



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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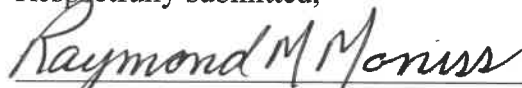
Incomplete tax sale foreclosures add to the City's blight problems. SB967 addresses those instances where tax sale foreclosure plaintiffs do not take title and assume the responsibilities of ownership. These properties are most often vacant, essentially ownerless, with no one tending to their upkeep. 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