

BALTIMORE CITY COUNCIL



HOUSING & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

25-0088

*Taxes – Property Tax – Vacant Lots and Vacant
Structures*

Public Testimony

Good afternoon,

My name is Jennifer Hammel, and I have lived in a row home located on the 3700 block of Mt Pleasant Avenue for the past 4 years. Two homes down from my residence is an empty lot that is two houses in width (3700/3702).

Since I moved in, the lot had been both an impromptu parking pad and dumping ground, always littered with trash and hazardous waste such as used needles. In the summer of this year, a serial squatter invaded two vacant homes on our block and additionally took illegal possession of the lot. He stored non street legal vehicles without tags, tools, pallets, water tanks, bikes, grills, furniture, and all sorts of machinery on the property. He had men watching over the lot, confronting anyone who approached it and put his own cameras on the adjacent utility poles. He actually built a makeshift fence around the entire property.

This all went on for the entire summer and beginning of the fall until the lot was finally dismantled after our efforts as a community. The lot is an eyesore, and always holds potential for illegal and nefarious activity, as we have experienced first hand.

The lot is apparently owned by

Silva Luis Angel Abundiz
Recinos Gustavo Adolfo
5009 Macon Rd.
Rockville, MD 20852

The intentions for the purpose of the lot are unknown to the community, we only know that we have to deal with everything this space attracts to our street.....and that is trash, rats, and opportunity to commit criminal acts.

I support any bill that holds the owners accountable for their property and responsible for being proactive.

Thank you for hearing me today,

Best,
Jennifer Hammel

410-314-8551

Hi,

I fully support this higher tax on vacant lots and vacant structures. It is a critical tool to rebuilding our communities.

Thank you,
Chris Plano
4202 Elsrode Ave, 21214

Dear Councilmember Ramos,

I want to thank you for sponsoring Bill 25-0088 (Taxes – Property Tax – Vacant Lots and Vacant Structures), of which I want to express my strong support.

I live in District 1 in the Baltimore Highlands community. I purchased my home on E Fairmount Ave in 2008 and have watched my neighborhood steadily deteriorate, particularly over the last five years. As longtime homeowners have been forced or chosen to leave, large investors and developers have increasingly purchased properties in bulk. The balance between owner-occupied homes and rentals has become severely skewed. On my block alone, out of 58 houses, only 10 are owner-occupied. At least five properties are officially listed as vacant, though I strongly suspect the number is higher.

Large companies, including MCB, EGBE, and Gold Ventures, now own dozens of properties in my immediate area. These companies have accumulated so many homes that they cannot keep up with basic maintenance, code compliance, or security. As a result, vacant houses and lots are left unsecured, unmonitored, and neglected.

According to the Abell Foundation, “These vacant properties, often abandoned, create instability both in the real estate market and the surrounding communities and perpetuate a cycle of disinvestment and population decline.” That statement accurately reflects my lived experience. Living in my home has increasingly felt like living in a prison. I have to think twice about what route to walk, where to park my car, having my dog or my husband to escort me so I am not walking by myself. The presence of vacant houses has turned my block and surrounding streets into magnets for illegal activity and exploitation. The mental and emotional stress that my husband and I endure every single day is wearing us down. I can’t tell you how many hours I spend sending emails to various city agencies to report this or that nuisance property, squatters, trash, stolen goods, abandoned animals, etc. It is like having a super-stressful part-time job that I don’t get paid for!

Throughout Baltimore Highlands, vacant properties are routinely used for drug sales and consumption, prostitution, gambling, and the storage of stolen goods. People move through alleys and yards looking for unsecured doors, windows, or fences. Trash, dumping, human waste, and drug paraphernalia are constant and overwhelming. The concentration of vacant structures has also drawn more and more unhoused individuals (many of which are in crisis and/or active addiction) into the neighborhood without any coordinated support or services, further compounding the problem.

When vacancies dominate a neighborhood, accountability disappears. Renters are transient, absentee owners are unreachable, and responsible homeowners are left to shoulder the consequences. Even those of us who care deeply about our community become worn down and desensitized over time. Conditions have worsened dramatically since 2020, and many residents are at their breaking point.

Bill 25-0088 is a necessary step toward restoring accountability. By extending the special tax rate to vacant lots and structures, the City sends a clear message that speculation and neglect will no longer be subsidized at the expense of stable communities. This bill creates a financial incentive for property owners to either maintain their properties responsibly or return them to productive use.

Thank you again for sponsoring Bill 25-0088 and to continue holding property owners accountable for the conditions they impose on our neighborhoods. Homeowners like myself want to remain in Baltimore, invest in our communities, and feel safe in our own homes. We cannot do that without meaningful action.

Sincerely,
Beth-Ann Wilson Van Cleve
Baltimore Highlands
District 1
Baltimore City



Odette Ramos

Baltimore City Councilwoman

District 14

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100 N. Holliday Street, Room 553

Baltimore MD 21202

Testimony

25-0088-Taxes – Vacant Property Tax – Vacant Lots and Vacant Structures

Support with Sponsor Amendments

May 5, 2026

Dear Chair Torrence and Members of the Housing and Economic Development Committee:

I am writing to ask for your support for City Council Bill **25-0088 – Taxes – Vacant Property Tax – Vacant Lots and Vacant Structures** with two Sponsor amendments. This is an enhancement to the version of the vacant property tax passed in the last Council session 24-0601.

CB25-0088 does three main things:

- A. Adds the vacant property tax already established on vacant structures to vacant lots.
- B. Automatically makes the vacant property tax 4 times the current tax rate. The original bill had a step approach for the first year being 3 times the rate, and after that four times the rate. We removed the provision about three times the rate.
- C. Removes the sunset in the original bill so that the vacant property tax applies every year.

There is one amendment to move the enactment date from July 1, 2026 to July 1, 2027 to allow for one more year for implementation and discussions regarding exceptions. There are further details about this later in this testimony. The other amendment is at the request of the Law Department for proper citation of the building code.

Taxes are generally used for revenue generation, or for behavior change. In this case, the vacant property tax is being used for behavior change, and increasing eligibility for In Rem.

In Rem is the City's primary acquisition strategy for vacant lots and vacant structures. When liens exceed the assessed value of the property, the City can foreclose on the property and take possession to ensure the property goes to someone who will bring the property to productive use. According to data from September of 2025 and analyzed by my office, there are 3,037 vacant structures eligible for In Rem and 4,861 vacant lots. Data from DHCD as of April 10, 2026 details 2,164 In Rem eligible vacant structures and 3,337 vacant lots. In the absence of In Rem 2, we need a mechanism to make more properties eligible for In Rem and the vacant property tax will help to push liens higher than the assessed value of a property.

Related to behavior change, we believe that those who are holding onto vacant properties and lots sometimes need a push to redevelop it to productive use. The way to avoid paying four times the current tax rate would be to redevelop the property and remove the Vacant Building Notice.

Thanks to Delegate Boyce and Senator Hayes, the General Assembly finally authorized Baltimore City and all jurisdictions to create a vacant property tax on vacant structures and vacant lots in the 2024

General Assembly session. This was a substantial effort, given that the General Assembly has been hesitant in the past to levy the property tax differently for various types of properties.

One of the reasons why vacant lots were not added to our original City Council bill last term was because of data issues with vacant lots. There were also concerns about privately owned lots that are side yards or community gardens. DHCD has been going through a process to inventory the vacant lots and propose “uses” so that side yards would not get the vacant property tax.

While we look to make sure the tax is having the intended effect outlined above, we wanted to avoid any potential harm. There are three parties that could potentially be harmed by the vacant property tax:

- Homeowners who have inadvertently purchased homes that have VBNs on them but are fully rehabbed. This is a list of about 400 homeowners impacted.
- Developers and our community development partners who own VBN property and are possibly holding for redevelopment.
- Developers and renovators doing the work to rehab vacant properties that are diligently working on them with proper permits.

The state enabling legislation does not allow us to legislate exceptions for the above classes or any class of owners. So we have been thinking about other ways to work around this exceptions issue. Our solutions included everything from rebate programs to lien release, and even working with all 400 homeowners who still have VBNs on them. None of these are perfect solutions.

So, we have pushed back the enactment date of the legislation to July 1, 2027 to work with our General Assembly sponsors to add language to allow jurisdictions to create exceptions by ordinance, and that’s why we needed the amendment.

Thank you for your consideration, and I humbly request your favorable report with sponsor amendments.

I can be reached on 410-396-4814 or via email at odette.ramos@baltimorecity.gov should you have any further questions.

Respectfully Submitted,



Odette Ramos
Baltimore City Councilwoman, District 14