



**House Economic and Workforce Development Committee
Testimony, House Bill 155 (Upchurch, M. Smith)
Debora Flora, Executive Director, Mahoning County Land Reutilization Corporation
Wednesday, April 21, 2021**

Chairman Edwards, Ranking Member Upchurch, and members of the House Economic and Workforce Development Committee:

On behalf of Mahoning County Land Bank, thank you for the opportunity to express interest in House Bill 155, which would establish the Land Reutilization Nuisance Abatement Program. I am Debora Flora, Executive Director of Mahoning County Land Reutilization Corporation since July 2012.

Mahoning County Land Bank, as it is publicly known, is observing its 10th anniversary this year. It is focused on the revitalization of vacant, abandoned properties in residential and commercial settings. My colleagues and our partners have renovated houses, returned small business buildings to the marketplace, demolished structures that were beyond repair and replaced blighted spaces with pocket parks and rain gardens. Progress has been made, but a great deal of work lies ahead, as Mahoning County battles back from historic issues related to industrial decline and modern-day challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mahoning County Land Bank has been entrusted twice with demolition funding, first during the Moving Ohio Forward Program from 2012 to 2014, and again when Hardest Hit funding was repurposed for blight removal from 2014 to 2019. In all, my organization removed 1,358 vacant, dilapidated residences in 60 census tracts from 2009 to 2019. Both programs concentrated on residential property conditions. The Land Reutilization Nuisance Abatement Program is important because it would assist land banks with residential and commercial property revitalization.

Rather than dwell on past accomplishments, I'd like to share with you a story about an opportunity that exists now and hinges on your support of House Bill 155.

In 2018, local businessman Hasheen Wilson acquired a former church at Market Street and East Dewey Avenue in Youngstown. He renovated and opened it as an event center for business meetings, celebrations, community gatherings and more, with seating for up to 200 people. During the pandemic, his parking lot also has been used as a food distribution site. His successful revitalization project, which put a tax-exempt property in to tax-generating status, inspired the County Land Bank staff to study the underutilized vacant building next door and ask how it could be a better reflection on Mr. Wilson's investment.

The building in question is brick, two stories, and described on the County Auditor's web site as having retail space on the bottom and apartments above. From the exterior, it appears to be structurally sound. No activities are occurring there, and the real estate tax delinquency dates back to 2004. A partner organization soon will fly a drone over the building roof as part of our assessment. Another abandoned and tax-delinquent building is next to it, in very poor condition. Beyond that is a parcel of vacant land with a delinquent tax bill in excess of \$50,000, because the City of Youngstown assessed it after demolishing a badly-damaged multi-family housing unit.

Mahoning County Land Bank could pursue ownership of all of these properties and apply to the Land Reutilization Nuisance Abatement Program for matching funds to do what is necessary to return all of it to productivity. If the first building is viable, then it could be renovated and reoccupied. Quality business and living space is highly desirable in Youngstown. If it's too late to save the second building, then its removal could create a new development space, with the vacant lot next to it serving as a parking area. Mr. Wilson's investment and the legislature's affirmative vote can change the course not only of that block, but a larger portion of Market Street.

This is not an isolated case of abandonment. Currently, I have a list of more than 200 vacant, tax-delinquent properties in 11 communities in Mahoning County. These same types of properties – commercial garages, cafes, warehouses, former schools and small stores – exist in the communities that you serve. These same opportunities exist throughout much of Ohio. The state's investment in nuisance abatement will produce returns for years to come.

Chairman Edwards, Ranking Member Upchurch and committee members, thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak in support of establishing the Land Reutilization Nuisance Abatement Program. If you have any questions, then I will do my best to answer them. I appreciate your service to the great State of Ohio.