



To: House Committee on Commerce, Labor and Economic Development

From: Councilwoman Lavonta Williams, On Behalf of the Wichita City Council

Date: March 9, 2016

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

Chairman Hutton, Vice Chairman Mason, Ranking Member Frownfelter, and members of the House Committee on Commerce, Labor and Economic Development, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of the City of Wichita in response to the Committee's 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 learned during this time that progress can be realized more quickly and efficiently when we all work together to do what we can to protect our communities. Residents have done their part by notifying City Hall when blight develops in their communities. Some have even gone above and beyond by trying to directly address these concerns for the sake of their own quality of life and the overall quality of the area. Local organizations have used their expertise to rehabilitate and construct high-quality, affordable housing units that have helped to transform entire neighborhoods. For its part, the City Council has strengthened its blight-related ordinances and partnered with local organizations that share its commitment to maintaining healthy and desirable neighborhoods (i.e. Habitat for Humanity, Love Wichita, Mennonite Housing, Power CDC, and the Wichita Area Association of Realtors). We have also cited property owners in violation of building codes, made multiple attempts to contact owners who have abandoned their properties (more than half of certified mail notices return to us unclaimed), and connected them to resources that could help them achieve compliance if they are willing but unable to do so. Our collective observations and experiences, along with those of our residents, substantiate the concerns associated with blight and motivate our desire to more comprehensively address this issue. Many recent news articles provide a glimpse of residents' concerns and recent community efforts to improve distressed neighborhoods in our community.

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 to rehabilitate abandoned properties that are having a detrimental effect on the surrounding area, we can

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certainly decrease the number of blighted properties and revive distressed communities more quickly, all while still respecting and protecting individual property rights.

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 overwhelm 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. This would not only result in a reduction of the neighborhood's property values but could also foster negative perceptions of the neighborhood and its surrounding areas and call into question its suitability for living or even visiting, thus impacting property ownership and tourism.

Furthermore, the persistence of blight negatively affects the public's confidence in their government to keep their city safe, healthy, and livable. For these reasons, we believe municipalities 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. Even demolition alone does not solve the problem, as the vacant lots created still require regular maintenance and often become sites for illegal dumping, creating yet another public health and safety concern to fuel this vicious cycle. Many of these demolished properties could have likely been salvaged, rehabilitated, and returned to the tax rolls at some point during this timeframe if the legal mechanisms had existed to do so.

As I look back at an opinion article I submitted to the Wichita Eagle in December 2010 (<http://www.kansas.com/opinion/opn-columns-blogs/article1049425.html>), I realize that my concerns and assertions continue to hold true. The status quo is still not acceptable, and we all still have a responsibility to maintain and improve the wellbeing and quality of our city. Our residents are supportive of reducing blight, and the expertise and capacity exists in the community to accomplish this. Now, we just need the ability to connect these resources to a growing and unmet need and to more effectively advocate for our city's distressed areas so that all of our communities can be safe, healthy, and vibrant.

SB 338—the result of a collaborative process that reflects the feedback of public, private, and nonprofit interests—would not be a cure-all, but it would certainly serve as a very valuable tool to help Wichita and municipalities across the state address one aspect of a very large problem that will continue to require strong partnerships, innovative strategies, and political support in order to effectively control, reduce, and, hopefully one day, eliminate it.

Thank you for your time and consideration of SB 338.

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