



June 19, 2019

Economic and Work Force Development Committee
Ohio House of Representatives
Columbus, OH

To the Esteemed Committee Members:

I am honored and humbled to appear before this committee in support of House Bill 252 to create the Land Reutilization Demolition Program.

County Land Banks across the state are working diligently to create better tomorrows for Ohioans at home, work and play. Most recently, County Land Banks have been focused on removing vacant, abandoned, blighted houses to stabilize neighborhoods.

Since March 2015, Mahoning County Land Bank has acquired and demolished more than 1,000 empty, dilapidated, unsafe, outdated houses, using a reimbursement award of \$14.9 million from Ohio Housing Finance Agency. In the same time frame, the Land Bank made viable houses available to local buyers for renovation and landscaped those 1,000-plus demolition sites. All of this has contributed to improved housing conditions, declines in residential arson reports in the cities of Youngstown and Campbell, and increased confidence among residents. Despite progress we've made, an estimated 2,500 houses still need to be demolished countywide, especially in Youngstown.

The unmet need in Mahoning County concerns vacant, abandoned commercial properties. The Clean Ohio Brownfield Revitalization Program was established to remediate polluted properties, such as dormant factories. Youngstown produced more than vast quantities of steel, as one is reminded when driving along Albert Street, where the former Republic Rubber Co. site is in shambles today. That Clean Ohio window opens only when redevelopment is imminent. No one has invested yet in Republic Rubber. Nonetheless, we need to clear away commercial properties that already are down to their bones.

Furthermore, no funding stream exists to remove crumbling buildings that once housed small stores, professional offices, fast-food restaurants, corner bars and other businesses that were the backbone of many neighborhoods. These types of properties can be found on many streets in Youngstown, Campbell and Struthers, but this is not only an urban issue.

The citizens and trustees of rural Goshen Township anxiously await the day that a long-empty restaurant will finally be leveled.

At the end of 2018, more than 2,300 commercial properties in Mahoning County were certified as tax delinquent. Of those, about 230 properties – roughly 10 percent of the inventory – were tax delinquent in amounts between \$7,000 and \$207,000. Two hundred fifty-five parcels haven't changed owners in at least 40 years. Some haven't been transferred since before World War II, or even the start of the Great Depression. These properties require intervention on our collective part to make them productive again.

As serious as the situation is in Mahoning County, I also want to inform you of a very promising development. In Youngstown, the Economic Action Group – EAG for short – brings together motivated partners – Mahoning County Land Bank, Western Reserve Port Authority, Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation, Youngstown State University, Eastgate Regional Council of Governments, the City of Youngstown and Boardman Township – to identify, evaluate and act on commercial properties. EAG began by commissioning a corridor study to identify roads for revitalization potential. That led to site assessments.

The first building we evaluated needs a partial demolition, but the functional portion of it has the size and features that are in demand now by small, local businesses. The next two buildings we looked at were in surprisingly good condition. The City of Youngstown soon will take ownership of those properties; meanwhile, the Port Authority is working with an up-and-coming business that needs room to grow.

The framework of EAG is similar to Mahoning County Land Bank's housing demolition and renovation programs, in which collaborators shared data, developed strategies, played to their strengths and honored deadlines. Residential demolition funding through OHFA galvanized the Land Bank and its partners, and the impact of our collective efforts is well documented. A new demolition funding opportunity at the state level will be the equivalent of rocket fuel for EAG.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I urge you to vote in favor of House Bill 252 and become part of our success story.

Sincerely,



Debora Flora
Executive Director