



Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Senate Urban Affairs Committee  
The Honorable Gene Yaw, Chairman  
The Honorable Shirley Kitchen, Minority Chairwoman

**Testimony of the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania on House Bill 712, Land Banks**  
Provided by Elizabeth G. Hersh, Executive Director  
Thursday, September 16, 2010

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on House Bill 712, Land Banks. Thank you for considering this very significant, in fact, pioneering, piece of legislation.

The single most important fact about HB712, and why I am here today to speak for it, is the Housing Alliance's firm conviction that we as a Commonwealth, need to establish a system for reclaiming and recycling vacant, abandoned and blighted land and giving it – and our communities – new life. We need a system that gives us a path to transforming blighted property into homes that people can afford, gardens, urban farms, new business and industry, a system for land recycling that is efficient, cost effective and works with the market. That is the ultimate vision of land banking for which HB712 is the first critical step.

In 2003 the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania published "Reclaiming Abandoned Pennsylvania: From Liability to Viability," an analysis that showed that antiquated state laws actually impede local efforts to address blight. We recommended a number of recommendations, many of which have since been adopted. In fact, as a result of the leadership in this Committee and that of the House Urban Affairs Committee, and bi-partisan legislative action over the past several years, Pennsylvania has made significant progress. Today we are a leader in creating the policy infrastructure to facilitate the local acquisition and disposition of blighted and abandoned property.

I have brought with me a "Quick Guide to New Tools for Addressing Blight" that the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania has compiled to describe all the new policy tools that the General Assembly has made possible. I think you will agree that it is quite impressive!

But the fact remains that without continuing to craft a strong, innovative policy framework to establish new laws to replace reform and modernize antiquated laws that stand in the way of land recycling; this new system cannot and will not happen. Efficient, equitable, strategic land reuse is not fully possible – yet - under current Pennsylvania law. The state, inadvertently, stands in the way of local efforts.

Blighted, abandoned and vacant land is a fact of life in Pennsylvania, a feature of our built environment and a factor in the health and strength of our communities and local economies. We all know – and live with the negatives – the crime and squalor, the breeding ground for vermin, the grief and shame of failed past economy and lost glory days for the Commonwealth, the decline in adjacent property values.

The question is: what can and will we do about it? Are there ways to these parcels be an asset and a resource for our economic and community growth? That is the intent – and the real beauty of this legislation. It is a first step in spinning straw into gold.

Here are some facts for your consideration that have helped convince me that HB712 is not only a good idea, but an essential step forward:

- 1) We do not currently have the tools needed locally to acquire or amass parcels of blighted, abandoned property, clear title to make it marketable and insurable for fixing up, redeveloping or demolishing by neighbors, community groups, realtors or developers. HB712 is the first step in creating these tools by setting a clear path forward.
- 2) We do not currently have a land “resale store,” a place where you can go and see what the inventory of available land for recycling is, where you can find out what’s available, how much it costs, how big it is, what kind of infrastructure it has or need for remediation. HB712 is the first step in creating this inventory.
- 3) We do not currently have a person – or entity – locally that is in charge of thinking about, collecting and marketing abandoned, blighted land or its relationship to the neighborhood or local market. This is not the job of the sheriff who forecloses on tax liens; it is not the job of the redevelopment authorities who use eminent domain, nor the job of the housing and community development departments who have no land recycling powers. It is no ones job and yet it is a job that needs to be done. It is the job of a land bank enabled by HB712.

Frankly, land banks could be created under Pennsylvania law without HB712 being passed. But the fact is that local communities are not = and will not be – establish land banks without your leadership, without a clear blueprint forward in legislative language that paves the way. This bill gives them a road map to employing the best national practice by laying out the structure, purpose and powers of a single purpose entity whose job is to tackle the daunting challenge of blighted and abandoned property and transform it, little by little, onto a local asset.

This bill represents our best thinking. Today, in 2010, we have never before had to deal with the huge supply of blighted, abandoned property that we have in our communities. This change in the landscape – and local economy – is new and unprecedented. It calls for pioneering new solutions. Land banking is new thinking. In fact, it is the best new thinking we have to help our local communities deal with an insidious and costly problem that plagues them. It is the first step in enabling our local communities to do what Dan Kildee has done in Michigan, that is, to spin gold out of straw.

Thank you for your consideration.

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