



# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT NETWORK OF MARYLAND

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony for this hearing on Vacant Properties. Our Baltimore City members, known as the Baltimore Equitable Community Development Network (BE/CDN), represent more than 40 community-based nonprofits, developers, and community development professionals. We've worked with city residents and agencies for decades to transform vacant properties into assets for the immediate neighbors of these properties as well as the surrounding communities.

As you deliberate on the City's current processes and potential new tools, we ask that the Council consider the following:

- **Tools are only effective when city agencies have the resources to fully implement them.**

As City agencies have already noted in their testimonies, the City has an existing fine system to disincentivize vacant properties as well as a receivership process to acquire and dispose of properties when a property owner is unwilling to respond to these City actions. However, DHCD lacks the staff needed to acquire and process these properties at a scale sufficient to the problem. In her testimony, Acting Commissioner Kennedy points out that DHCD has typically filed 400-500 receivership filings a year, and plans to increase it to 700-800 a year.

For a city with over 15,000 vacants, this amounts to 1-2 decades of work. Is this an acceptable timeline to address this issue, particularly for our neighbors living near these properties? What does this mean for their health and well-being, and the general well-being of the city? How much lost property tax revenue does this mean for the city to move at this pace? How much more could DHCD do with twice or three times as many existing staff?

- **The District Court of Maryland is a key stakeholder in transferring properties and any meaningful reform for efficiency must include them.**

Properties acquired through receivership must go through the District Court of Maryland, which has the power to hear and approve petitions for receivership and accept/deny sales, in addition to hearing stays from interested property owners or lien holders.

Our understanding is that the courts were still working through a backlog prior to the COVID-19 pandemic because of the 2019 hack of Baltimore City government systems; the backlog has only gotten worse due to pandemic-related court closures over the past year. We urge members of the council to reach out to relevant Judges and staff at the District Court to understand what can be done to increase the speed and efficiency of the process on their end.

- **Increasing fines and taxes on vacant properties does not effectively penalize the worst offenders.**

Our concern is that the very same property owners who have allowed their properties to deteriorate and accrue fines will be unmoved by additional fines and taxes on their property. Furthermore, the increased liens may complicate the eventual acquisition and disposition of these properties for community-driven purposes.

- **Transparency is key.**

As many of you and your constituents know, one of the more frustrating aspects of living near a vacant property is the mystery that surrounds it--ownership, responsibility for maintenance, and the City's ultimate plans (or lack thereof) for the property. In this day and age, the city's plan for vacant properties should be clear as well as easily accessible and understandable to any interested resident.

Finally, **the best solution to any issue is prevention.** This has been a serious issue for our city for decades, and the COVID-19 pandemic has brought substantially greater financial instability to many of our neighbors as they have faced the loss of loved ones, a decline in health due to COVID or the stresses related to living in a pandemic, sources of income, or a reduction in income. While CDN continues to work with state and city agencies to ensure that as many Baltimoreans as possible can stay in their homes, we hope that the Council will do the same and continue their focus on housing stability and promoting intergenerational transfers of wealth via estate planning.

We hope that with the Council's attention to this issue, along with the incoming federal COVID-19 relief funds, we can finally begin to see real, tangible progress to eliminating vacant properties. Thank you again for your time and consideration on this important matter.

Sincerely,  
Hieu Truong  
Organizer, BE/CDN