

**TESTIMONY BEFORE**

**THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE SENATE URBAN AFFAIRS AND  
HOUSING COMMITTEE**

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2019 - ALTOONA, PA**

**PRESENTED BY:**

**STEPHEN J. MCKNIGHT  
PRESIDENT AND CEO  
THE ALTOONA BLAIR COUNTY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

**“CHALLENGE OF BLIGHT”**

On behalf of the Altoona Blair County Development Corporation Board of Directors, I want to extend our appreciation to Senator Ward and all of the members of Senate Urban Affairs and Housing Committee for the opportunity to present this important testimony relating to blight in our community.

This is a critically important and highly competitive time for our community and economic development efforts. Never-before have people and the investment they potentially represent, been so mobile. That mobility is made possible by an unprecedented and ever-growing power of technology. It is creating new methods of production and instant communication. Customers can be effectively served, and products produced and sold from essentially anywhere in the world.

As a result, people are increasingly able to choose places to live and work that fit their lifestyle, corporate culture and goals. While some will seek out big cities, many others will search for smaller towns – mountain main street communities like here in the First Frontier Blair County – places that offer a solid balance between work, life, family and friends.

Regardless of the type of place people will call home, rest assured they will not compromise on the quality of that place. All communities must and are putting their best foot forward. Likewise, we must continually invest in critical infrastructure like roads, bridges, water and broadband. But that is not enough. We must also ensure that we offer the best visual appeal, quality and functionality in assets such as our parks, trails, schools, civic and cultural gathering spaces, sidewalks, housing and pedestrian connectivity.

What people see as they drive through our towns or walk our neighborhoods, says something about who we are. A judgement is made about how we value and see our future to be? Are we an optimistic bunch? Or does it appear we are giving up. Simply put, blight, whether it exists within the public or private realm, will hurt our chances of attracting people to our community and the investment that they bring.

While there have been efforts over the years to ensure our public spaces are inviting and well maintained, I would like to take the time here to call attention to our private housing stock, especially within our urban neighborhoods.

Why is housing so important? It's simple. People need a place to live. They demand high quality, diverse, modern housing options at various price points. Most of our housing stock was built prior to 1940. Much of that is now in the hands of landlords who live elsewhere increasing the chances of neglect and disrepair.

At last count, more than 7,000 people in our labor force are aging towards retirement. Workforce research suggest that roughly 80 percent of those positions will need to be refilled. This creates a significant labor force demand without even considering any net new job growth. And yet overall net new job growth is also happening here, at just over 2 percent last year.

This is good news, but between the existing job churn and new growth, the need to attract talented, skilled people to our community is our number one economic development priority. If we do not increase our immigration count while retaining our existing workforce, we will not grow. Business operations could be threatened and disinvestment a looming possibility.

Study after study shows that the next generation workforce desires high quality, walkable neighborhoods, that offer a safe and vibrant living experience, with diverse housing choices and price points. Communities that deliver that win. Those with an older housing stock, broken sidewalks, dimly lit streets and generally neglected properties will not be competitive. They will struggle to attract people, businesses and overall economic growth. ABCD Corporation has identified several steps as critical in the blight prevention process.

- 1) Continue to aggressively enforce current codes, laws and regulations designed to ensure the safety and quality of our streets, structures and neighborhoods
- 2) Administer and fully-fund the recently established City Land Bank and begin acquiring properties for redevelopment at greater scale and density
- 3) Work with the state and local stakeholders to identify or create new gap financing programs that provide patient capital for higher-risk urban-centered mix-use housing redevelopment and adaptive reuse projects
- 4) Keep directing public investment towards streetscapes, lighting, public spaces and modern education infrastructure
- 5) Continue to incentivize private investment through temporary tax abatements such as the LERTA program
- 6) And finally, in submarket conditions like ours, we must find ways to appeal to our private sector community's philanthropic interest, encouraging them to invest in projects that will first and foremost transform a neighborhood, seeding our local market for future returns.

If we live in the past, relish what once was while neglecting what is, there will never be a what's next. We must strive to be the best we can be to attract the talent we need - there really is no other choice. ABCD Corporation has been and will continue to partner with the City, State, the Redevelopment Authority, area non-profits and our private sector partners to eliminate blight for the next generation to come. We look forward to working with the Senator Ward and the entire Committee to achieve that goal. Thank you once again for this opportunity.