

State panel promises help in city's war on blight

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By Cynthia Burton
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At a hearing of the state House Urban Affairs Committee yesterday, legislators promised to give Mayor Street's blight program a boost by streamlining the state property-acquisition laws and severely punishing illegal dumpers.

"Whether it's education or blight elimination, we've got to talk," said the committee chairman, State Rep. George Kenney (R., Phila.). "We're the

state government and we're here to help."

The meeting, held at Temple University's Tomlinson Theater, was sparsely attended. But it gave the committee a chance for a wide-ranging, three-hour discussion with city blight-fighters.

Herbert Wetzel, executive director of the city's Redevelopment Authority, gave the committee some proposed legal language yesterday that would expand the definition of a

"blighted property."

Over the last few decades, 60,000 property owners abandoned their land, factories, and homes. Many have outstanding city liens on them, including liens for back taxes and for demolishing the abandoned homes.

But because of legal restrictions favoring property owners' rights and a cumbersome city bureaucracy, it takes at least two years to move a property into the hands of a new owner.

Kathleen Murray, special assistant to Council President Anna C. Verna, said it had taken from 1970 to 1998 to move a block of abandoned properties in Grays Ferry to neighbors for use as yards.

Under Wetzel's proposal, the city could confiscate a property if liens on it amounted to more than 1½ times the property's fair market value.

Kenney said he would push for the changes.

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Wetzel also asked the state to raise the fines on illegal dumpers. On the rare occasions when they are caught, dumpers are fined \$300. The fine "is cheaper than going to a proper disposal facility," Wetzel said.

In Detroit, the city can fine dumpers \$5,000 and impound their vehicles.

Kenney said the committee was already working on a bill that would make illegal dumping less profitable.

State Rep. Marie Lederer (D., Phila.) said she wanted a housing court, modeled on one in Pittsburgh, where fines on violators are used to fix or seal vacant homes.

"The city is falling apart and nobody takes our codes seriously," said City Councilman Michael Nutter. He said bringing code violations to city courts does not work because judges are dealing with many more serious problems, such as murders and

assaults.

Pointing out that the committee's three top members were Philadelphians, Lederer, who is the ranking Democrat, said "the city has a unique opportunity to affect this committee, so take advantage of it."

Her sentiments were echoed by State Rep. John Taylor (R., Phila.), the ranking Republican.

Most of the half dozen members at yesterday's event talked about communication.

Patricia L. Smith, director of the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Transformation, said that she and her staff had talked with committee staffers or members at least twice in the last year.

Apparently, that was not enough for the committee, which is why Kenney decided to bring the hearing to Philadelphia as a symbolic gesture.

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