



CITY OF BALTIMORE
MAYOR BRANDON M. SCOTT

TO	The Honorable President and Members of the Baltimore City Council
FROM	Alice Kennedy, Commissioner, Housing and Community Development
CC	Mayor's Office of Government Relations
DATE	April 24th, 2025
SUBJECT	25-0014R Informational Hearing – Vacant and Abandoned Garages

Position: Favorable

BILL SYNOPSIS

The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has reviewed City Council Resolution 25-0014R Vacant and Abandoned Garages for the purpose of requiring representatives from the Department of Housing and Community Development to appear before the City Council to provide insight into the issue of vacant and abandoned garages in Baltimore City and to discuss strategies, including in rem liens or foreclosures, to manage and control the issue and its impact on safety, aesthetics, and community economies.

SUMMARY OF POSITION

DHCD's handling of vacant garages largely follows the same process as it does for other building types. Our Code Enforcement inspectors are dispatched, usually via referral from 311, to examine reportedly vacant garages and look for conditions such as no roof, being open to casual entry, or risk of collapse. If any of those features are present, the garage may then be issued a violation notice for the specific defects or a Vacant Building Notice (VBN).

If the garage in reference is a stand-alone structure, the inspector may issue a notice of defect or a VBN in the same manner that we would for any other kind of vacant building. In instances where a vacant garage is connected to or part of another structure, we do not issue a partial VBN but would proceed with an itemized violation notice listing any identifiable deficiencies. Both violation notices then proceed through the standard enforcement process, ultimately leading to legal action if all the underlying issues are not fully addressed. It is important to clarify that being unsightly or even in moderate disrepair will not necessarily qualify a garage as a vacant building but may otherwise amount to other citable offenses under the Building, Fire, and Related Codes of Baltimore City.

If the physical integrity of a garage appears to threaten public safety, inspectors will further

assess it for risk of imminent collapse. DHCD has the legal authority to order emergency stabilization or demolition as necessary, and to lien the property owner as appropriate. Given that stabilization does not make sense in the context of a garage, we tend to raze those deemed unsafe. Furthermore, as a risk to public safety is the primary characteristic of vacant garages that have received a VBN, demolition is the most common outcome.

In terms of acquiring vacant garages, both In Rem and receivership are available options. For such acquisitions, those tools would have the same basic requirements that they do when applied to other types of property. In Rem acquisition for a garage parcel is available if it has a VBN (or is razed) and the property meets the lien to assessment requirements. Receivership is available once a property receives a VBN. Regarding receivership, it is worth noting that we do not currently have a record of anyone asking for an individual garage through that process. For that reason, and because we cannot currently guarantee the outcome when employing receivership, we would only move forward with receivership in instances where there was already a plan in place from the community or a nearby owner that pre-qualified with One House At A Time (OHAAT). In Rem is of particular relevance as our Code Enforcement Legal Services (CELS) team is unlikely to pursue injunctions and fines for a vacant garage unless there are already plans in place to move that garage towards In Rem viability.

As with any process under our purview, DHCD is constantly considering areas where our efforts can be improved. For example, due to current demand and staffing levels, 311 Service Requests of this type (excluding emergency cases) are currently addressed within 7 business days when, if we were fully staffed, completion times would be closer to 2 or 3 business days. Equally, community outreach and education play a vital role in helping residents understand what constitutes a violation and the steps involved once a violation has been identified. The better informed our communities are, the more relevant requests for service DHCD will receive. As with other Code Enforcement issues, we cannot address problems which we do not know exist. Finally, it may be helpful, if possible, to explore new ways of capturing data on vacant garages. Currently there is nothing in the Vacant Building Notice or parcel data that effectively identifies whether a property is a garage or not. In some cases, a VBN might be issued on a parcel that includes a house and a garage. In such cases, the structures are not easily distinguishable without examining the inspection notes.

DHCD appreciates the Council's concerns over vacant garages and the problems that they can cause for communities throughout Baltimore City. Their run-down appearance can lower both quality of life and overall property values. Unattended structures in residential neighborhoods can play host to a variety of crimes. Derelict garages may even be at risk of collapse. All these factors and more have contributed to our agency taking this issue seriously and having procedures in place to deal with vacant garages as they arise. We welcome the opportunity to discuss those procedures in greater detail while also cooperatively developing pathways to even greater efficacy.

FISCAL IMPACT

As drafted, this Resolution would have minimal fiscal or administrative impact on DHCD.

AMENDMENTS

DHCD is not requesting any amendments to this Resolution at this time.