Hailing from among the city’s 661,000 housing units and 142,000 small businesses, Philadelphians crowd the 11th floor of the Municipal Services Building, waiting for their moment with the Department of Licenses and Inspections (L&I).

Many seek help with a problem: a need for a business license, a dispute with an inspection or, increasingly, a fine related to vacant property. L&I’s recent campaign targeting Philadelphia’s 40,000 vacant lots and 15,000 empty structures means 55,000 new problems are on the way.

This burden does not appear to weigh on a man walking into an L&I conference room. Dressed in a pinstripe suit, he greets his visitors and then begins explaining the benefits of the department’s vacant land strategy. Developing these 40,000 lots, he says, could save the city at least $20 million in maintenance costs annually.

With his jaunty stride, baby face and hair unspickled by gray, the man could easily pass for a junior staffer. But this is Carlton Williams, ’94, and for the past year and a half he has served as commissioner of L&I. His 300 inspectors, customer service representatives and plan examiners interact with every new business in Philadelphia. Each year, L&I inspects 90,000 properties and issues nearly 60,000 development permits.

Williams is a self-described quintessential optimist: “If you knew the city 10 years ago and have seen it today, you know how much potential Philadelphia has.”

From the conference room, all one can see of the city is the dense traffic circling City Hall. But Williams’ perspective extends farther, north and west to neighborhoods such as West Oak Lane, where he grew up playing football and baseball in city playgrounds. Midway between those playgrounds and his downtown office are two landmarks where Williams’ career in public service was borne: Fairmount Park and Temple University.

Turning left or right

In the early 1990s, the William Penn Foundation donated $20 million to a now-defunct program that some would dismiss as idealistic. The program offered Philadelphia’s at-risk youth the opportunity to work as rangers for Fairmount Park while studying at Temple for an associate’s degree in sport and recreation management. Hopefully, the logic went, this group of tough teenagers from bad neighborhoods would learn to treasure the city’s green space and become upstanding young leaders.

School of Tourism and Hospitality Management Assistant Dean Jeffrey Montague was the program’s academic coordinator, responsible for creating the curricula and teaching several classes. Having grown up in the city himself, Montague knew these kids “couldn’t care less about parks” — or becoming upstanding young leaders, for that matter. Montague’s goal: Get them to start caring.

The commissioner of Philadelphia’s Department of Licenses and Inspections has a big job. But “quintessential optimist” Carlton Williams greets the challenge—no, opportunity—with open arms.

BY CARL O’DONNELL PHOTOS BY RYAN S. BRANDENBERG