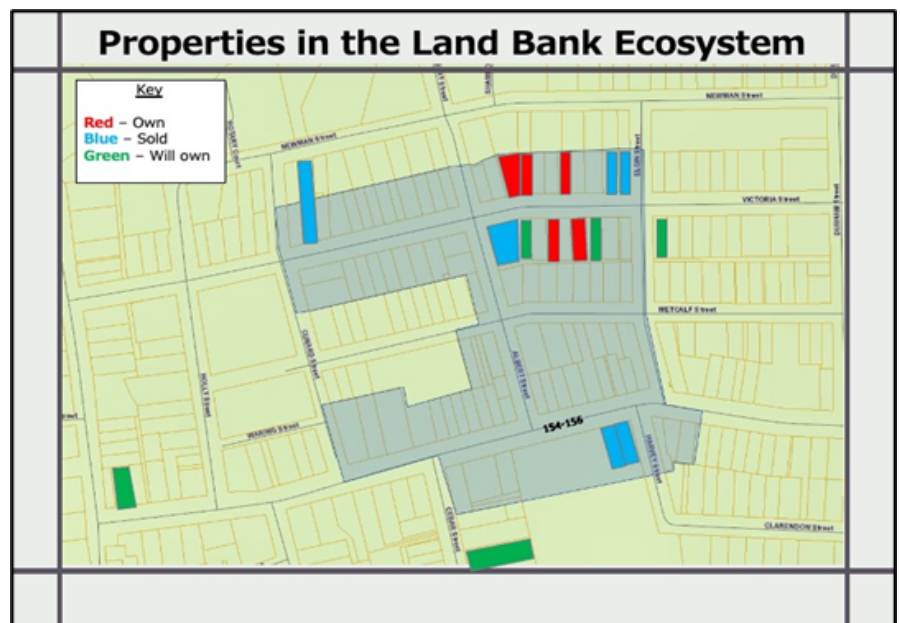


The Saint John Land Bank was incorporated as a not-for-profit entity in 2017. The concept of ‘land banking’ focuses on acquiring abandoned and vacant properties that are typically tax delinquent and contributing to the decline of their respective neighbourhoods. The properties are often transitioned into more desirable community uses like affordable housing, green spaces, gardens, or market housing. Land banks can acquire properties through purchase or donation, but most often they gain possession of neglected properties through direct acquisition, or “eminent domain”. In the United States, land banks have been given the power to expedite the acquisition of tax delinquent properties to remove blight and help stabilize neighbourhood decline.

The Saint John Land Bank was approved for the Social Innovation Fund (SIF) in 2018 and extended through March 2023. The objective was to “obtain title to vacant and derelict properties in Saint John, New Brunswick, with the objective of repurposing these properties as a diverse housing mix, green spaces, and development projects that contribute to the revitalization of the City of Saint John”.

Through SIF the Land Bank hired a dedicated project manager who developed internal policies, negotiated the acquisition of properties from the private sector, worked with the Province to acquire surplus properties in the city, and worked closely in several capacities with the City of Saint John. The Land Bank also negotiated the disposition of properties to the private sector and not-for-profit organisations that will all contain some degree of affordable housing when the projects are completed.

Throughout its SIF tenure, the Land Bank acquired 12 properties in the city,<sup>2</sup> and dispositioned five of them to support development projects. One now occupied 14-unit development was completed in 2021 (74 Victoria Street), while three other projects were in different pre-development phases. In addition, three separate Land Bank properties on Victoria Street were in the early stages of discussions with a private sector developer.



<sup>2</sup> The property at 182-190 Britain Street in the South End contains five separate PIDs; however, they were all owned by a single numbered company when purchased, so these PIDs are considered one property for the purposes of this report.

Envision Saint John and the Land Bank worked over the SIF funding period to secure capital funding from CMHC for the acquisition of property that will be renewed on an annual basis. CMHC agreed to redirect their portion of the revenue generated as partial landlords of Market Square to the Land Bank. The agreement required the funding to be used to support the establishment of affordable housing units in the city, which was in-keeping with the operational goals of the Land Bank. This funding was a great opportunity for the Land Bank to actively acquire lands, remove any existing blight, and prepare for redevelopment. The funding has allowed the Land Bank to acquire the property at 182-190 Britain Street and will play a central role in the future success of the Land Bank.

## **Policy Advocacy**

### **Property Dispositions**

The disposition of property is guided by policy developed in 2018 and updated in 2021. An important outcome of the Land Bank's work is to promote the inclusion of affordable housing when possible and appropriate. The Land Bank's Discount Policy, adopted in September 2022, provides direction for the Board to consider when a reduced price on the sale of land should be entertained. The sale of Land Bank properties has supported four separate development projects, all of which include a component of affordable housing. Each project is at different stages of development, from preliminary planning to completed and occupied. The properties marked blue in Figure 1 (above) illustrate the location of these projects, all of which are located in the Old North End.

### **Expedited Tax Sale Advocacy**

The time it takes an abandoned property to be declared 'surplus' remains very lengthy, often taking more than six years. A long-term goal for the Land Bank is to see a revised property tax sale system that expedites the processing of tax delinquent properties through to being declared "surplus" and offered directly to not-for-profits, such as the Land Bank. An expedited system would result in an increase in the number of affordable housing units in the community.

A salient feature of most land bank authorities around the world is the ability to take ownership over neglected and tax delinquent properties before they create more financial and/or physical harm to their surrounding community. Known as the power of "Eminent Domain" in the United States, this power is usually given to the land bank by the state, and it is the most powerful tool used by land banks to stabilize neighbourhood decline and repurpose abandoned spaces for productive community uses.

The power to expropriate abandoned property to repurpose it for community use is a controversial and likely unnecessary power for the Saint John Land Bank to acquire at this point. Strategic policy adjustments at the provincial level to favour the movement of abandoned properties through their system toward an affordable housing outcome would accomplish the same goals. Toward this end, the Saint John Land Bank has been advocating for change to the property tax sale system since its inception. A revised system could produce dozens of units each year that the Land Bank would have the opportunity to salvage and, with community partners, repurpose as affordable housing units.

Where the decline of a building has gone too far, the Land Bank would see the structure demolished and beautify the property through landscaping efforts. The lot would also be positioned for new development.

The Land Bank has had several discussions with politicians and senior bureaucrats at the Province and City regarding a pilot project that would see an expedited tax sale system. Although the concept has generated some interest at both levels of government, there has yet to be any real commitment put toward a pilot concept.

Maintaining a focus on this work is important for the Land Bank: Enhancing the system to increase the number of affordable housing units, while deterring irresponsible property ownership, would have positive impacts on the community and region for years to come. In August 2024 the Land Bank sold a large parcel of land on Britain Street for a development which will include affordable housing, and later that Fall incorporated the New Brunswick Community Land Trust Cooperative Ltd., which they anticipate will bring increased operational support to sustain the Land Bank.

