



SB 138
Baltimore City - Property Taxes –
Authority to Set a Special Rate for Vacant and Abandoned Property

Hearing before the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
Jan. 24, 2024

POSITION: Favorable

Community Law Center (CLC) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, which is a legal partner to Maryland neighborhoods and nonprofits in pursuit of more just and vibrant communities. CLC provides direct legal representation to communities and nonprofits on issues like tax exemption and organizational governance, real estate, contracts, intellectual property, employment law, and more. We advocate on issues that impact our Maryland neighborhood and nonprofit clients, including to reform the tax sale system and to prevent and remediate property vacancy and abandonment.

CLC supports SB 138 to allow the Mayor and City Council of Baltimore City to set a special tax rate for vacant properties. This bill provides a much needed tool to address the vacant property crisis in Baltimore. Many vacant properties have been essentially abandoned by their owners, left to attract rodents and other pests, invite illegal dumping and other criminal activity, and accumulate trash and high grass and weeds. They become open to the elements, furthering their own deterioration and causing structural damage to neighboring structures, like attached row houses. These vacants also impact neighboring property values, pose a danger of collapse, and require increased City police, fire, and code enforcement services.

All the while, these abandoned properties further deteriorate. As they deteriorate, their assessed value decreases, and so, as a result, does the property tax due. This decreasing property tax perversely incentivizes the property owner to take no action to clean up and rehab the property, leaving the cycle of deterioration to continue – as it becomes more expensive to rehab the deteriorated vacant, it becomes less expensive to do nothing, since the low property tax is based on the low assessed value. With the incentive of low taxation if the property owner does nothing, there is no reason to clean up the property and return it to productive use. This impacts the neighboring properties and the entire community, which must now deal with this deteriorated and abandoned vacant property. It also impacts the City of Baltimore as a whole, contributing not only the vacant property crisis, but also to the City's declining tax base.

We need every tool to address vacant properties and return them to productive use. SB 138 provides one such tool, giving the Mayor and City Council the power to set a special tax rate for vacant properties to incentivize their rehabilitation, and disincentivize their abandonment and decay.

CLC supports SB 138. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

For the above reasons,
CLC urges a FAVORABLE VOTE ON SB 138.

Please contact Shana Roth-Gormley, Staff Attorney at Community Law Center, with any questions.
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