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House of Representatives
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
HARRISBURG

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Press Conference for HB712

Tuesday, June 22, 2010

Good morning and welcome. I am Rep. W. Curtis Thomas of the 181st Legislative District, Philadelphia County. I am the Majority Chairman of the House Urban Affairs Committee.

We are here today in anticipation of a very important step being taken in the ongoing fight to preserve neighborhoods across the Commonwealth. This morning my colleagues and I on the Urban Affairs Committee will vote on HB712, which provides for the establishment of land banks in municipalities throughout Pennsylvania. I am truly excited to be to be on the verge of advancing what I believe to be landmark legislation. Before I speak about the content of HB 712, I'd like to take a moment to speak about the path taken to arrive at this point.

One of the first goals I set for myself upon becoming the Chairman of Urban Affairs this past January was to review the bills in Committee and develop a bi-partisan strategy to focus on what legislative changes were needed to improve the bills, and then put the bills in a position to receive support from the General Assembly

HB 712 was a bill I knew would become a highlight of this bi-partisan process – it had been sitting in Urban Affairs since March 2009 without receiving serious consideration. Still, experience from other parts of the country has shown the land bank model is a valuable tool in combating blight and neighborhood disinvestment. In March, I made HB 712 a priority for this Committee.

Our first step was a workshop with Dan Kildee – the national authority on land banks. Mr. Kildee managed one of the earliest and most successful examples of a land bank when he was the Treasurer of Genesee County, Michigan. Our workshop generated so much interest that Dan, along with Frank Alexander of the Center for Community Progress and Cindy Daly of the PA Housing Alliance agreed to participate in a Committee task force which included democratic and republican staff. The Urban Affairs Committee also held an April stakeholders meeting with the Redevelopment

Authority of Philadelphia County, representatives from the Pennsylvania Senate, and Community Legal Services. Based on the information we have gathered, HB 712 has been redrafted and is ready for consideration by the House Urban Affairs Committee.

In the past few decades, we have all witnessed the slow decay and neglect in many of our urban and rural communities throughout the state. Abandoned properties, vacant lots and a crumbling housing stock have slowed redevelopment, given way to increased crime and diminished the quality of life in many areas. The land banks authorized by HB 712 will help address this by becoming a new tool for municipalities and counties across the Commonwealth.

Land banks are public entities created to efficiently acquire, hold, manage and develop tax-foreclosed property. Through the use of legal tools which land banks provide, a local government will be able to ensure that tax-foreclosed properties are sold or developed with the long term interests of the community and surrounding property owners in mind. Land banks are particularly known for being a tool to promote opportunities for redevelopment and affordable housing at a local level.

I should point out that HB 712 has was not proposed in a vacuum – over the last decade the General Assembly has worked diligently to pass laws that empower our local governments to tackle issues of blight and disinvestment. HB 712 adds a powerful tool to the existing measures already enacted.

Act 135 of 2008 – the Conservatorship Act has allowed courts to appoint a third party to rehabilitate or demolish a blighted property if the owner has disappeared or refused to act.

Act 171 of 2006 empowered local Redevelopment Authorities to step in where a property is left vacant.

Act 83 of 2004 amended the Municipal Claims and Tax Lien Law to eliminate the right of redemption for vacant properties

And Act 99 of 2000 – the Municipal Code and Ordinance Act created firm deadlines for how long property owners had to correct code violations.

Adding HB 712 to the Commonwealth’s existing toolbox will allow local governments to create an agency that can aggressively pursue property tax delinquencies while assembling a pool of

properties that can be used to spur the development of affordable housing.

It is my hope today that we are able to take a major step forward in reversing the trend of disinvestment in many areas of Pennsylvania.

Before I hand the microphone off to my colleagues, I am compelled to acknowledge the countless hours that so many individuals have put into crafting this final product. Getting HB712 to this point has truly been a team effort. I would like to thank Rep. Chris Ross, Chester County, Minority Chairman; Rep. John Taylor, Philadelphia County (prime sponsor); Dan Kildee and Frank Alexander of the Center for Community Progress; Cindy Daly of the PA Housing Alliance; and the talented legislative staff from both sides of the aisle who worked diligently on this issue. I thank them for all of their efforts.

Thank you.