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RESOLUTION CALLING FOR MORE EFFECTIVE POLICIES TO REDUCE THE NUMBERS OF VACANT AND BLIGHTED PROPERTIES IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Vacant and Blighted Properties: Scope and Impacts

WHEREAS: As of September 2023, about 4600 properties in the District of Columbia are designated by the Department of Buildings as vacant, including about 3900 vacant buildings and about 700 vacant lots;ⁱ

WHEREAS: More than 300 of the vacant buildings are also designated as blighted (defined as “unsafe, unsanitary, or otherwise determined to threaten the health, safety, or general welfare of the community”ⁱⁱ);

WHEREAS: More than 600 of the vacant buildings are exempt from higher Class 3 (vacant) and Class 4 (blighted) property tax ratesⁱⁱⁱ (with exemptions granted on the basis of such criteria as the building being under active construction or repair, the owners actively seeking buyers or renters, the building title being subject to litigation, development of the property requiring approval by a District board or commission, or the owner citing economic hardship^{iv});

WHEREAS: Vacant and blighted properties are located in residential and commercial areas within all eight wards of the District;

WHEREAS: Within Ward 1, more than 500 buildings are designated as vacant (including more than 30 designated as blighted and more than 100 exempt from higher tax rates) and about 15 lots are designated as vacant;

WHEREAS: Within the boundaries of Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) 1B, about 120 buildings are designated as vacant (including about 10 designated as blighted and about 20 exempt from higher tax rates) and about 5 lots are designated as vacant;

WHEREAS: About 53% of vacant properties in the District have been vacant for two or more years, and about 28% have been vacant for four or more years. Within Ward 1, about 50% have been vacant for two or more years and about 27% have been vacant for four or more years. Within ANC 1B, about 50% have been vacant for two or more years and about 21% have been vacant for four or more years.^v

WHEREAS: Vacant and blighted properties often provide cover for illegal activity, contribute to lower property values, reduce quality of life for community residents, remove potential housing units from the market, and create unsafe and unsanitary conditions for nearby residents, businesses, and visitors;^{vi}

WHEREAS: Vacant and blighted properties in residential areas contribute to the District’s severe shortage of affordable housing;

WHEREAS: Vacant and blighted properties in commercial areas may discourage businesses from opening or expanding and customers from visiting, thus impairing the community's economic health and development and the creation of new jobs;

Context for Addressing the Problem

WHEREAS: For more than a decade, residents, community leaders, public officials, and other ANCs have expressed concerns about the large numbers of vacant and blighted properties in the District and their impacts on the health and well-being of their surrounding communities; the lack of progress in reducing the numbers of vacant and blighted properties; and problems and inefficiencies in the District government's inspection and classification of properties (regarding their status as vacant/blighted and as exempt from higher tax rates), its collection of property taxes on vacant and blighted properties (including adjusting rates when a property's classification changes), and its efforts to promote appropriate development and usage of the properties;^{vii}

WHEREAS: Although reports about individual properties have appeared in the news media, no comprehensive, District-wide analyses are available that address such topics as: the ownership of vacant and blighted properties (e.g., whether owners are individuals or for-profit or non-profit organizations, whether they are based in the District, and whether they belong to or serve specific populations or communities), reasons for the properties becoming and remaining vacant or blighted, and owners' plans and aspirations for the properties;

WHEREAS: The District government is committed to achieving racial equity and applying a racial equity lens across government operations (as evidenced by establishment of the Mayor's Office of Racial Equity^{viii} and development of a draft Racial Equity Action Plan^{ix});

Establishing a Task Force

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT: ANC 1B calls on the Council of the District of Columbia and the Mayor to approve legislation establishing and funding a high-level task force to (a) assess in a comprehensive fashion the numbers, types, distribution, ownership, causes, and impacts of vacant and blighted properties in the District; (b) identify the economic and social factors (both historical and contemporary) that have given rise to the current patterns of vacant and blighted properties in the District; (c) evaluate the success of past and current District government policies and programs aimed at reducing the numbers of vacant and blighted properties, with attention to both their strategies and implementation; and, on those bases, (d) recommend a set of policies and programs that will be more effective than current approaches in reducing the numbers of vacant and blighted properties and encouraging development of them into properties that serve the needs and interests of the residents of the District;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT: The task force include members appointed separately by the Council Chair and by the Mayor; that it include members from each ward; and that its members include individuals with community experience, policy expertise, and professional and academic knowledge relevant to the issues surrounding vacant and blighted properties;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT: The task force consider policies and programs of all components of District government that have formal responsibility for addressing vacant and blighted properties (e.g., Dept. of Buildings, Dept. of Housing and Community Development, Office of Planning, Office of Tax and Revenue, Office of the Tenant Advocate, Office of Zoning) as well as other components with operations that may involve vacant and blighted properties (e.g., DC Health, Dept. of Human Services, Dept. of Public Works, Dept. of Small and Local Business Development, Lab@DC, Mayor’s Office of Racial Equity, Metropolitan Police Dept.).

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT: The task force consider a broad range of potential new, expanded, or updated District government policies and programs aimed at reducing the numbers of vacant and blighted properties and their negative impacts, including but not limited to: modifications of current property tax rates and regulations (including those pertaining to tax liens and tax sales);^x financial and real estate guidance to owners and potential purchasers, investors, and developers; stronger enforcement of building codes coupled with guidance to owners on compliance;^{xi} government-financed purchase, redevelopment, and resale of properties (e.g., through establishment of a land bank^{xii}); public/private partnerships (e.g., pay for success models^{xiii}); use of data analytics to identify properties at risk of becoming vacant or blighted;^{xiv} engagement with mortgage lenders and borrowers to prevent or facilitate foreclosures and to maintain properties;^{xv} stronger requirements on owners to secure and maintain properties; greater surveillance and inspection of properties; application of eminent domain; demolition of vetted properties;^{xvi} development of vacant lots as green spaces;^{xvii} and facilitating development of vacant commercial properties to provide needed community services (e.g., grocery stores, health centers);

Task Force Approach

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT: The task force adopt a systemic perspective that examines how the factors that lead properties to become and remain vacant and blighted interact with broader patterns of economic development and power in the District and region, including disparities in economic resources of individuals, households, and businesses along racial, ethnic, and geographic lines;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT: In developing recommendations, the task force take into account known and potential impacts of government policies and programs on economic and social disparities;^{xviii}

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT: The task force consult with community members and organizations, including ANCs, in all wards to learn about and build upon their experiences and views regarding vacant and blighted properties and their ideas for how to reduce the numbers and negative impacts of these properties;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT: The task force draw on relevant research and discussion in academic, policy, and legal domains and the experiences of other cities in the United States and other countries in addressing vacant and blighted properties;^{xix}

Task Force Report and Implementation

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT: Within two years of its formation, the task force issue a final written report describing its findings and recommendations; and the Council expeditiously hold hearings and meetings in which the report and the Council’s and Mayor’s proposals for implementing its recommendations are presented, discussed, and voted upon;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT: The Council and Mayor approve sufficient funding and staffing (possibly including establishment of a dedicated office) to support successful implementation of those task force recommendations and any related proposals that are adopted.

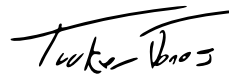
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Certification:

After providing sufficient notice for and with a quorum of 6 of 8 present at its October 5, 2023 meeting, Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1B voted, with 5 Yeas, 0 Nos, and 1 Abstention, to adopt the above resolution.



Sabel Harris
Chair, ANC 1B
ANC 1B08



Tucker Jones
Secretary, ANC 1B
ANC 1B09

ⁱ D.C. Dept. of Buildings Public Dashboard (Vacant Properties), <https://dataviz1.dc.gov/t/OCTO/views/DOBPublicDashboard/VacantProperties?%3Aembed=y&%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y> (accessed Sept. 18, 2023).

ⁱⁱ “Vacant Buildings,” D.C. Dept. of Buildings, <https://dob.dc.gov/page/vacant-buildings>. “Register a Blight Property,” D.C. Dept. of Buildings, <https://dob.dc.gov/node/1617891>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tax rates: Class 1 (residential), 0.85% assessed value; Class 2 (commercial/industrial), 1.65-1.89%; Class 3 (vacant), 5%; Class 4 (blighted), 10%. (D.C. Office of Tax and Revenue: “Real Property Tax Rates,” <https://otr.cfo.dc.gov/page/real-property-tax-rates>; “OTR Vacant Real Property,” <https://otr.cfo.dc.gov/page/otr-vacant-real-property>.)

^{iv} “Register a Building as Exempt,” D.C. Dept. of Buildings, <https://dob.dc.gov/service/register-building-exempt>.

^v Data downloaded from D.C. Dept. of Buildings Public Dashboard (Vacant Properties).

^{vi} “Exploring the relationship between vacant and distressed properties and community health and safety,” Case Western Reserve Univ. (2017), https://case.edu/socialwork/sites/case.edu.socialwork/files/2018-10/vacant_distressed_props_comm_health_safety.pdf.

Porter, L.C., et al. (2019). Understanding the criminogenic properties of vacant housing: A mixed methods approach. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 56(3), 378-411. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427818807965>

“Can we curb crime by cleaning the corner?,” Shelterforce (Feb. 4, 2021), <https://shelterforce.org/2021/02/04/can-we-curb-crime-by-cleaning-the-corner/>.

“How vacant and abandoned buildings affect the community,” Center for Community Progress (March 24, 2023), <https://communityprogress.org/blog/how-vacant-abandoned-buildings-affect-community/>

^{vii} “Can’t go home again: How a District program to fight blight preserves vacant lots, instead,” *Washington City Paper* (Aug. 5, 2010), <https://washingtoncitypaper.com/article/385480/cant-go-home-again-how-a-district-program-to-fight-blight-preserves-vacant-lots-instead/>

“Ward 1 has 255 vacant properties. Here’s a map showing where they are,” *DCist* (May 20, 2013), <https://dcist.com/story/13/05/20/map-shows-every-vacant-and-blighted/>.

“D.C. failing to crack down on abandoned buildings, report finds,” *Washington Post* (Sept. 21, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/dc-failing-to-crack-down-on-decrepit-buildings-report-finds/2017/09/21/181c7a6a-9e14-11e7-9083-fbfff6804c2_story.html.

“D.C.’s problems with vacant, blighted properties haven’t gone away, residents and officials say,” *Washington Post* (July 28, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/07/28/dc-vacant-blighted-properties/>.

“Some D.C. homeowners see skyrocketing property tax bills after houses declared vacant,” *WAMU* 88.5 (Aug. 16, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/local/305/2022/08/16/1117670236/some-d-c-homeowners-see-skyrocketing-property-tax-bills-after-houses-declared-vacant>.

“Empty eyesores: Dozens of blighted homes sit for decade or more,” *News 4 I-Team* (May 24, 2023), <https://www.nbcwashington.com/investigations/empty-eyesores-dozens-of-blighted-homes-sit-for-decade-or-more/3354655/>.

Over the last year, the following ANCs have issued resolutions regarding vacant and blighted properties: 1A, 1E (RES-4856), and 4D (RES-4566). (See: <https://resolutions.anc.dc.gov/Documents.aspx>.)

viii <https://ore.dc.gov/>

ix <https://ore.dc.gov/actionplan>

x “Cities now use taxes to fight blight. Is it working?” *Governing* (May 8, 2018), <https://www.governing.com/archive/gov-cities-blight-taxes-1c.html>.

xi “Strategic Code Enforcement,” Center for Community Progress, <https://communityprogress.org/resources/strategic-code-enforcement/>.

xii “Land Banks,” Center for Community Progress, <https://communityprogress.org/resources/land-banks/>.

“This bill could help D.C. turn vacant homes into grocery stores,” *DCist* (April 25, 2023), <https://dcist.com/story/23/04/25/dc-nadeau-housing-bill/>.

xiii “Can pay for success be a tool to fight blighted properties?,” Urban Institute (Dec. 5, 2018), <https://pfs.urban.org/pay-success/pfs-perspectives/can-pay-success-be-tool-fight-blighted-properties>.

xiv Lee, J., et al. (2022). Predicting detached housing vacancy: A multilevel analysis. *Sustainability*, 14, 922. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14020922>

Lee, R. J., et al. (2023). Using neighborhood characteristics to predict vacancy types: Comparing multi-scale conditions surrounding existing vacant lots. *Environment and Planning B: Urban Analytics and City Science*, (online prepublication). <https://doi.org/10.1177/23998083231160542>

xv Caloir, H. (2018). The “zombie” and vacant properties remediation and prevention initiative: Emerging best practices. New York State Housing Stabilization Fund, LISC. <https://www.lisc.org/our-resources/resource/zombie-vacant-properties-remediation-prevention/>

xvi Mallach, A. (2018). The empty house next door: Understanding and reducing vacancy and hypervacancy in the United States. Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. <https://www.lincolnst.edu/publications/policy-focus-reports/empty-house-next-door>

xvii Mallach, A. (2018).

Jin, H.-Y., et al. (2021). Can urban greening using abandoned places promote citizens’ wellbeing? Case in Daegu City, South Korea. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 57, 126956. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2020.126956>

xviii In some cases, redevelopment of vacant properties may increase disparities; see: Lee, R.J., & Newman, G. (2021). The relationship between vacant properties and neighborhood gentrification. *Land Use Policy*, 101, 105185. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.105185>

Regarding impacts of property tax policies on disparities, see: “Policy brief: Tyler v. Hennepin County analysis and policy reform options for state and local governments,” Center for Community Progress (Aug. 2023), <https://communityprogress.org/publications/tyler-hennepin-policy-brief/>.

xix Examples of relevant literature include:

Lee, R.J., & Newman, G. (2019). A classification scheme for vacant urban lands: Integrating duration, land characteristics, and survival rates. *Journal of Land Use Science*, 14, 306-319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1747423X.2019.1706655>

Mallach, A., et al. (eds.) (2019). *Vacant and problem properties: A guide to legal strategies and remedies*. American Bar Association. <https://www.americanbar.org/products/inv/book/393574499/>

O’Callaghan, C., & Di Felicianantonio, C. (Eds.) (2023). *The new urban ruins: Vacancy, urban politics and international experiments in the post-crisis city*. Policy Press. <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/the-new-urban-ruins>

Song, X., et al. (2020). Urban vacant land in growing urbanization: An international review. *Journal of Geographical Sciences*, 30, 669–687. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11442-020-1749-0>