



To: Senate Committee on Commerce

From: Councilwoman Lavonta Williams, Wichita City Council (District I)

Date: February 2, 2016

Subject: Written Comments on the Consideration of Senate Bill 338 Relating to the Rehabilitation of Abandoned Property

Madam Chair Lynn, Madam Vice Chair Wagle, and members of the Senate Committee on Commerce, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of the City of Wichita in response to the Committee's review and consideration of SB 338. I hope this testimony will underscore the need for legislation such as the bill before you to equip cities with the necessary tools to adequately address blight and maintain safe, healthy, and vibrant communities.

The Wichita City Council has worked tirelessly to address blight for more than a decade. We have strengthened our respective ordinances and partnered with local organizations that share our commitment to maintaining a healthy and desirable quality of life in our neighborhoods (i.e. Habitat for Humanity, Mennonite Housing, Love Wichita, and the Wichita Area Association of Realtors). Our collective observations and experiences, along with those of our residents, exemplify the concerns associated with blight and the desire to more comprehensively address this issue. The attached news articles demonstrate residents' concerns and community efforts to improve distressed neighborhoods in recent years. Residents are doing their part by notifying City Hall when blight emerges in their community. Some even go above and beyond to try to address the concern on their own for the sake of their quality of life and the overall quality of the area. Local organizations use their expertise to rehabilitate and build high-quality, affordable housing units and transform entire neighborhoods. As a City, we cite property owners in violation of building codes, try to connect them to resources to help them achieve compliance if they are willing but unable to do so, and make multiple attempts to contact owners who have abandoned their properties (more than half of certified mail notices return to us unclaimed). When absolutely all else fails and after about eight months from the initial request (but potentially years after the property was first cited for code violations), a dangerous and unsafe structure can finally be razed. That is

We echo the concerns of our partners in the City of Topeka and the Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas regarding the dangerous and destructive cycle of deterioration that can consume a community if blight is left unchecked or poorly managed. An abandoned property with overgrown grass can quickly become a rundown, gutted haven for criminals or an unstable structure over run by vermin, which would not only reduce the property value of the area, especially for homeowners and property owners adjacent to the blighted properties, but also negatively affect the perceptions of residents and the public regarding the

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area's suitability for living or even visiting. That is why we believe cities should have greater authority to intervene between the time a property exhibits multiple code violations and when, in the worst cases, it is finally demolished, which could occur months or years after initial contact. Many of these demolished properties could have likely been salvaged, rehabilitated, and returned to the tax rolls at some point during that time had the legal mechanisms existed to do so. But even demolition alone does not solve the problem, as the vacant lots created still require regular maintenance and often become sites for illegal dumping, thereby creating yet another public health and safety concern and fueling this vicious cycle.

Wichita has an estimated 17,600 vacant properties, according to the 2010-2014 American Community Survey. The City's Metropolitan Area Building and Construction Department has open cases on 165 neglected properties, along with more than 2,000 housing and 7,000 nuisance cases. We understand that we cannot reach all of the properties that need attention, but by assisting our community partners to more fully carry out their missions and helping them rehabilitate abandoned properties that are having a detrimental effect on the surrounding area, we can certainly address an increased number of properties and increase the speed at which distressed communities are revived, while still first respecting and protecting individual property rights.

As I look back at an opinion article I submitted to the Wichita Eagle in December 2010 (attached), I realize that its concerns and assertions continue to hold true. The status quo is still not acceptable, and we all still have a collective responsibility to maintain our city. The residents are supportive of reducing blight. The expertise and capacity to reduce blight exists in the community. Now, the Wichita City Council needs the ability to more effectively advocate for our city's distressed areas so that all of our communities can be safe, healthy, and livable. SB 338 would not be a cure-all, but it would certainly be a very valuable tool to help us and municipalities across the state address one aspect of a very large problem that will require strong partnerships, innovative strategies, and political support to effectively control, reduce, and, hopefully one day, eliminate.

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