



Greektown Neighborhood Association, Inc.

804 Umbra Street
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October 21, 2024

RE: Written testimony on 24-0601 Property Taxes - Special Rate for Vacant and Abandoned Property

Dear Chairman Costello,

I write to you on behalf of the Board of the Greektown Neighborhood Association, in Southeast Baltimore City. We appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony to the Ways & Means Committee expressing our strong support for Council Bill 24-0601. We believe this legislation is a significant step forward in the City's efforts to combat the persistence of vacant and blighted property, and the many problems that stem from them.

With only a dozen or so formally identified Vacant structures, Greektown is perhaps more fortunate than other parts of Baltimore, where vacancy can be counted in entire blocks. Still, our experience demonstrates that even a single vacant can be a significant hazard to the surrounding community. Neighbors began reporting issues with an unoccupied & unmaintained rowhome at 627 Umbra Street at least back to 2011, though it took until 2020 for a Vacant Building Notice to be issued. By March of 2023, the home was open to casual entry, with people breaking in on a regular basis. Police investigating lights and activity in the house noted inches of standing water in the basement and an overpowering presence of mold. Requests to both 311 and 911 for these and other issues continued until June 29, when someone broke into the home and caused a fire. This fire displaced the two owner-occupied homes on either side for over six months, and cost them significant repairs to their homes due to both the fire, and water intrusion from broken pipes in the basement.

The existing tools that the City had at its disposal to address this growing issue were inadequate to prevent it. The owner, though contactable, was unwilling to either sell or make the necessary improvements to the property, and the fines from the occasional DHCD citation (only 8 since Jan 2016) did not add up to enough for receivership to become a realistic option, even with Greektown being a streamlined code enforcement neighborhood. The neighborhood association, the Councilman's office, DHCD & BPD were all involved and working on this and other properties for years with no success; the leverage simply wasn't there. To this day, and despite the fire, 627 Umbra remains boarded with a tattered, tarped roof, neither sold nor in line for receivership.

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Trish Kontoudis, President | Ian Wolfe, 1st Vice-President | Stavros Katsas, 2nd Vice-President | Paul Sellers, Treasurer
Ettie Hayun, Secretary | Chris Fekos, Despina Kranis, Gus Fotinos, Lisa Hovel, Members-at-Large

This proposed legislation, by setting a higher tax rate on vacant properties, benefits communities like ours in two ways. First, it provides a negative incentive to the blighted property owner to either improve their property or to sell it to someone who will. Second, when the owner is unresponsive, it provides the City with a more rapid means of pursuing receivership, to then return the property to a productive use in one way or another. As our community continues to address situations like the Umbra Street rowhouse, or the multiple vacant & blighted storefronts along our main commercial corridor, we believe this special tax rate will give the City some of that missing leverage to tell absentee and neglectful property owners that it is no longer acceptable to leave homes and businesses to rot in Baltimore City. Our Board strongly encourages the committee to pass this bill as drafted.

Sincerely,

Ian Wolfe,
Vice President, 1st
Greektown Neighborhood Association, Inc.

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