

Testimony for the Senate Urban Affairs & Housing Committee
Representing Community Organizations re:
Land Banking & Other Approaches to Revitalization as Critical Tools in Fighting Blight

Julie Fitzpatrick, Pennsylvania Downtown Center
April 14, 2022

Good morning, Senators Pittman, Saval and Senate Urban Affairs & Housing Committee. Thank you for allowing me to share a little about my organization and the work that we do across Pennsylvania. My name is Julie Fitzpatrick, and I am the executive director for the Pennsylvania Downtown Center (PDC). We are the nonprofit partner with the Dept. of Community and Economic Development's (DCED) Keystone Communities Main Street and Elm Street programs, our downtown and neighborhood revitalization programs in PA.

Pennsylvania Downtown Center (PDC) is the only statewide nonprofit dedicated solely to the revitalization of the commonwealth's core communities. Our member organizations, and the communities with which we work, range in size and location from extremely large urban neighborhoods to rural towns with a population of less than one thousand. Primarily through utilization of the National Main Street Center's Main Street Approach[®], PDC provides outreach, technical assistance, and educational services to assist communities in revitalizing their central business districts and surrounding residential neighborhoods.

As a Main Street America Coordinating Program, the Pennsylvania Downtown Center, is part of a powerful, grassroots network consisting of 45 Coordinating Programs and over 1,600 neighborhoods and communities across the country committed to creating high-quality places and to building stronger communities through preservation-based economic development.

I am here to support land banking, housing incentives, and related supporting legislation as important tools in fighting blight in communities across the Commonwealth, through prevention and other solutions.

I would like to share a few key points from a recent housing survey of Main Street programs across the country that is soon to be released:

- There is a huge opportunity for housing in downtowns/Main Street districts. 74% of respondents say housing in downtown adds economic and social vitality to commercial corridors, but 75% report a lack of available housing stock to meet demand.
- Upper floor vacancy and underutilization is a huge, missed opportunity, particularly in PA. Two-thirds of Main Street programs report vacant upper floors, and over half report completely vacant buildings. We could begin to address the housing shortage and demand by providing incentives to operationalize upper floors, by bringing them to code by installing fire suppression improvements and shared elevators in common public spaces between adjoining buildings.
- While housing in Main Street districts is growing, it is uneven – not all communities are able to experience growth, and some are losing housing units. Within the boundaries of Main Street districts, Pennsylvania has some of the most diverse housing typology, and PA Main Street

districts also have some of the oldest housing stock, making it third oldest among fellow coordinating programs in the nation. We can provide incentives to assist seniors to adapt their residence, so that they can age in place and remain safety in the place they called home for the last 60 years.

Many of us are aware of the issues, and we are here to discuss solutions. Pennsylvania is also in need of solid property maintenance codes, which include proper training and education for enforcement officers, and financial incentives for property maintenance for individuals who truly cannot afford the accumulated upkeep and maintenance that has occurred through the years. We need to make it more punitive for predatory land and property owners who buy up inexpensive properties or hold on to existing properties and then allow those properties to fall into disrepair as tax shelters and perpetuate the blight and increase the apathy in our towns. We are also in need of a more skilled workforce who have the technical training to adequately repair and restore our older, but well-built building stock.

In my 17 years of this profession, I have worked in communities all throughout PA, such as Punxsutawney, Reynoldsville, Johnstown, West Chester, Hazleton, Plymouth, and Shenandoah, as well as in neighborhoods in Allentown, Scranton, Erie, and Lancaster. I have experienced first-hand the decades of decline, lack of maintenance, and the apathy that follows; but I have also seen the positive effects of strong public-private partnerships, and the power of building pride in one's community.

Having the appropriate tools, funding incentives, and strategies to implement are key to substantive and transformative improvements in our PA communities. It is imperative that we do our part to help to create communities where residents are proud and choose to live, to raise their families, and to retire; to support downtowns of entrepreneurial ecosystems, where businesses are given the tools to start a business that has the power to transform their lives and the lives of future generations. We are looking to support communities that offer a high quality of life for their residents, that are safe places for children and for seniors, gathering places to celebrate, and welcoming places for all.

We also need to support the community develop nonprofit organizations, our Main Street and Elm Street programs, that have worked tirelessly to make sure our downtowns and neighborhoods thrived. Even during the last two years of the pandemic where we have seen the impact in Main Street districts across PA where there were 421 net full-time jobs, 404 net part-time jobs, 238 net new businesses, with over 57,000 volunteer service hours to help keep our Main Streets the heart of the community.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify, and for allowing me to share a little about my organization and the work that we do across Pennsylvania.