

Testimony of William S. Fontana, Executive Director
Pennsylvania Downtown Center
Before the Senate Urban Affairs Committee
Regarding the Downtown Location Law
Wednesday, October 16, 2013

Good morning Chairman Argall, Members of the Committee and Committee staff. My name is Bill Fontana and I currently serve as the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Downtown Center, a position I have held since May of 2000. On behalf of the PDC Board Chair Jane Conover, the rest of our board, our membership and staff, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today before the Committee. As I am sure you might guess, we at PDC believe that this law is beneficial to the economy of the Commonwealth's traditional business districts, the service needs of the residents of the Commonwealth, and the long-term sustainability of communities. My comments today will be relatively brief, and hopefully, to the point.

First, I would like to thank the Chairman for making the downtowns of the Commonwealth a priority when it comes to locational decisions made by the Department of General Services. I think that the legislation, as it has evolved over the years, has made the law more understandable as to what constitutes a true "downtown" as opposed to a commercial strip, Greenfield Business Park, or other similar non-central business district location.

I would also like to thank the Secretary of DGS, and the secretaries that have preceded her, for what I believe have been good faith efforts at implementing the law. I know that the law places added administrative requirements on the Department, and I appreciate the time it takes to meet those requirements.

I would like to specifically address my comments today to just one basic point. This has to do with the requirement that DGS consult local revitalization organizations before making a locational decision. PDC agrees with this requirement wholeheartedly. We believe that the Commonwealth should and must be a partner in the economic and physical revitalization of our core communities. Often times, a State office, the people that are employed there, and the clients/visitors that the office generates are important components of this revitalization effort. That is not to say that every community feels every state office MUST be located downtown. The opportunity to confer with the local revitalization program should provide DGS with much needed input to assist them with making these locational decisions. Unfortunately, at a recent meeting of Main Street and Elm Street managers, when asked if any of them had been consulted by DGS concerning the locational decisions related to a DGS supported office, not

one of the managers, including some who have had very long tenures in their communities, raised their hand. And while this is somewhat disturbing, neither is it terribly surprising. I can imagine how difficult it is for a DGS staffer with real estate responsibilities to find the right organization and the right person to confer with. In order to remedy that situation, we would like to propose that the DGS be allowed to amend their policy to allow them to contact our organization as a sort of one-stop-shop for meeting the consultation requirement. We could then get in touch with the local organization and obtain input on the position of the community relative to the proposed DGS location decision. I believe that this would streamline the process. I am reluctant to state that I think the law should name a specific organization, so allowing DGS to amend its policies and name PDC in those policies, seems to make more sense. In addition, by so doing, DGS will create an independent source of monitoring of the law. We should be able to report back to the General Assembly, as a sort of “friend of the court” on an annual basis as to the number of contacts made by the department to PDC, the number and character of community responses, and the number of community-related decisions made by DGS. I believe that this option may be of greater interest to the department as the issue can be dealt with from a policy perspective rather than legislatively. I should also point out that there was consensus agreement among the Main Street and Elm Street Managers at that same meeting as to the benefits this approach.

There are other elements of the law that we would like to see added. One would be a policy similar to the Federal government’s “Good Neighbor Policy” that allowed the GSA to participate financially in supporting improvement districts. While I am certain that current budget limitations would result in rather strenuous objection to this requirement, it seems to us that some consideration of a DGS payment of the assessment for services rendered or a “voluntary” contribution to a local improvement district makes good sense. It would reinforce the Commonwealth’s commitment to the local revitalization effort.

That concludes my comments and I will be happy to try to answer any questions you might have. Thank You.