



PA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
URBAN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

PROGRESS REPORT ON PA LAND BANKS AT YEAR 5
TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2017
9:00 A.M. – 11:00 A.M.

Good morning Representative Mark Keller (Chairman) and Representative Michael O'Brien (Democratic Chairman) and the other members of the House Urban Affairs Committee. I am Andrew French and I am here as the Executive Director of the Redevelopment Authority of Fayette County. Located in southwestern Pennsylvania, I am sure each of you are aware of the tremendous assets Fayette County has to offer: Laurel Highlands, Ohiopyle State Park, and Fallingwater. Unfortunately, despite those assets, like so many other counties in the Commonwealth, we also have some serious challenges.

While I recognize that this hearing has been established to provide a five-year progress report on Pennsylvania Land Banks, I cannot speak to that issue specifically since Fayette County has not formed a land bank and has instead decided to dedicate their efforts towards using local resources to compliment existing agencies that are already engaged is dealing with blight. I will provide more insight on this point later in my testimony.

What I would like to focus on today in my brief comments is what we have accomplished in Fayette County in our effort to deal with blighted properties. Since our inception in 1949, the Redevelopment Authority has dealt with literally thousands of blighted structures. In fact, that is what redevelopment authorities were created by the Commonwealth to do.

Looking back over the years since the Land Bank Legislation was contemplated and passed, the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority has accomplished much, including the following:

- We've acquired and rehabilitated 9 properties and re-sold those properties to low-income homebuyers.
- We've rehabilitated 33 owner-occupied residential properties.
- We've demolished over 40 residential blighted properties.
- We've demolished 7 commercial blighted properties.
- We've aided in the construction of over 40 new homes for sale to first-time low-income homebuyers.



In total, the Redevelopment Authority has invested over 7.1 million dollars in these efforts using a variety of local, state, and federal resources. While these numbers may seem low to those in more urban areas of the Commonwealth, please understand that in Fayette County, these projects have had a tremendous impact on stabilizing our most fragile communities and have had a significant secondary impact of creating additional revenue for the impacted municipalities.



In order to provide additional examples of our success in dealing with blight and re-purposing property, I will quickly highlight the following projects:

- Three Oaks Development in Redstone Township. Involved acquisition of a former obsolete public housing site. Following demolition, funding from CDBG, HOME, PHFA-PHARE, USDA, and private financing were utilized to construct 35 new single-family units. \$700,000 in public investment was utilized to leverage over \$3.0 million in private investment. Original property value of \$0 increased to over \$5.0 million.
- Masontown Borough. Involved acquisition and demolition of a long vacant commercial structure. Project will result in the new construction of 3 single-family residential structures for sale to low-to-moderate income homebuyers.
- Brownsville Borough Redevelopment Initiative. Involved acquisition of 26 vacant, dilapidated, and condemned properties and demolition of 7 properties (thus far), which has resulted in:



- Completion of a new “Town Square” utilizing approximately \$350,000 (through Greenways, Trails, and Recreation Program (GTRP), RACF, Fayette County Tourism Fund, Heinz Foundation, Private Donations).
- Funding for a 24-unit Brownsville Senior Apartments being developed by Trek Development (made possible through \$300,000 in demolition funding through RACF and \$1.4 million through PHFA LIHTC and PennHOMES) – resulting in a total investment of \$7 - \$9 million.

To transition and re-focus on the specific purpose of this hearing, I believe that the Land Bank legislation enacted 5 years ago is extremely beneficial in the fact that it re-engages many communities in looking at the issue of blight and how to redevelop properties. Obviously, there are many challenges to developing, operating, and maintaining a land bank, which is why Fayette County has opted not to form one; especially given the fact that their Redevelopment Authority is already acting, in essence, as a land bank.

While the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority, and many other redevelopment authorities across the Commonwealth, are acting in the same capacity as land banks, we are not afforded the same key powers given to land banks. Based on my conversations with my colleagues throughout the Commonwealth, mainly through the Pennsylvania Association of Housing and Redevelopment Agencies (PAHRA), this is an issue of great concern. Our hope is that Senate Bill 667, which was introduced by the great Senator Pat Stefano from Fayette County, will correct this matter.

I believe our ultimate goal should be to provide as many resources and tools possible to those agencies on the ground which are dealing with blight; therefore, I hope this Committee and the House will approve Senate Bill 667 to provide those key additional powers to redevelopment authorities to help us aid our local communities in dealing with blight.

I once again would like to extend my thanks to Representatives Mark Keller and Michael O’Brien for inviting me today. I would also like to extend my thanks to Christine Goldbeck. Thank you.