

Redevelopment Authority of the County of Armstrong (RACA) Land Bank

402 Market Street, Kittanning PA 16201

Testimony for the Senate Urban Affairs and Housing Committee

Thank you, Senators Pittman, Saval and members of the Senate Urban Affairs and Housing Committee, for the invitation to testify on how land banking can help mitigate blight in our neighborhoods.

My name is Brigid Beatty; I am Program Manager of the Armstrong County Department of Planning and Development. Our department provides administrative support to the Redevelopment Authority of the County of Armstrong (RACA) Land Bank.

Armstrong County became very active in its blight remediation strategies back in 2017 when the Board of Commissioners appointed a Blight Task Force to develop a series of recommendations to address the problem. In its report, the task force prioritized the development of a land bank. It also recognized that many municipalities do not have adequate resources to effectively enforce maintenance codes.

Thanks to a grant secured around that time with assistance from Sen. Don White's office, the county was able to provide technical help and guidance to municipalities with blight remediation strategies. These same grant funds provided for the development of the RACA Land Bank.

It is our understanding that there are a number of blight related Bills being proposed, including amendment to Act 153 of 2012, which would allow a land bank board to establish a virtual quorum to conduct a board meeting. This amendment, proposed by Rep. Abby Major, would be beneficial to the RACA Land Bank Board since the COVID-19 Pandemic prevented in-person meetings for months at a time. The Board was only able to conduct three meetings in 2021.

Despite obstacles and delays arising from the pandemic, RACA – in its capacity as land bank – has been able to acquire and clear a number of vacant and tax delinquent properties within its service area.

The Land Bank Board has worked closely with participating municipalities to identify problem properties. Projects have included demolishing dangerous structures and marketing cleaned-up parcels as side-yard lots and for development. The Board is particularly enthusiastic about its most recent accomplishment, which involves a new partnership with Armstrong Habitat for Humanity. This partnership has allowed for the purchase of a property at a judicial sale by the land bank for Habitat, thereby allowing Habitat to build new affordable housing on the cleared site.

One of the goals going forward is to continue to cultivate and expand upon partnerships for land reuse so that we can better meet the needs of the community.

Although there have been proactive county and municipal efforts to address property blight in our neighborhoods, the majority of housing stock predates 1970, and many of the existing structures are in need of upgrades. Boroughs and unincorporated villages have been struggling with increasing signs of disinvestment such as vacant, blighted, and abandoned properties.

We believe the land bank is a valuable tool in combating this issue, but the scope of the problem surpasses the land bank's funding ability to clean up and recycle more properties.

To date, the land bank has relied on grant funding for its start-up costs and activities. Although the land bank has been strategic in its property acquisitions, the expenses related to operational issues, environmental and remediation issues, and maintenance issues is a matter of ongoing concern.

The Act 152-2016 County Demolition Fund is critical in the fight against blight. However, additional funding sources, designated for land bank specific projects, are necessary for the continuance of land bank services and activities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important matter.