

Kenneth Gilbert
President of the Forest Park Civic Association
Proponent Testimony
Senate Bill 201
Senate Civil Justice Committee
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Chairman Bacon, Vice Chair Oelslager, Ranking Member Skindell and members of the Senate Civil Justice committee. My name is Kenneth Gilbert, President of the Forest Park Civic Association, which represents approximately 3000 homes in Northeast Columbus in the Northland area. I am testifying on behalf of this bill. Problem properties and owners have done a great deal of damage to our community. We have seen increased crime, such as burglary, drugs, prostitution, assaults, kidnapping, and even murder related to these properties in our area. The Quarter Horse Congress even recommended that our hotels on State Route 161 not be used as too many were unsafe, costing our businesses heavily.

Currently one weapon that law enforcement, our city attorneys, and the community has is the state nuisance abatement law. This allows, with full respect to due process and the rule of law, for a court to deem a property a nuisance and close it down for repeated violations as defined in state law. These include drugs, prostitution, and underage alcohol purchases. But there is one item missing: Violence. We had a situation in our neighborhood where one after-hours club had multiple incidences of violence, including assaults, a kidnapping, shots fired into resident homes and businesses, and finally a homicide. Yet the police and courts could do nothing under the current nuisance law. It was only an undercover officer who was able to obtain evidence of illegal alcohol purchases that enabled our local courts to shutter this establishment. That puts an officer at risk and is very time consuming. If our city attorney had the ability to use violence as a determining factor, this place could have been closed down much earlier and perhaps prevented that homicide.

Even with the tools at hand, our Columbus police and the city attorney's office has been able to close a number of establishments under the current criteria in the past 4 years. This has led to a major drop in crime in Forest Park. One fast food establishment in our area had to lock the doors of their bathrooms to prevent hotel residents from shooting up drugs. They no longer have to do that. Burglaries are down. The good hotels are full again for the Quarter Horse Congress.

However, these investigations are time-consuming and difficult. In one sense, they should be. It would not be fair to deprive an owner of the right to use their property without due process and strong evidence. The law already provides for that. But violence in our neighborhoods is every bit as much a nuisance as prostitution and drugs. Please give law enforcement the tools to better serve the community by passing this bill to add violence to the list of nuisances actionable by the law.

Thank you, on behalf of my community. I am happy to answer any questions that the committee might have.