

Hearing on Issues of Community Blight
Pennsylvania Senate Committee
on
Urban Affairs and Housing
Carroll Township Municipal Building
April 29, 2015

Chairman Wagner, Democratic chairman Fontana, Senator Bartolotta and other members in attendance. My name is Joe Kirk. I serve as Executive Director of the Mon Valley Progress Council. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on potential strategies to address issues of community blight in our region.

By way of background, I have served as Executive Director of the Progress Council since 1987. I have a degree in Urban and Regional Planning from the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs and have over 38 years of experience with councils of governments and a regional community and economic development organization. I also served as an assistant professor in the School of Urban Affairs at California University of Pennsylvania.

The Mid Mon Valley is a region of thirty-five communities in and near the Monongahela River valley that share a common identity and challenges including facing major issues of continued economic distress.

This year, the Mon Valley Progress Council is celebrating its 50th anniversary of service to the Mid Mon Valley. The Progress Council was formed in 1965 by business leaders who recognized that the closure of the US Steel plant in Donora represented both a major economic challenge and an opportunity. It was the first integrated steel mill to shut down in the United States and was also the first industrial-brownfield-redevelopment project in the nation.

For the past half century, the Progress Council has been engaged in a broad range of community and economic development initiatives on behalf of the Mid Mon Valley. It has been our experience that regional cooperative efforts provide the best opportunity to address the challenges we face. Among the current Progress Council regional initiatives are a state-certified multi-community enterprise zone program that includes ten municipalities and a regional association of local governments called the Mid Mon Valley Intergovernmental Cooperative.

The Cooperative, established two years ago has, among other actions, sponsored some twenty-four training session for municipal staff and elected officials and provided a forum for discussion of community issues. The Cooperative partnered with the Local Government Academy on a three-part training program on strategies to impact blight. Recently, we formed the "Flight Blight Roundtable" that brings together communities to discuss and develop cooperative efforts to address community blight.

Community blight is one of several core issues that both reflect conditions of economic distress and limit a community's potential to improve economically. Economic revitalization efforts, ranging from advancement of the Mon Valley/Fayette Expressway and Southern Beltway projects (strongly advocated by the Progress Council), to attracting new firms to the region, to supporting the growth of area firms will do little to improve our local communities unless we address issues of blight. Quite simply, issues of blight are increasing and must be addressed if our communities are to experience any real benefit from regional economic development efforts.

Discussions of the Flight Blight Roundtable confirm the need for a more comprehensive and cooperative strategy. Initial ideas of the Flight Blight Roundtable thus far include:

- Funding that would focus on supporting or augmenting expenses particularly in the areas of property acquisition and material-land-fill costs.
- Development of a regional community-development corporation that would partner with service organizations to support rehabilitation of selected properties for re-sale and the potential of volunteer services to support rehabilitation efforts.
- Augmenting local code enforcement with additional intergovernmental services that would provide expertise in code enforcement.
- Dedicated legal counsel that would focus exclusively on working with communities on expediting the legal process for acquiring blighted properties.
- Intergovernmental sharing of existing equipment and capacity including intermunicipal contracting.
- Assistance in expediting the sale of existing properties or lots to adjacent property owners.

The Flight Blight Roundtable will also serve as an ongoing forum for topics ranging from updates on legislation, model programs, best practices and sharing ideas on local actions.

We recognize that, more than ever, the Commonwealth faces challenges of limited resources. Intergovernmental cooperation provides the potential for efficient and effective use of state resources. There is simply not enough money available nor is it an effective strategy to just demolish any and all properties defined as blighted. Comprehensive and locally-based, fight blight programs that reflect the specific issues in communities are the only way to reduce both short-term and long-term conditions of blight. State legislation and programs that assist and support such efforts are essential.

Cooperative action on the issue of blight also has the potential to attract additional resources including corporate support as well as assistance from private foundations and local grant programs. The Commonwealth's Neighborhood Partnership Program's tax credit incentive would be a significant asset in attracting such resources. Local resources such as the Washington County's Local Share Account Program could also play a role in supporting a multi-municipal fight blight strategy.

We stand ready to work with this Senate Committee as well as the Department of Community and Economic Development on initiatives that both increase and improve local capacity to address issues of community blight.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this community. I welcome your questions.