

Department of Legislative Services  
Maryland General Assembly  
2014 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE  
Revised

House Bill 645

(Delegate Weir, *et al.*)

Environmental Matters

Judicial Proceedings

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Real Property - Landlord Defenses in Nuisance Actions

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This bill establishes a defense to any nuisance action brought under State or local law against a landlord if the tenant's actions are the sole basis for the nuisance action. The landlord must also provide evidence that either an action has been filed and is pending in the District Court for repossession of the leased premises or the landlord possesses a warrant of restitution and is awaiting an eviction.

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Fiscal Summary

**State Effect:** The bill does not directly affect State governmental operations and finances.

**Local Effect:** The bill does not directly affect local governmental operations and finances.

**Small Business Effect:** Minimal.

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Analysis

**Current Law/Background:**

*Breach of Lease:* When an unexpired lease authorizes the landlord to repossess the premises prior to the expiration of the stated term of the lease if the tenant breaches the lease, the landlord may file an action for repossession (an eviction action) in the District Court. The action may be filed if (1) the tenant breaches the lease; (2) the landlord has given the tenant 30 days written notice of the breach and the landlord's desire to repossess the premises; and (3) the tenant or person in actual possession of the premises refuses to comply. Alternatively, the landlord is required to give 14 days written notice if

the tenant or another person on the premises with the tenant's consent breaches the lease by presenting a clear and imminent danger of serious harm to the landlord, the landlord's property, or any person on the premises.

*Nuisance:* The concept of "nuisance" originates under common law and is something that causes offense, annoyance, trouble, or injury. A private nuisance obstructs the rights of a specific individual or group, while a public nuisance is an act or omission that obstructs, damages, or inconveniences the rights of the community.

Several types of nuisances are specifically addressed in State law, including:

- conditions that are dangerous to health or safety, including an inadequately protected swimming pool, an unprotected open ditch, an unsanitary outhouse, a foul pigpen, an improperly functioning sewage system, an unkempt junkyard or scrap metal processing facility, an excessive accumulation of trash or garbage, a dead animal, a contaminated or inadequately protected water supply, a rodent harborage, poor housekeeping that could endanger an individual's health, or any condition that may endanger health and may be transmitted by means including surface drainage and air currents (Title 20 of the Health-General Article);
- dwellings, buildings, vehicles, vessels, aircraft, or any other place(s) used by individuals to administer illegally controlled substances or where controlled dangerous substances or controlled substances or controlled paraphernalia are manufactured, distributed, dispensed, stored, or concealed illegally (Title 5 of the Criminal Law Article);
- conditions affecting public health and involving plumbing, drainage, offensive trades, water supplies, and disposal of any waste material (Title 10 of the Environment Article); and
- property that is used for prostitution or for the administration, manufacture, distribution, or storage of a controlled dangerous substance or related paraphernalia (Title 14 of the Real Property Article).

Depending on the nuisance, the department charged with abating the nuisance is authorized to enter onto private property to determine its existence.

Additionally, each county board of health is authorized to adopt and enforce rules and regulations on any nuisance or cause of disease in the county. If a county health officer investigates and finds a nuisance, the health officer is required to serve a written notice to the person who is causing the nuisance, ordering the person to abate the nuisance within a specified period of time.

Generally, in a drug-related or prostitution nuisance abatement case, the court may issue an injunction or order other equitable relief whether or not there is an adequate remedy at law. The court may order appropriate relief without proof that the defendant knew about the nuisance. A court may also award costs and reasonable attorney's fees to a community association that is a prevailing plaintiff.

In addition to or as part of an injunction or other remedy, the court may order (1) a tenant who knew or should have known of the existence of the nuisance to vacate the property within 72 hours or (2) an owner or operator to submit a plan of correction for court approval to ensure that the property will not again be used for a nuisance if the owner or operator is a party to the action and knew or should have known about the nuisance.

If an owner fails to comply with a drug-related nuisance abatement order, in addition to issuing a contempt order or ordering any other relief, the court may order the property to be (1) sold at the owner's expense, in accordance with the Maryland Rules governing judicial sales or (2) demolished if the property is unfit for human habitation and the cost of rehabilitation significantly exceeds the estimated market value after rehabilitation. If an owner fails to comply with a prostitution nuisance abatement order, the court may issue a contempt order.

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### **Additional Information**

**Prior Introductions:** HB 1222 of 2013, a substantially similar bill, passed the House with amendments and was heard in the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, but it received no further action. HB 610 of 2012, another similar bill, received an unfavorable report from the House Environmental Matters Committee.

**Cross File:** None.

**Information Source(s):** Baltimore, Carroll, Montgomery, Queen Anne's, and St. Mary's counties; Office of the Attorney General (Consumer Protection Division); Judiciary (Administrative Office of the Courts); Department of Legislative Services

**Fiscal Note History:** First Reader - February 11, 2014  
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