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### **Testimony**

## **22-0101R – Mayor’s Recommendations – 30 Day Review of Strategies to Eliminate Vacant and Abandoned Properties.**

Chair Middleton and Members of the Economic and Community Development Committee:

I am writing to submit testimony for 22-0101R – Mayor’s Recommendations – 30 Day Review of Strategies to Eliminate Vacant and Abandoned Properties.

On January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, three of Baltimore’s Bravest were killed in a fire in a vacant and abandoned property. It was vacant for many years, with thousands of dollars worth of liens, next to other vacant properties on that block. This follows multiple decades of decay in many of our neighborhoods – where residents who still live there have had to deal with the impact of vacant properties next to them for years.

Vacant and abandoned properties in our neighborhoods have an impact on public health and public safety. We know that when students walk to school next to vacant properties, the cortisol in their brain increases – this increases stress and blocks learning. We know that residents living next to vacant properties have water in their basements, rodents, mold and other structural problems and very often cannot get homeowner’s insurance. We know that the majority of our violent crime happens in areas with vacant and abandoned properties. We know that our lack of investment and initiative to address this problem head on has caused trauma, sent the strong message that we as leaders do not care about certain neighborhoods, and has caused immeasurable harm to our communities. This did not just start. This has been a crisis for decades caused by the racist housing policies Baltimore started – and frankly continues today. To me, addressing vacant and abandoned properties MUST be our top priority – because it links with everything else.

True equitable development is about investing in our neighborhoods that have suffered the most in a way that does not displace residents. We can do this. Many of us have been working in this field for a long time. And finally we are seeing a shift in thinking toward addressing this crisis.

It will not be fast, it will not be easy, but it is urgent. And it will take money. In my letter I wrote to the Mayor submitted for consideration during the 30 Day examination of strategies to address vacant and abandoned properties, I was clear – we need a strong vision that everyone can get behind. We have 15,000 vacant and abandoned properties – those that are marked with a vacant building notice. The City only owns approximately 1200 of them. We can remove ½ of the vacant and abandoned properties in 10 years with a concerted, strategic effort:

- (a) Changing the tools and systems we use to acquire and dispose of properties – we have begun to do this by fully implementing the Judicial In Rem strategy where the City forecloses on the liens when they are above the value of the property and we have an agreement with the courts for a

separate docket to expedite these cases. We still have a long way to go in changing our disposition process, permit office, and other systems – but we have begun.

- (b) Raise the money. This is a \$3Billion effort. We must explore all of our options including expanding borrowing capacity, working with state and federal partners, and raising private capital. We need this money for demolition/deconstruction, stabilization and subsidy.
- (c) Provide incentives for investment in our areas that need it most. Restructuring our tax credits and incentives to be equitable and fair is critical.

After the tragedy of January 24<sup>th</sup>, Mayor Scott announced an internal working group, lead by the City Administrator, to assess our current strategies for addressing vacant and abandoned properties and incorporate new tools and strategies to address this crisis. Commissioner Kennedy had already outlined a strategies incorporating the Impact Investment Areas in the Pugh Administration as the first areas for major action. Moreover, the working group agreed – the tools we currently have are not working. Receivership while it works in some areas, as lead to massive speculation and neighborhoods cannot outbid the speculators to control the outcome of the property. Same with purchasing properties in tax sale.

This hearing is about understanding every single strategy that is outlined in the resulting memorandum. What I call the 30-Day Memo accompanies this testimony. We will go through every line, and determine what the status is of every strategy, and what the next steps should be. We will hear testimony about the work being done in neighborhoods already – and that the work of the City should be making properties available, providing funding leverage more dollars to do the work, and to advance equitable development. These are the three goals we should be striving for as we work to resolve this crisis.

I am thrilled that many my recommendations – coming from decades of work in this field - were incorporated into the 30-Day memo, and I thank the Administration for allowing me to play a role in the implementation of the Judicial In Rem strategies particularly the critical negotiations regarding the court process. I continue to move through my list of recommendations and have so far introduced 5 pieces of legislation to further the goals in my letter – and there is more coming.

Colleagues, I don't intend to vote this resolution out today. We will have periodic status hearings about where we are on these strategies to move the needle and push hard for action.

Today in the audience and online we have residents who care deeply about our city and who have suffered with living in areas with blight. We also have the families of two of the fallen firefighters who will testify today. I am grateful for the time each of them has taken to be here, and grateful for this committee's commitment to this action.

Respectfully submitted:



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