

# Jail bad slumlords

Jeri Stumpf was in town this week. He brought a powerful message.

Unfortunately, the audience wasn't very large, but there were movers and shakers who listened and liked what they heard.

I did, too. So, I guess my contribution can be to spread the message. That's the one commodity we have in the newspaper business — ink.

Stumpf has roots in York County. He spent a summer, while a student at Dickinson College, working for the redevelopment authority. If I understood correctly, after graduation he became the first county planner.

He is currently the executive director of the House Urban Affairs Committee.

He certainly seems to be the right guy at the right time for small and large cities across Pennsylvania.

"If I rob a bank, I go to jail," Jeri told the group.

"But if I buy a city property, milk all of the equity out of it, allow it to decay before I allow it because I owe taxes or other liens, leading to neighborhood decay and lowered property values for other homeowners, meaning other taxpayers have to make up the difference, do I go to jail?"

The right answer should be yes, but we all know the answer is no.

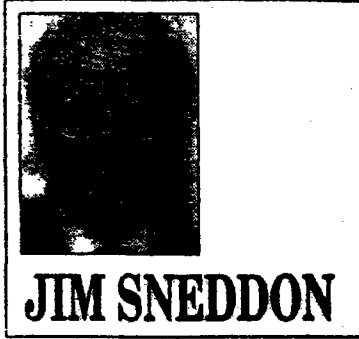
It sounded to me as if Jeri was making a very good point about stealing, but in Pennsylvania, if you are a landlord who wants to beat the system, you can steal from the taxpayers and have minimal consequences.

Early in the evening, Steven M. Hovis, assistant city solicitor, explained the penalties for code violations. He pointed out the maximum fine is \$500 for civil penalties and \$1,000 for criminal penalties. He noted how district justices seldom levied maximum fines.

He noted how difficult it is to cite out-of-town, out-of-state landlords. And he noted how difficult it is to collect the fines when they are ignored.

That seems to be a favorite tactic of slum landlords under the current codes in Pennsylvania: Ignore them and ignore the penalties.

Jeri underlined, however, the end result of consistent code vio-



lations.

"Urban blight is leading to the destruction of our cities," Jeri said.

The House Urban Affairs Committee held hearings last year examining the problem of blight and how to eradicate it, and how to expedite economic development in Pennsylvania's cities.

The committee produced an extensive report, which I'll devour in the coming weeks, but that report has led to bipartisan legislation in the House and Senate to address the issues of urban decay because of slum landlords.

Here are some aspects of the legislation:

Stiffen the fines. Make the penalty cumulative. If the \$1,000 fine is not paid after 30 days, the fine is increased by \$1,000 a day. After 90 days the offense becomes a misdemeanor, and landlords are sent to jail.

"Make it a crime," Jeri insists.

If it means going after landlords who live out of state, the legislature must find a way to deal with extradition.

"We do it with other crimes. We have to do it here, too," Jeri said.

Then he unveiled the power player in the current legislative approach.

"We are advocating going after all the assets of individual owners." Jeri's tone punctuated the word "all."

Currently, if legal action is brought against a property owner, it can only apply to the property in question. If that property is worthless, or has little economic value, there is no effective cudgel to force the property owner to respond.

If the property owner has a lot of assets, and a lot of properties, and those assets can be attached, it changes the playing field.

"Why should the landlord be allowed to have all those assets when he or she owes the taxpay-

ers?"

It's a good question. It gets back to the original point about thieves. It's also a reason why this legislation is bipartisan. Conservatives can support it because slumlords' practices rob taxpayers. Liberals can support it because the poor and cities get support.

Mortgage corporation? Jeri also made an interesting case for a Commonwealth Mortgage Guarantee Corporation.

I'm not sure about this stuff because I don't have any expertise here, and I worry about who is benefiting from tax write-offs, government guarantees etc.

But I can agree with several points.

If this corporation guarantees loans so that the private banking industry will be more likely to grant loans to minorities and others who have little capital, then it is likely to aid cities and the economy.

Jeri cited York Federal Savings and Loan as a major success story in York because it has been the catalyst to get various projects going in the city, creating a partnership between government, residents and businesses, and the banking industry.

I am less clear about the legislation and how nonprofits play a role. I am also uncertain if I can support the tax-free-zone legislation, because I'm not sure who benefits — the community, private investors, or both.

And I really worry about how the county plays a role in all this, particularly if it is going to get tax credits, because some of those tax credit revenues must come back to the city.

Most of the folks in attendance, however, seemed to feel that what they heard from Jeri was positive. I got the sense there were glitches here and there that need to be addressed, but the overall proposal is necessary to help cities deal with these problems.

As York City pushes forward with its vision for the year 2015, blight is a serious concern. I'm sure we're going to see efforts to deal with it at our level, but it sure would help if the legislature weighed in with some weapons.

Columns by James D. Sneddon, editor and publisher of The York Dispatch/York Sunday News, appear Sundays.