



**Westmoreland County Redevelopment Authority**  
**Westmoreland County Land Bank**

40 N Pennsylvania Ave, Suite 520  
Greensburg, PA 15601

April 14, 2022

Pennsylvania State Senate  
Urban Affairs and Housing Committee

Public Hearing on Housing Issues

Dear Senator Pittman and Members of the Urban Affairs and Housing Committee:

My name is Brian Lawrence. I currently serve as the Executive Director of the Redevelopment Authority (Authority) of the County of Westmoreland and the Westmoreland County Land Bank (Land Bank). I come before the Committee today to offer my perspectives on the challenges facing communities in Westmoreland County as it relates to housing, blight, vacancy, abandonment, and tax delinquency.

First, I'd like to thank the Committee and the whole General Assembly for your continued support of legislation aimed at improving the places we care about. The Redevelopment Authority and Land Bank, despite being separate agencies, have a unified mission to help build healthy and whole communities, and to reposition our towns by eliminating blight and its influences throughout Westmoreland County. The tools, ordinances, and funding which have been passed or approved over the past decade or more, are vital to advancing that mission.

I'd also like to introduce myself, so you can understand my perspective as an urban and regional planner. I'm a Westmoreland County native, from Hempfield Area High School, I attended Westmoreland County Community College and then moved on to Indiana University of Pennsylvania to earn a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in geography with a focus on urban and regional planning. In 2010, I was hired with the Westmoreland County Department of Planning and Development and spent 10 years working on many of the topics that are crucial to the revitalization of communities.

In that time, I earned and continue to maintain professional certification in the American Institute of Certified Planners. In August of 2020, I was hired to serve as the Executive Director of the Authority and Land Bank.

This year, the Redevelopment Authority will celebrate its 60th anniversary. When the Authority was founded, it was on the heels of major structural changes in the national economy and the spatial configuration of our communities. The dual impacts of deindustrialization and suburbanization continue to echo throughout Westmoreland County. In that time, the Authority has been involved with hundreds of small and large projects. From owner-occupied housing rehabilitation to large scale redevelopment projects like Derry Business Park, we've used our unique powers and authority to advance projects from conception to completion. In 2013, Westmoreland County became one of the first counties to create a countywide land bank and the Authority was selected to serve as the administrative and operational agent for the Land Bank.

Together, the Authority and Land Bank deploy their resources and powers in tandem to build healthy communities and reposition our towns. To do that, we have six major programs, including blight demolition, residential and commercial rehabilitation, land banking, brownfield cleanup, education and training, accessible and affordable housing, and historic preservation. All of these programs rely on partnerships among local municipalities, the state government, federal agencies, and public service providers. We continue to cultivate those relationships, while also seeking private developers and foundations to support our work.

Today, Westmoreland County is facing new challenges, but directly related to the issues which lead to our founding. Mainly, the reverberations of deindustrialization continue to influence population statistics. Specifically, an aging and declining population. On the horizon we're facing significant changes in the makeup of our population. To illustrate this, we regularly hear reports about housing units that are being left empty as the owners pass on and heirs have little interest in repairing or remodeling homes for resale. Many times, conditions of these homes pull down their values to the point that the rehabilitation is no longer justifiable, or not without significant subsidy. I anticipate that this will be a more pressing issue in the decades to come. Between 2010 and 2020, the American Community Survey estimates suggest that the number of housing units occupied by one person who is over 65 has increased by 14.7%.

	2010	2020	% Change
Total Households	152,640	153,772	0.7%
Householder Over 65 Living Alone	19,849	22,762	14.7%

*American Community Survey, 5-year estimates, 2010 and 2020*

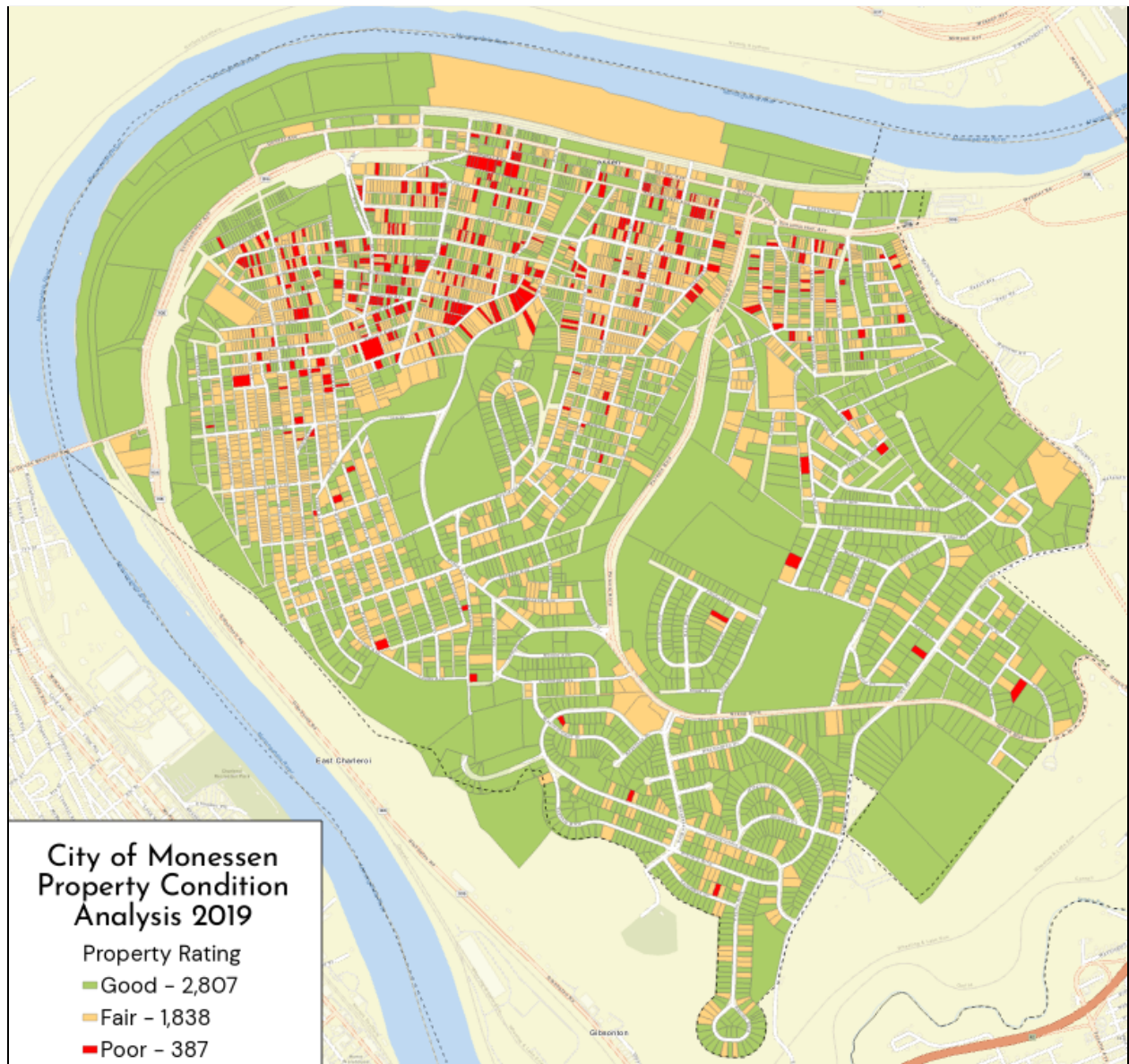
It's likely that this change will accelerate as the median age continues rising. These figures beg the question whether we should expect to see more housing units being vacated due to deaths and whether those units, both in condition and volume will match future demand.

At a minimum, it suggests greater need for services to help keep residents in their homes, as long as mobility allows for it. Our accessible housing program, funded partially through the Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement Realty Transfer Tax Fund, has assisted 121 individuals with permanent disabilities with ramps and stair lifts over five years. More than half of those assisted are living alone. It suggests a real need to ensure those living alone have the implements to stay in their homes and the neighborhoods they know. To support this work further, we'd suggest increasing the existing cap on PHARE RTT funding from \$40M annually to \$80M. Such an increase in funding would improve our ability to assist more households. At the end of the day, an occupied housing unit stands a much better chance of remaining blight free than a vacant one.

While we should be addressing the precursors to blight, like helping residents stay in their homes, we need to ensure we're doing what we can to clear out the units that keep otherwise stable properties from meeting market potential. To help understand the scale of that problem in Monessen, the County Planning Department conducted a citywide property conditions assessment for the City in 2019. Monessen is a community that's been wracked by severe levels of blight. Since 1960, Monessen's population has declined from 18,424 to 6,876. This represents a 62% change in 60 years. Such a dramatic change has manifested itself as high rates of blight.

The property conditions assessment found that nearly 8% of properties met the qualification of poor condition. It's highly likely that all of these 387 properties deserve

demolition. Another 36% met the criteria for being in fair condition. Those in fair condition, when surrounded by properties in poor condition, are much more vulnerable to blight than those surrounded by good properties.



*City of Monessen, Property Condition Analysis 2019*

Our fear now is that given market conditions, the 1,838 properties in fair condition stand a much greater chance of declining further without strategic and targeted interventions to stabilize those markets. An additional spatial analysis conducted by the County Planning Department draws strong connections between fire and police response, tax delinquency, and the presence of blighted properties. That is, greater rates of blight



concur with increased response needs and tax delinquency. Suffice it to say, demolition is an appropriate tool to deploy along transitional areas to stave off future decline, as much as possible.



*Typical conditions of four of 387 poor rated properties in Monessen*

While I don't want to come before you to merely ask for funding support, I do want to highlight the strategic objectives we aim to achieve. Chief among them are more technical assistance and support for local municipalities since all good blight reduction programs begin with a data-driven, progressive discipline approach to code enforcement.

Far too many of the communities in Westmoreland County that suffer from high rates of blight, do not have the proper ordinances, processes, or staff capacity to deal with this problem in a systematic way. We hope to augment that by providing a regional code enforcement program. Such an approach offers two significant benefits.

First, for the communities who struggle with hiring and keeping code enforcement officers on staff. Our approach would build efficiencies of scale by working with three to five municipalities in each of the seven planning regions of the County. Essentially, the Authority would hire, train, and equip professional code enforcement officers to provide the services under a pro rata basis. Our belief is that what one municipality can't do alone, a handful can do together. We want to be the organization that enables this multi-municipal service.

Second, such an approach offers the Authority and Land Bank the on-the-ground intelligence to support smart and strategic interventions. Currently, aside from the three communities in the County that have completed inventories, I can't tell you which specific neighborhoods in a given municipality are struggling with blight. Therefore, I can't suggest which tools, ordinances, or processes that need to be deployed. I can't answer the questions that are burning resources at the local scale. And, as the Countywide agency with the province of blight reduction, it makes sense to have us engaged as early as possible in prevention, remediation, and elimination efforts. To help this along, House Bill 1827 which would create a grant program for municipal code enforcement could be amended to include county redevelopment authorities and land banks as eligible entities.

In the absence of such a regional code enforcement program, we're looking to create connections to best practices through education and training events. On April 22nd, we're holding our first Blight Summit: Blight Boot Camp 2022. The day-long event will feature local, regional, and national speakers on the topic of community development generally, but with a focus on abandonment, vacancy, and blight. Attendees will leave the summit with inspiration and practical steps that their communities can take to start their efforts. We'll be following up with semi-annual meetings among code enforcement officers, local solicitors, developers, and municipal managers engaged in this vital work. Helping to bridge the gap between small communities and their access to digital tools, we hope to roll out a mobile and web-based code enforcement application in the coming months. We're learning that many code enforcement officers are still tied down by paper records. When compiling a persuasive case before local magistrates and

building a case for any number of actions, it pays to be organized. The app will enable code enforcement officers to issue, track, manage, and report on code violations and enforcement actions in a systematic way.

Similarly, we're aiming to create better access between responsible local developers, contractors, and investors who want to rehabilitate Land Bank properties. A pre-qualified developer program would also feature a mobile and web-based application that allows qualified developers to work closely with the Land Bank in distressed neighborhoods. There is a real hunger among developers in Westmoreland County to improve the building stock in the places they live and work. The app will help us provide equitable access to the development opportunities which the Land Bank can unlock.

In all these ways and more, the Redevelopment Authority and Land Bank are taking a leadership position on the topic of neighborhood and downtown revitalization. Again, thank you for your continued support of the efforts to build healthy and whole communities. I look forward to being a partner with the Committee, Senate, and General Assembly.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Brian Lawrence".

Brian Lawrence, AICP  
Executive Director