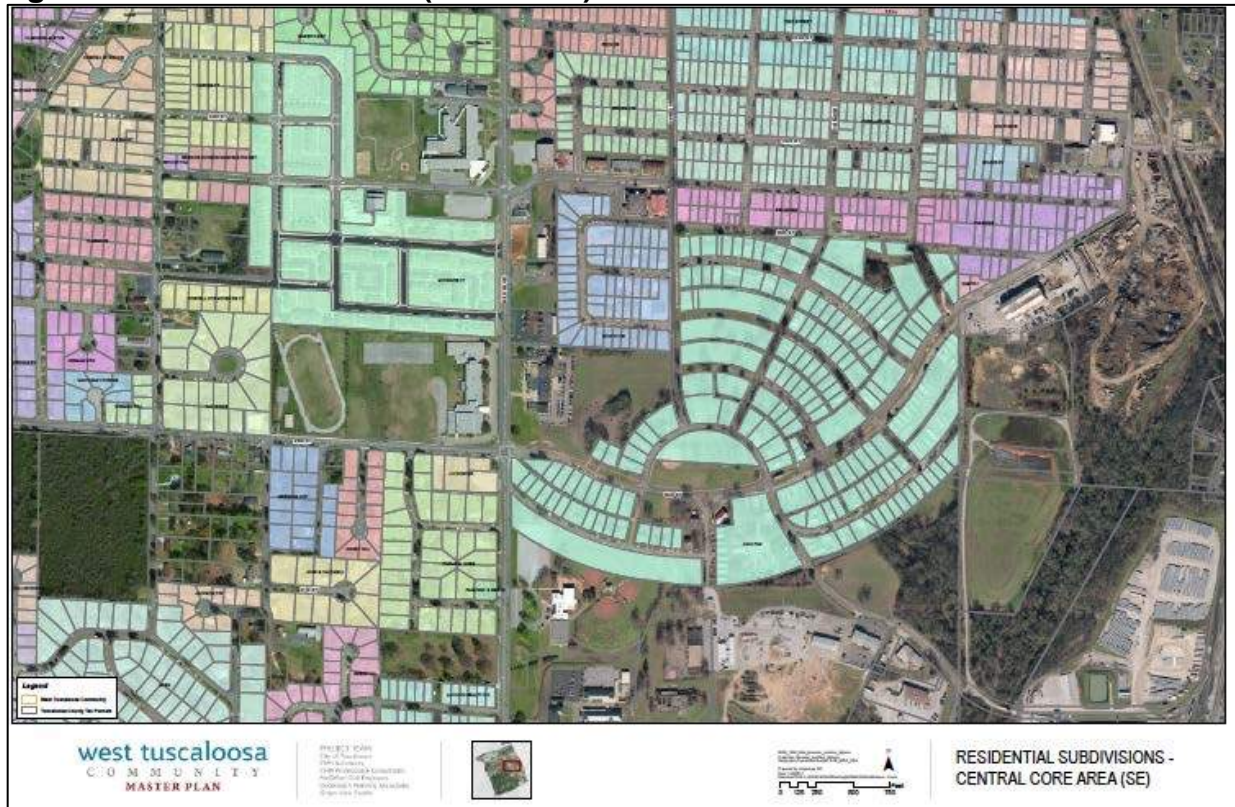
Figure 3. North Area Central



Figure 4. Central Core Area (north)



Figure 5. Central Core Area (southeast)



The site visit effort included traveling throughout the target areas in transects, which represent areas with the highest concentration of blight indicators. The Consultant Team photographed over four hundred (400) examples, documenting blight conditions for residential and non-residential properties throughout the Study Area. These photographs depict conditions that range from initial signs of degradation to completely abandoned buildings. Some of the abandoned buildings were physically secured from access by being boarded up; however, others remained accessible creating opportunities for squatters, illicit or illegal activity, or further structural degradation.

In addition to data collection and inventory, blight was a frequent topic raised during the interviews conducted by the Consultant Team. Interviewees responded favorably to the practice of demolishing abandoned properties and removing potential areas where

illegal, illicit, or undesirable activities could be conducted. Interviewees also stated a visual preference for vacant or green lots created by demolitions, which could hopefully provide locations for new homes, businesses, or community civic spaces.

The data collection and inventory processes resulted in the documentation of the following conditions of blight throughout the West Tuscaloosa Study Area:

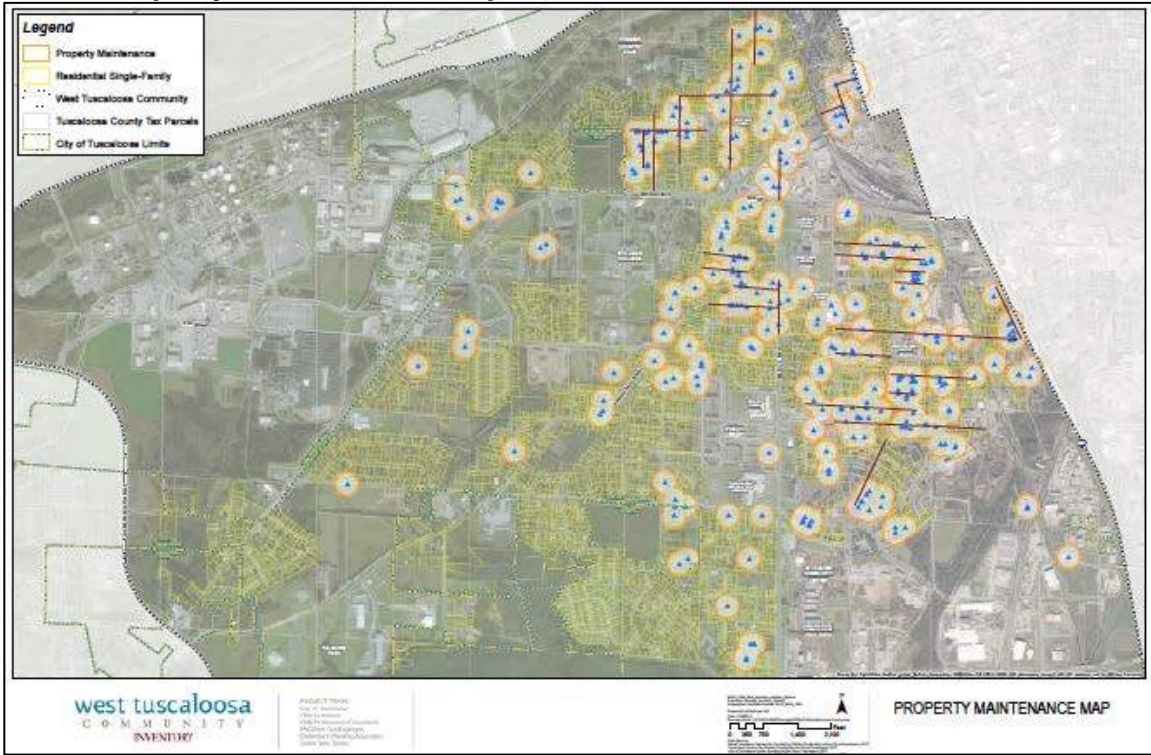
- ❖ *Poor building conditions/ Vacant or underutilized buildings/ Poorly maintained property*
- ❖ *Vacant Lands*
- ❖ *Sidewalks absent or in poor condition*
- ❖ *Crime*
- ❖ *Visual blight: overhead utilities, poor building facades, poor lighting and signage, abandoned or untagged vehicles, outside storage, signs of disorder*

Each condition of blight is discussed in detail below:

- ❖ *Poor building conditions/ Vacant or underutilized buildings/ Poorly maintained property*

Throughout the Tuscaloosa Study Area, there are conditions related to the lack of maintenance and abandonment of houses and buildings. At the time of our site visit, 21 properties in the West Tuscaloosa Study Area were scheduled for demolition. Three of those were demolitions necessitated by property fires. From 2015 to 2017, the City issued approximately 325 property maintenance cases in the West Tuscaloosa Study Area, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Property Maintenance Map, 2015 to 2017



The following photos show representative examples of the levels of property and building maintenance:

Figure 7. Abandoned Home with Fallen Gutter and Power Lines



The Consultant Team documented several homes, abandoned and occupied, which displayed significant levels of disrepair.

Figure 8. Abandoned Public Housing Complex



Abandoned apartment complexes and large buildings, such as this vacant public housing project on 17th Street, create a neighborhood eyesore and are an underutilization of large parcels that could be well-suited for redevelopment.

Figure 9. Abandoned Home



During our site visit, we documented several homes that appear to have structural and historical value. While boarded up, the property appears tidy and could be a good investment for those interested in restoring historic homes. There is evidence of this type of rehabilitation occurring throughout the Study Area.

Figure 10. Abandoned Businesses



The Study Area is scattered with abandoned or underutilized commercial buildings.

Figure 11. Property with Significant Amounts of Trash and Debris



Properties with abandoned or dilapidated buildings and accumulated trash and debris create a variety of public health and safety issues for the surrounding area.

Figure 12. Overgrown Yard

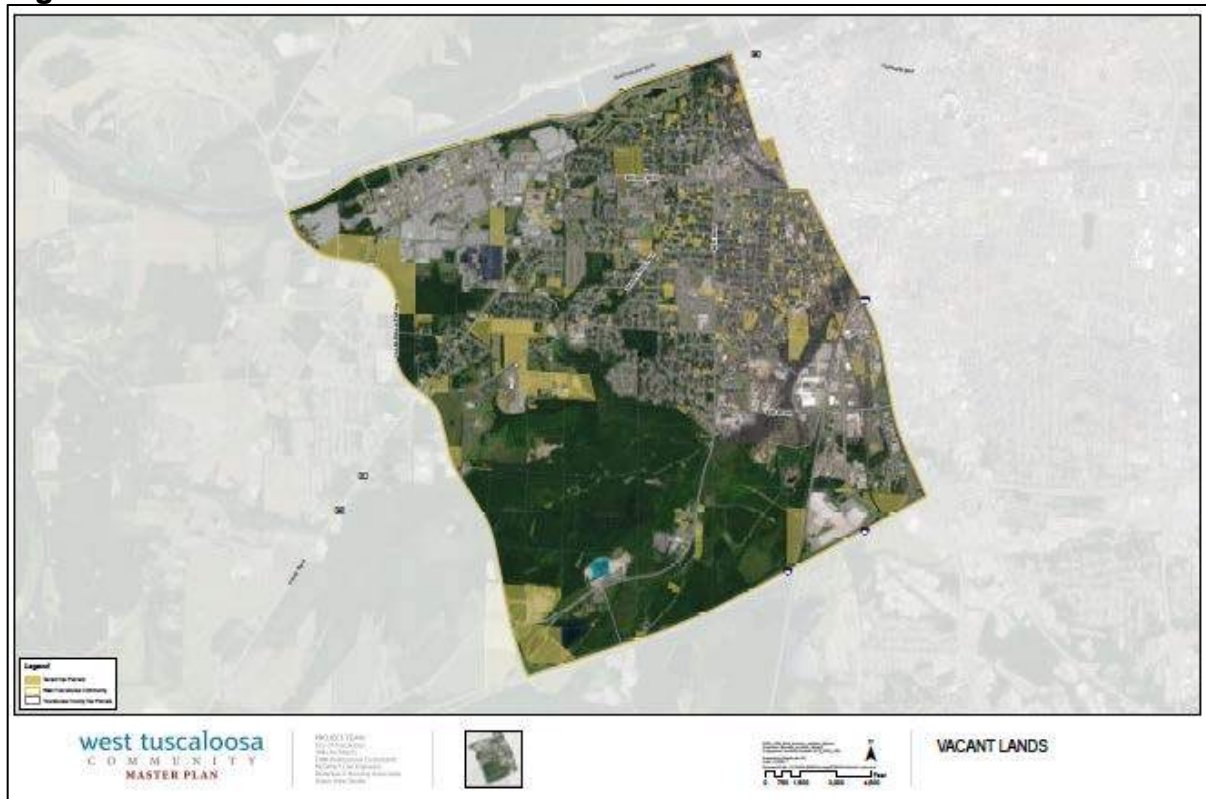


Properties that are not well-maintained, such as this overgrown yard, present significant public safety and public health issues for the surrounding area. Overgrown properties in combination with vacant or abandoned home sites can provide a haven for mosquitos, rodents, or other vermin and opportunities for squatters or places for illegal activities to occur.

❖ *Vacant Lands*

Vacant parcels are scattered throughout the West Tuscaloosa Study Area. Vacant parcels can represent opportunities for new homes, businesses, and community assets, such as parks. However, this is dependent on how well the properties are maintained. Lack of maintenance on vacant properties due to absentee landowners presents a variety of challenges for adjacent residents and the City. Figure 13 below depicts the vacant parcels within the target areas. There are many individual parcels, but in some areas vacant parcels are grouped together, which may provide more opportunity for redevelopment.

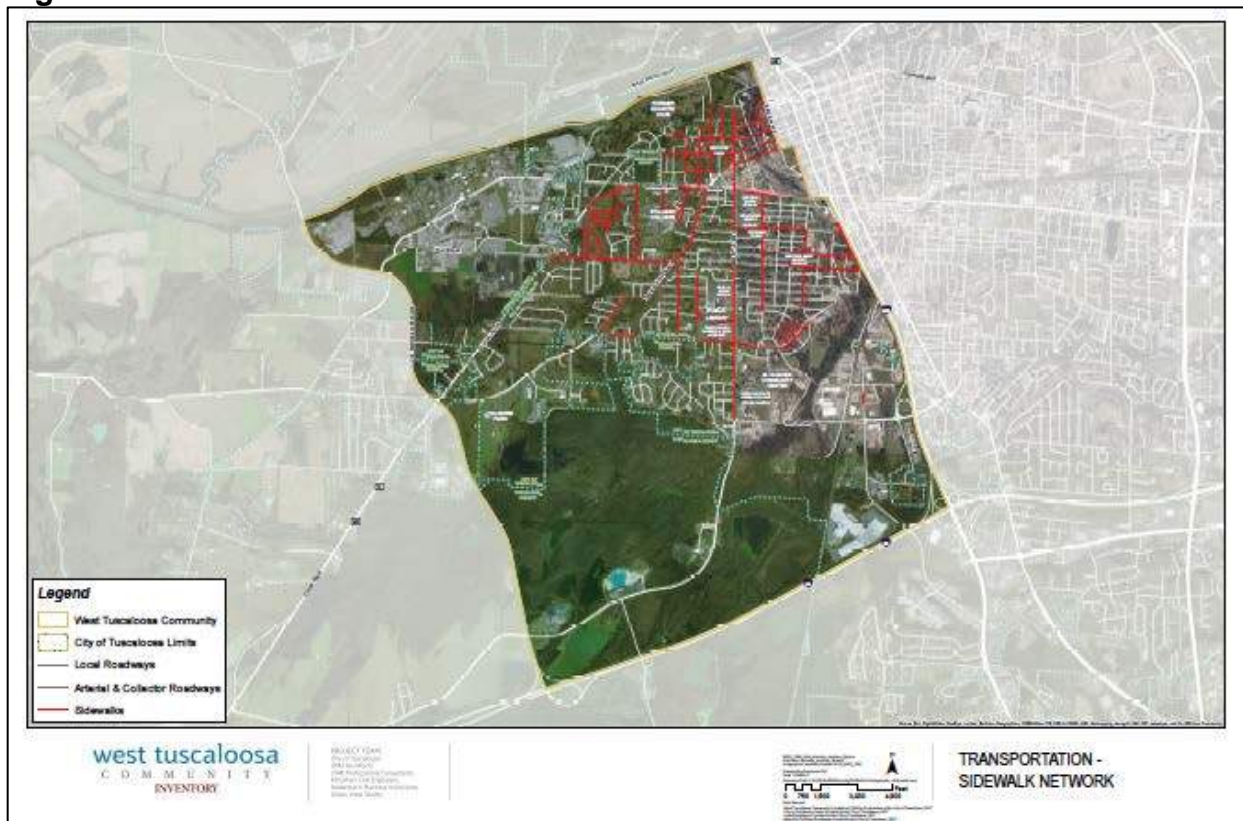
Figure 13. Vacant Lands



❖ *Sidewalks absent or in poor condition*

As depicted in the Figure 14 below, the West Tuscaloosa Study Area suffers from a fragmented sidewalk network. Many residents interviewed during the West Tuscaloosa project’s public engagement activities stated that they would like to be able to walk through their neighborhoods but feel unsafe doing so without sidewalks. In some instances, sidewalks may exist but are in poor condition.

Figure 14. Sidewalk Network



The importance of sidewalks is fundamental to neighborhood mobility, stability, and security. If the connections in West Tuscaloosa can be restored and enhanced, then quality of life will be improved. There is a multiplier effect when people return to their front porches, neighborhood sidewalks and streets, and public spaces. Sidewalks promote residents’ presence in the public areas of their neighborhoods and allow neighbors to become acquainted. Sidewalks, front porches, and windows create an

informal, natural opportunity for surveillance, or eyes on the street. The presence of neighbors and visitors reduces the likelihood of criminals or others committing illegal activities and increases the perception that public spaces are safe and secure.

❖ *Crime*

The causes of and contributors to crime are diverse and complex. However, there is a growing body of research that shows direct correlations between conditions of blight and increased incidents of crime. Conditions of blight contribute to *perceptions* that a neighborhood or district is unsafe. The presence of abandoned buildings, vandalism, graffiti, and loitering may be seen as *evidence of crime* whether any crime has actually occurred. Therefore, crime and disinvestment can become a self-fulfilling prophecy of a neglected, blighted, built environment.

Crime incident data for violent crime and property crime was collected from 2013 to 2017, as noted in the following figures. Both violent and property crime is widespread throughout the West Tuscaloosa community. Because crime incidents are evenly distributed, it is difficult to determine a spatial pattern of crime. However, when crime incident data is combined with property maintenance case data, we can see that there is a concentration of both crime incidents and property maintenance cases in the target area depicted in Figures 3, 4, and 5 above. The 2017 Map includes the location of streetlights in the West Tuscaloosa area. There is a lack of streetlights in the neighborhoods, which may contribute to crime and feelings of fear. Crime incident and property maintenance case data are depicted in the table and figures below by year.

Figure 15. Crime Incident and Property Maintenance Case Data by Year

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017 (partial)
Violent Crime	339	347	408	349	224
Property Crime	871	850	831	834	512
Property Maintenance Cases	38	3	54	157	72

Source: City of Tuscaloosa

Figure 16. Crime and Property Maintenance Analysis Map, 2013

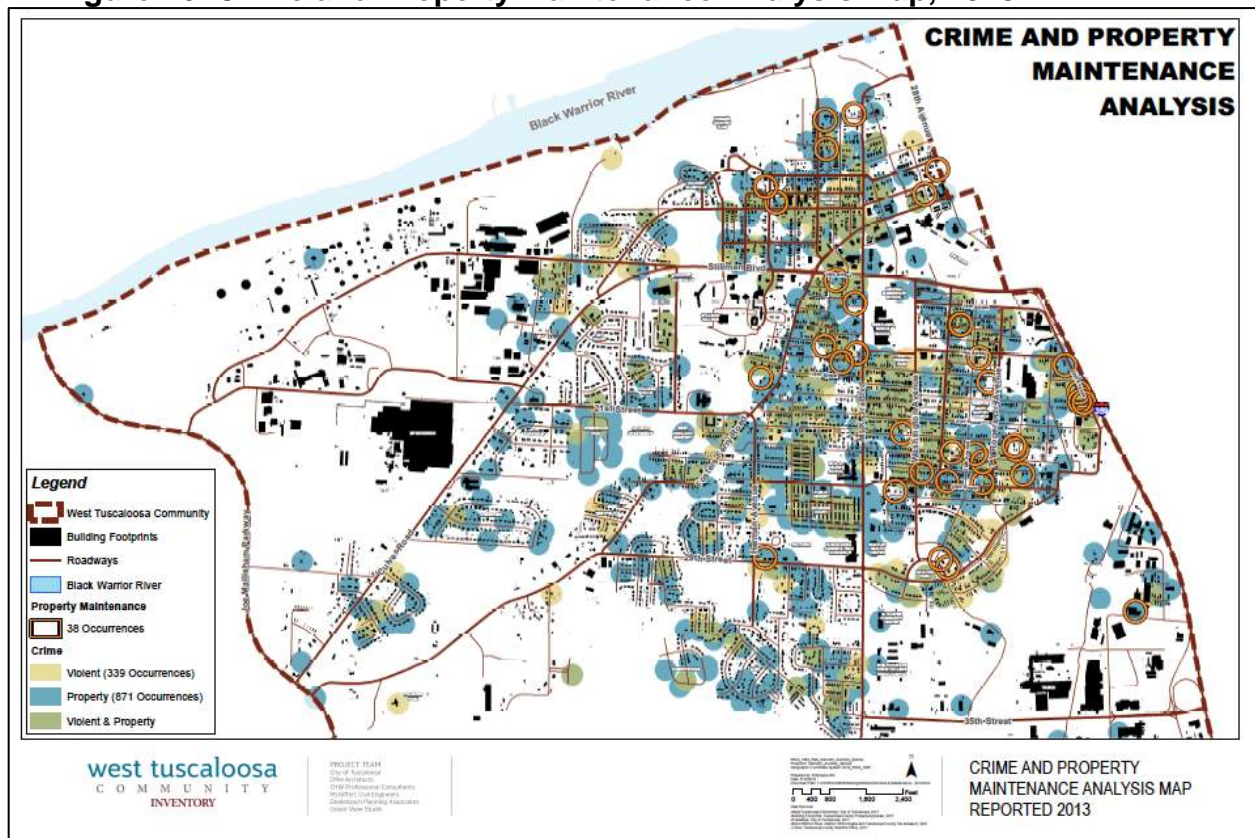


Figure 17. Crime and Property Maintenance Analysis Map, 2014

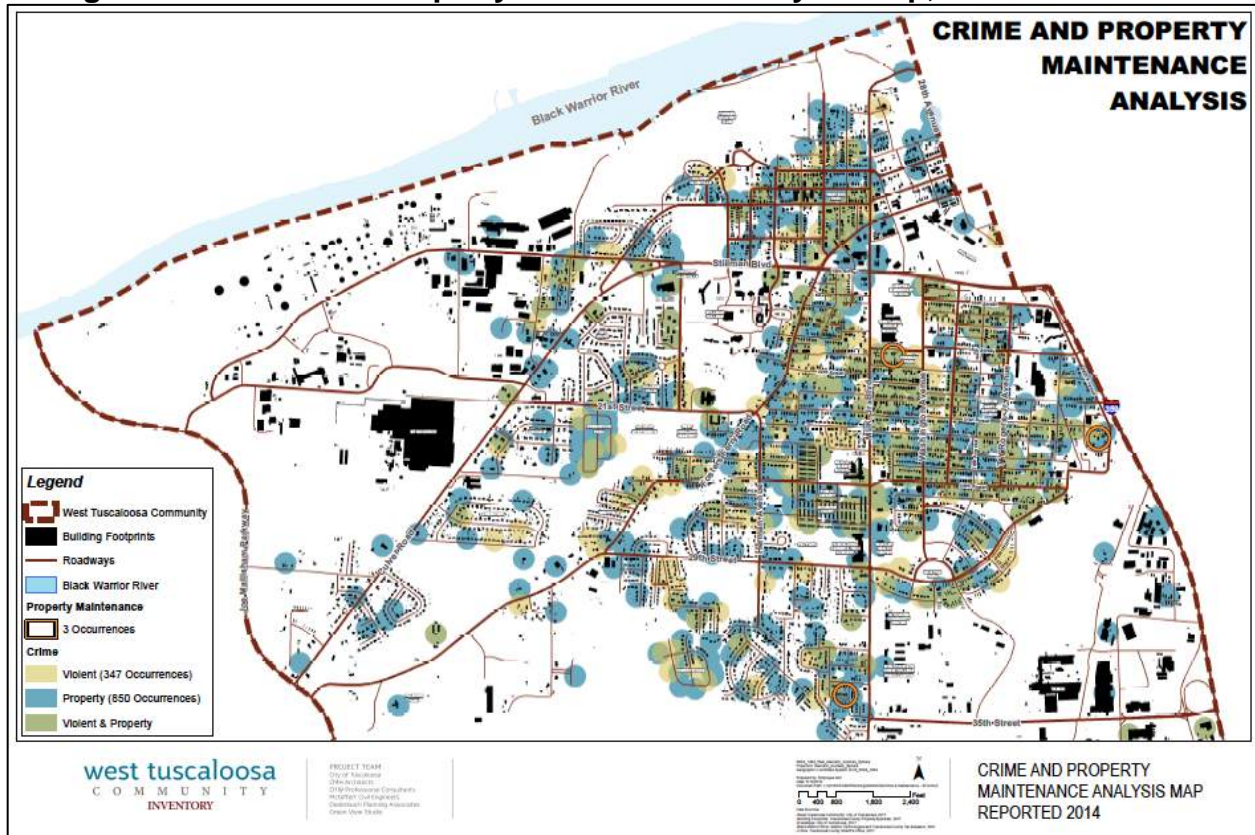


Figure 18. Crime and Property Maintenance Analysis Map, 2015

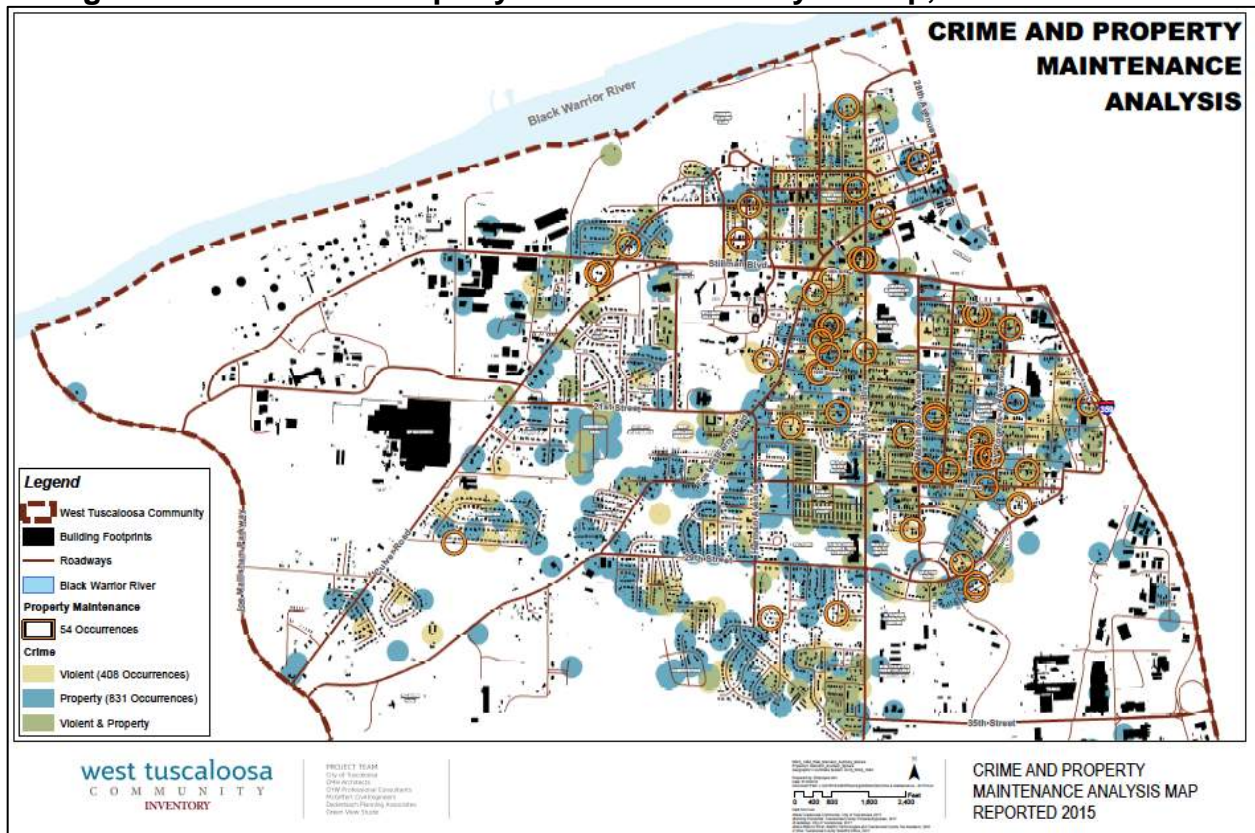
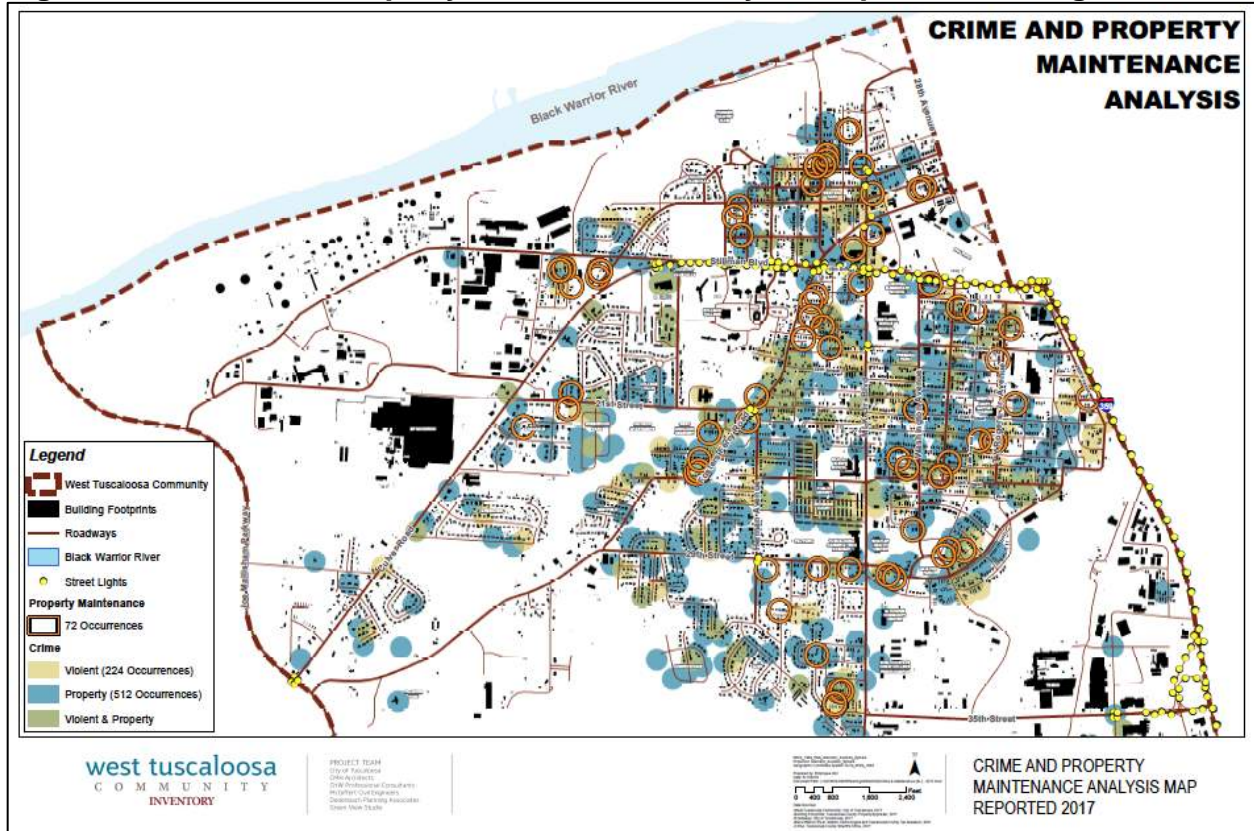


Figure 20. Crime and Property Maintenance Analysis Map with Streetlights, 2017



❖ *Visual blight: overhead utilities, poor building facades, poor lighting and signage, abandoned or untagged cars, outside storage, signs of disorder*

In addition to the discussions and photos provided above, there are properties, buildings, and conditions that contribute to visual blight. While these conditions of visual blight may not arise to the level of harming public health, safety, and welfare, they contribute to an overall appearance of disinvestment and of an economically depressed area.

Figure 21. Overhead Power Lines



Figure 22. Overhead Powerlines in Neighborhood



Throughout the West Tuscaloosa Study Area, the commercial and neighborhood views are dominated by a proliferation of powerlines and utility poles. There is also litter along the roadway.

Figure 23. Visual Blight in Commercial Area



This commercial property at a prominent intersection contains many conditions of visual and physical blight, including an abandoned building, proliferation of utility poles and powerlines, unkempt landscaping, litter, and illegal signs.

Conclusions: Determination of Blight

Based upon the inventory and analysis of blighted conditions in the West Tuscaloosa Study Area conducted by the Consultant Team, we can conclude that conditions of blight and blighted properties exist within the Study Area. We make this conclusion based on the following factors:

- The presence of buildings and structures which have become deteriorated, dilapidated, vacated, or abandoned through lack of or poor maintenance, inappropriate building materials, or obsolescence, and now constitute conditions which are adverse or contrary to the prosperity of the West Tuscaloosa Study Area;
- The presence of excessive vacant land on which structures were previously located which, by reason of neglect or lack of maintenance, has become overgrown with noxious weeds, is a place for accumulation of trash and debris, or a haven for mosquitos, rodents, or other vermin;
- The presence of a fragmented and deteriorated sidewalk network, which prevents the residents of West Tuscaloosa Study Area from safely walking in their neighborhoods;
- The prevalence of property and violent crime and the presence of disorder and conditions of blight, which increase fear and the perception that West Tuscaloosa is unsafe for residents and those outside West Tuscaloosa; and,
- Signs of visual blight, including the proliferation of utility poles and overhead powerlines, illegal and inadequate signage, lack of street lights, and the presence of litter, debris, and graffiti.

A Determination of Blight would allow the City to eliminate blighting conditions and prevent the continued occurrence of blight in the West Tuscaloosa Study Area. By declaring the Study Area as blighted in accordance with Alabama Code Section 24-2-2, the City would be enabled to:

- Acquire, clear and redevelop the blighted area in accordance with an Urban Renewal/Redevelopment Plan and thus eliminate the predominance of the blighting conditions which substantially impairs or arrests the sound growth of the community, and constitutes an economic liability in the area;
- Effectively address the blighted conditions in the Study Area that are adverse or dangerous to the public health, safety and general welfare and impair the efficient and economic exercise of the governmental functions;
- Eliminate the blight's impairment of the economic values and tax revenues, and expenditures for public health and safety, fire and accident protection and other public services and facilities;
- Clear, re-subdivide and prepare for urban renewal or redevelopment of the blighted area and prevent or reduce existing or future blight all of which are considered public uses and purposes for which public money may be spent and private property acquired as governmental functions of the City;
- Conserve or rehabilitate buildings and premises in such a manner that the conditions and evils of blight may be eliminated, remedied or prevented; and,
- Utilize the redevelopment activities to stimulate construction and development which is closely correlated with general economic activity and to aid the development of a better and more desirable community.