



Testimony for the Senate Urban Affairs & Housing Committee
Land Banking as a Critical Tool in Fighting Blight
Andrew Toy for PACDC
April 9, 2022

Good morning Senators Pittman, Saval and Senate Urban Affairs & Housing Committee. My name is Andy Toy and I am the Policy Director for the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations (PACDC). Thank you for coming to Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection, and allowing us to testify on this important issue in community and economic development.

I am here to support land banking and related supporting legislation as important tools in fighting blight in communities across the Commonwealth. As context, I have worked in community and economic development over three plus decades and have seen how a single blighted property can create a negative domino effect and how an improved and productive property can send positive signals that spur additional investment and development. As a former Board Member of the Pennsylvania Downtown Center, I have been fortunate to experience first-hand both larger and smaller cities and towns in Pennsylvania, including Pittsburgh, Allentown, Scranton, Lancaster, Erie, York, West Chester, Johnstown, Gettysburg, and Indiana, the hometown as you know of Jimmy Stewart. I have also met many of the Main Street Managers and leadership from those places and other leaders from across the Commonwealth always looking to improve their towns.

What I've witnessed is that ensuring properties are in good hands and are contributing to the health and well-being of a community is key. In Philadelphia, for example, in the not too distant past, when I was at the Commerce Department, it took us years to get a property out of the hands of an uncaring or dead person that was both causing damage to a neighboring property and/or inhibiting the growth of a vital business. On the other hand, in certain corridors we've seen that when Main Street organizations and other non-profits and municipalities are able to acquire key commercial properties, this can significantly change the direction of those areas. Likewise with Elm Street and housing programs for residential properties. In addition, other uses such as the great community gardens that Neighborhood Gardens Trust manages and develops are important community building projects that also provide a source of nutritious food for the community. I've also seen great examples of this in Erie.

Our understanding is that there are a number of related Bills which, together, help create a much more powerful and efficient Land Banking tool available to municipalities across the Commonwealth as they work to quickly move blighted properties back into productive use. The proposed improvements to the existing law include exempting land banks from realty transfer tax, creating special code enforcement programs for blight prevention and removal, allowing land banks to enter into conservatorship agreements, protection of land banks from environmental liability, allowing permit denials for LLCs with tax delinquent properties, and creating a registry of vacant and blighted properties.

By incorporating a Land Bank into our work we can acquire and target the transfer of properties, often through a Request For Proposal, so that we can ensure the proposed use makes sense in the overall plan for the community and doesn't become another blighting influence. In Philadelphia, for example, we have had to deal with speculators sitting on vacant properties or others trying to open up nuisance businesses that actually have a negative impact on neighborhoods. We've also seen great projects developed through RFPs with commercial and residential components that strengthen communities.

It's important to utilize all of the tools in our toolbelt as we work to make our communities stronger, more resilient and better places to live, work and raise families. Please consider acquisition of blighted buildings and land through a Land Bank as one of those important tools.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.