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The war on blight

Pennsylvania communities should get more ammo to hold landlords responsible.

Slum housing has been a nearly irrepressible problem in urban areas. But even in other parts of Pennsylvania, the rights of even the most irresponsible property owners can trump the rights of struggling communities.

So the state House of Representatives passed a series of modest but important bills Monday and Tuesday that would squeeze slum landlords to clean up violations of the housing code, major maintenance problems, or make good on tax arrears.

However, in its rush to get home for the holidays, the Senate won't have time to consider the bills, said Stephen MacNett, general counsel to the Senate. But, he added, "the Senate already has passed some comparable legislation, and these bills are the kind of issues that can reasonably be dealt with this winter or spring."

Let's hope he keeps the Senate on track.

House Majority Leader John M. Perzel (R., Philadelphia) rightly wants to give communities around the state the "legal tools to confront slumlords and land speculators who have allowed neighborhoods to rot."

The bills could be useful to Mayor-elect John F. Street, who campaigned on a platform to clean up (or clean out) acres of dilapidated and abandoned housing in some of the most downtrodden parts of Philadelphia.

And it would make it not only possible but imperative for Montgomery County leaders to initiate a major up-

grade of the worst areas of their county seat in Norristown — not to forget Pottstown, Bristol or Chester.

The package of 12 bills includes one to empower towns and counties to deny several kinds of permits to slumlords and speculators who abuse housing codes or who fail to pay taxes on properties.

An even more potent weapon would allow municipalities, counties, community groups and individuals to sue delinquent landlords over serious property maintenance violations.

Unfortunately, a bill that would allow the state to deny deadbeat landlords various environmental and transportation permits was withdrawn from consideration when Democrats loaded it with disparate amendments, according to Mr. Perzel's office. It should be brought back next year.

Another measure worth passing is one that would set up a statewide computerized registry to track deadbeat landlords. That way counties and cities could coordinate their actions.

In addition to these punitive measures that would have helped put manners on bad property owners, the package should include the creation of a state-backed \$30 million loan guarantee fund that would encourage lenders in major cities to make loans to otherwise risky ventures in blighted areas.

Targeting slums for renewal should have been part of the 1999 agenda. It now needs to be put near the top of the legislature's work for 2000.