

**Letter re Testimony SB967 - City Solicitor.pdf**

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Position: FAV

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TO: Budget and Taxation Committee (via the MyMGA Portal)  
FROM: Raymond M. Morriss, Mayor, City of Cumberland  
RE: Testimony for SB967  
DATE: March 15, 2022

Dear Members of the Budget and Taxation Committee:

I am the City Solicitor of Mayor and City Council of Cumberland (the “City”), the Maryland municipal corporation more commonly known as the City of Cumberland. This letter constitutes my testimony on behalf of the City in regard to SB967. I will speak to the purpose the proposed legislation is intended to serve from a legal perspective. The Mayor of the City, Raymond M. Morriss, will speak to the circumstances giving rise to the need for this legislation.

The City, like other local governments, has a vested interest in the outcome of tax sale foreclosures. Properties are sold at tax sale when real property taxes and certain other sums are not paid. Ideally, a tax sale purchaser would foreclose upon a property, pay the taxes current, take title, maintain and repair the property, and pay the taxes indefinitely into the future.

This bill is intended to address what happens when a tax sale foreclosure proceeding is concluded but the foreclosing party does not take title to the property. Tax sale foreclosures end with the issuance of a final order directing the tax collector to sign a deed once the taxes and other sums are paid. A property remains in limbo when the final order is issued but the foreclosing party does not take title. This occurs with a significant measure of frequency when the properties are bought by large-scale tax sale purchasers and the properties are blighted to the extent that it would not be a sound business decision to invest further sums in the properties.

When the foreclosing party doesn’t take title, the local government may delay offering the property for tax sale or it may again offer it for sale after the requisite number of years of unpaid taxes accrues. Either way, the property will be sold again, most likely to a large-scale tax certificate purchaser without knowledge of the condition of the property, or in the event no one bids, the certificate will be acquired by the county or the municipality in which the property is located. If a local government acquires the certificate, it can conduct its own tax sale foreclosure and acquire title to the property the same way any other certificate holder could.

Every time a tax sale certificate is purchased, the purchaser has two (2) years from the date of the sale to file a foreclosure case. Once the case is filed, it can drag on for an extended period of time, in some instances, more than a year and a half. If the foreclosing plaintiff does not take title after the case has been concluded, this cycle can repeat itself, starting off with the sale of the tax sale certificate to a new purchaser. This process can go on for years. Because the title of the property remains in limbo while this process plays out, the City refers to these properties as “zombie properties” or properties with “zombie titles.”

Presently, Section 14-847 of the Tax Property Article allows an interested party, including a local government, to file a motion to strike a final order if a property is not transferred to the foreclosing plaintiff within 90 days of the final order. If the motion is granted, the foreclosing plaintiff will lose any interest it has in the property. However, this does not directly benefit the interested party because the striking of the final order does not vest it with ownership rights in or the right to exercise dominion or control over the property.

If SB967 is passed, a local government will have the ability to take title free and clear of liens when a foreclosing party fails to do so within 120 days of the date of the entry of the final order. A local government that has been granted this relief will receive all of the benefits of a foreclosing plaintiff even though it did not conduct its own foreclosure. It will expedite a local government’s ability to take title and address blight.

The measure will have no effect upon the right of an interested party to file a motion to strike within 90 days of the date of the final order. The rights of the owner(s) of the property and any lienholders are not affected as the proceedings were already at the point where the owner could be divested of title and the liens would have been stripped. No one’s rights are adversely affected, including those of the foreclosing plaintiff, as the foreclosing plaintiff could have taken title but opted not to do so.

If passed, this measure will add a powerful new tool to assist local governments in fighting blight.

Respectfully submitted,



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Michael Scott Cohen  
City Solicitor  
City of Cumberland

**Letter re Testimony SB967 - Mayor.pdf**

Uploaded by: Raymond Morriss

Position: FAV



# CITY OF CUMBERLAND MARYLAND

TO: Budget and Taxation Committee  
FROM: Raymond M. Morriss, Mayor, City of Cumberland  
RE: Testimony for SB967  
DATE: March 15, 2022

Dear Members of the Budget and Taxation Committee:

I am the Mayor of the City of Cumberland (the “City”). Please accept this letter as my written testimony on the City’s behalf in support of the above-referenced bill.

The City of Cumberland, known as the “City of Steeples” and the “Queen City” was once the second-largest city in Maryland. Over the past several decades, some larger-scale employers have closed their businesses or left the area. Many of the properties which were at one point in time built to accommodate the City’s growing workforce in its heyday are no longer needed due to the decline in the City’s population, thereby creating and exacerbating blight.

There are a number of factors that contribute to blight, including but not limited to the deterioration in aging housing stock and the failure to maintain properties. These issues are not unique to the City. To varying degrees, blight is a problem for all of Maryland’s local governments.

The West Virginia University College of Law Land Use and Sustainable Development Law Clinic (the “Law Clinic”) prepared a Blight Action Plan for the City. In the course of inventorying the more than 11,000 structures in the City, the Law Clinic ascertained that 512 of them were blighted. The criteria for finding a property to be blighted included whether the building did not appear to have been maintained for the past 10 years or more and whether it had components that exceeded their useful life. The Law Clinic found that 36 of the blighted structures were commercial or residential. An additional 33 were mixed commercial/residential structures. All of the rest were residential. The Law Clinic also advised that there were a significant number of additional buildings that were on their way to becoming blighted.

**MAYOR**

RAYMOND M. MORRISS

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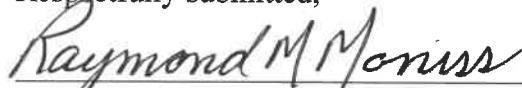
Incomplete tax sale foreclosures add to the City's blight problems. SB967 addresses those instances where tax sale foreclosure plaintiffs do not take title and assume the responsibilities of ownership. These properties are most often vacant, essentially ownerless, with no one tending to their upkeep. Nuisance and property maintenance issues typically arise or become exacerbated. On account of the foregoing, the City refers to these properties as "zombie properties" or properties with "zombie titles."

In movies and books, the longer a zombie remains above ground, the more tattered it becomes. Similarly, the longer a property has a zombie title, the more apt it is to become blighted or its blighted condition is likely to worsen.

The City has made a concerted effort to fight blight. Although not a panacea, if passed, SB967 will add a powerful tool to its blight-fighting toolbox.

I thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Raymond M. Morriss". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Raymond M. Morriss, Mayor,  
City of Cumberland