

Good morning, and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Rebecca Brown and I'm the Director of the Codes and Inspections Department for the City of Altoona. As an employee of the department for 22 years, and in my current capacity as Director for the last 3 years, I've certainly seen many changes in our community relative to blight and the negative effects it creates in our neighborhoods. One constant remains, however, and that is that blight in some form will always be present, and blight does not discriminate; it can and will creep in and take hold of even the so-called "nicest" areas of a community very quickly. The domino effect is staggering; one blighted, dilapidated home on a City block is a disease and will undoubtedly infect another, and another, until that one blighted home turns into 5 or 6 blighted homes on the block. Our department's goal is to routinely monitor our City's neighborhoods and enforce the property maintenance code to prevent blight from spreading and also assist in the elimination of the existing blight. We don't just work in Altoona, but we live here, our families live here, and we know the damaging effects blight creates within our community.

The City of Altoona utilizes the 2015 IPMC for enforcement purposes. Four Code Enforcement Officers, each being assigned a specific geographical area of the City, conduct inspections on both a proactive and reactive basis. Since January 1 of this year to present, we have addressed over 3000 violations in accordance with this Code. Violations with the most activity include garbage, overgrowth, and repairs. The City issues notices and allows for ample time to correct violations; if compliance is not achieved, we are able fine a property owner up to 3 times prior to filing a summary citation at the Magisterial District Justice. To date, we have a slightly over 360 active summary citations filed. The County has implemented a Code Court to be held one day a month, hearing exclusively cases for code enforcement, which is a great asset to our code enforcement process.

Last year, we implemented Code Enforcement Sweeps. These proactive sweeps are held several times monthly, concentrating first on areas in which we receive the most complaints and extending eventually through all City neighborhoods. Code Officers walk neighborhoods in pairs, addressing violations such as high grass, garbage, and repairs to properties. Door hangers are issued for notification purposes, allowing residents the opportunity to correct a violation prior to receiving a formal Notice of Violation. It also allows residents the opportunity to

speak with our Code Enforcement Officers and address any other neighborhood concerns relative to code enforcement.

Another tool utilized in our blight remediation efforts is the Rental Inspection Program, which requires inspections of rental properties every three years on approximately 3500 registered rentals. This program, which was established in 2002, requires a local contact be assigned and provided to our Department should the property owner live outside of Blair County. Approximately 30 percent of our rental property owners reside outside of the City of Altoona, over 1000 rental properties. Through the rental program, we have the ability to revoke a rental license for continued property maintenance violations outside the 3-year inspection cycle of the rental program. This is a very effective tool and encourages landlords to act promptly when receiving notification of a violation. This applies to any landlord who does not comply with a notice of violation after the second notification. When a rental license is revoked, the property may continue to be rented to the existing tenants, but if the property is vacated, no new tenants may enter the property. Additionally, summary citations are filed against rental property owners with a revoked license. Rental revocation is only reversed if the property maintenance issues are corrected.

We also have registration requirements adopted for both vacant and foreclosed properties. Vacant properties continue to plague our City and achieving compliance can be extremely difficult, specifically with out of town and/or deceased property owners. The City must provide remediation resources for overgrowth, snow removal, dangerous exterior conditions, and other public nuisances resulting from the abandonment of these properties. Unfortunately, our funding to maintain these vacant and abandoned properties is extremely limited, and the City's role in maintenance can continue for several years. We are certainly hopeful that the implementation of the Land Bank will assist with this process by restoring the value of these properties and placing them back on the tax rolls.

This year, our department began attending the County judicial sales. While we are legally unable to halt the sale of properties to bad actors with repeated history of violations, I feel our presence at these sales reminds prospective buyers that they are on our radar, and that they will be held accountable for any

property purchased in need of attention. We of course can offer them information on any property they wish to purchase, as some of the prospective buyers will purchase a property sight unseen. Our only legal option to halt a sale is to provide the County with a listing of landlords with revoked rental licenses; state law prevents the sale of a property to a person with a rental revocation.

People believing blight stems from only laziness may not realize that our low-income residents are affected as well, and quite possibly through no fault of their own. All too often, we are approached by residents and the elderly who desperately want and need assistance to maintain or repair their homes, but don't qualify for loans or grants. The City does have low-interest loans available, however some residents don't qualify. In these situations, we make every effort to work with the property owner. We provide them with a housing services informational sheet that lists different agencies that may offer assistance.

Fighting blight is an enormous task that is never-ending. Our department is using the tools legally available to combat blight in our City and provide revitalization in our neighborhoods.