

House OKs bills to fight blight

The 17-bill anti-blight package would arm officials to punish negligent property owners and fund revitalization plans.

By Amy Worden

INQUIRER HARRISBURG BUREAU

HARRISBURG — The state House of Representatives yesterday passed legislation giving cities unprecedented tools to punish negligent property owners responsible for urban blight.

Hoping to stem flight to the suburbs by restoring cities and small towns, lawmakers overwhelmingly approved the 17-bill "anti-blight" package.

The core bills target slumlords by giving municipalities a wide range of powers to deny permits and licenses to those with outstanding code violations. One measure gives individuals and community groups legal standing to sue property owners over code violations.

The legislation, which now goes to the Senate for consideration, also includes financial incentives for local governments to revitalize downtown areas.

"We are sending the message to communities who need to clean up and improve their neighborhoods that [the legislature] is going to stand with you and give you more ammunition to take on these slumlords, shut them down, and penalize them," said State Rep. George Kenney (R., Phila.), sponsor of a bill giving specific permit-denial authority to Philadelphia.

With more than 55,000 blighted properties, including 31,000 vacant lots and 26,000 abandoned buildings, Philadelphia has the highest number of vacancies per capita of any major U.S. city, according to a recent Brookings Institute survey of 83 cities.

Kenney said the legislation could prevent costly cleanups such as Mayor Street's proposed \$250 million blight-removal program that calls for the demolition of 14,000 buildings.

"How did we get to this point?" he said. "We shouldn't have to wait until 50,000 properties are abandoned to do something about it."

House Majority Leader John Perzel (R., Phila.) called blight "an epidemic that has infected neighborhoods all across the city."

He said that unless decay was stopped it "eventually destroys the quality of life in any neighborhood it

Pa. House OKs anti-blight bills

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One bill would track negligent property owners by establishing a statewide computer registry of housing-code violations.

The targets are the "egregious violators," said Jeri Stumpf, executive director of the House Urban Affairs Committee, "those who milk equity out of a building and leave the carcass to the neighborhood and leave the state and local government to clean it up."

The package could be called the 'clean up your act bill,'" said Joanne Denworth, executive director of 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania, a statewide alliance of groups that advocates managed growth and urban revitalization.

Also included are bills aimed at reviving downtown commercial areas and adjacent neighborhoods.

One bill would make permanent the state's \$2.5 million Main Street Program, which awards grants to communities to help revitalize downtown commercial districts, largely through facade, lighting and sidewalk improvements.

Another bill would create the \$2.5 million "Elm Street Program," an initiative modeled after the Main Street Program and intended to build upon its improvements. The Elm Street Program seeks to rejuvenate residential neighborhoods that adjoin the commercial districts.

Fifteen of the 17 bills were approved by the House last session but never introduced in the Senate and had to be reintroduced.

State Sen. Charles Dent (R., Lehigh), chairman of the Senate Urban Affairs Committee, said he was confident that at least several of the bills would win Senate approval.

"I believe it will be fairly easy to arrive at a consensus, at least on the ones that come to my committee," he said. "Many of the bills seemed reasonable, and I will work hard to advance them."

Bill sponsors say that bolstering urban areas will stem the tide of suburban sprawl.

"If you don't help cities and towns, people will move out and we'll have more sprawl," Kenney said.

Local officials in Philadelphia's suburbs agreed.

"The best way to protect open space is to make some of the existing towns more attractive so people want to stay there and move there," Michael Stokes, assistant director for the Montgomery County Planning Commission, said.

Stokes said communities were powerless to combat slumlords.

"It's a real problem when landlords are delinquent on various improvements and there is almost nothing the municipality

can do," he said. "Then the landlord goes out and gets five more permits, and the municipality can't deny them."

Upper Darby recently established a property-maintenance task force to help clean up blighted areas and enforce code violations.

"It dovetails nicely into what we are doing on our own, and we welcome any support that we can receive," said Thomas Judge Jr., the township's chief administrative officer.

Next door in Millbourne Borough, similar efforts are under way in a 0.07-square-mile municipality with an increasing number of recent immigrants living in substandard housing.

"They understand that their living conditions aren't great, but they don't understand what their rights are," said Dru Staud, borough manager.

In Bensalem, where officials have bought and razed community eyesores, including an abandoned restaurant, planning director Matthew Takita applauded the legislation.

"We think the bills are a good thing," Takita said. "If it will obtain the end result of compliance and secure property, then we are in favor of it."

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Inquirer staff writer Kristin E. Holmes contributed to this article.