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Senate Majority Policy Committee Meeting

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First, I want to thank Chairman Argall, President Pro Tempore Ward, and distinguished members of the Senate Major Policy Committee for taking the time to meet with us today to talk about this important issue. I also want to thank Senator Schlegel Culver for always being a champion for not just Sunbury, but all her municipalities within her district. Sunbury was once a bustling industrial hub along the Susquehanna River and now faces the challenge of urban blight. This phenomenon, marked by the decay and deterioration of buildings, vacant lots, and infrastructure, has become a significant concern for both the local government and its residents. Blight is not only an aesthetic problem but a socio-economic issue that affects the community's quality of life, public safety, and potential for revitalization.

The roots of blight in Sunbury can be traced to various economic and historical factors. Like many other former industrial towns in the northeastern United States, Sunbury saw a decline in its manufacturing sector during the mid-20th century. As factories closed or relocated, many jobs were lost, leading to population decline and economic stagnation. This shift caused a decrease in demand for housing and commercial properties, contributing to disinvestment in the area.

Furthermore, the loss of key industries, such as coal and textiles, left the city with a reduced tax base. Without adequate funding for infrastructure maintenance and public services, the city's neighborhoods began to deteriorate. Over time, landlords became less inclined to invest in property maintenance, and absentee ownership of buildings became more common, contributing to the spread of blight.

Another contributing factor is the aging housing stock in Sunbury, many of the city's homes and buildings are decades old, and without proper maintenance, they begin to deteriorate. Deferred repairs, weather damage, and neglect can lead to structural issues, making buildings unsafe and unattractive. These properties often sit vacant for extended periods, further exacerbating the blight problem. With Sunbury's population aging, the homes that once were the crown jewels of the town are decaying due to the inability to maintain them and the inability to move to a "working class" affordable retirement or "downsizing" community that is local.

Blight in Sunbury has far-reaching consequences. The most obvious impact is on property values. As buildings fall into disrepair, surrounding properties lose value, which affects homeowners and businesses alike. A decrease in property values leads to lower tax revenue for the city, which, in turn, makes it harder for Sunbury to fund essential service such as public safety and infrastructure improvements.

Public safety is another concern. Vacant and abandoned buildings provide havens for criminal activity. Whether it's vandalism, drug use, or squatting, these derelict structures can become breeding grounds for crime, making neighborhoods unsafe for residents. Additionally, vacant lots and overgrown properties can lead to safety hazards such as overgrown vegetation, which can obstruct visibility and encourage rodents or other pests.

Blight also has social and psychological effects on residents. A community with visible signs of neglect may experience a sense of hopelessness and decreased community pride. This, in turn, can lead to further disinvestment as people move away and businesses shy away from opening or expanding in these areas. In some cases, the cycle of decline becomes self-perpetuating, with each stage of blight worsening the next.

Addressing blight in Sunbury requires a multi-faceted approach involving state and local government, city residents, and private stakeholders. The city has taken steps to combat blight by implementing a city nuisance program, putting an emphasis on infrastructure projects to attract new business, provide LERTA as a tax incentive program to promote investment, and work on updated old and antiquated ordinances that may not be "business friendly."

The state plays a critical role in combating blight for communities like Sunbury by:

1. Funding for Demolition and Rehabilitation

- **State Grants and Loans:** The state can offer funding to demolish abandoned and dangerous buildings, or to rehabilitate properties. Programs like the **Blight Remediation Program** could provide grants or low-interest loans to local municipalities for these efforts.
- **Tax Incentives:** Offering tax incentives for developers to rehabilitate blighted properties can encourage private investment.

2. Community Revitalization Programs

- **Main Street Program:** Through initiatives like the **Main Street Program**, the state can provide technical support and financial assistance to revitalize downtown and commercial areas. This could help attract businesses and reduce blight in central areas of Sunbury.
- **Opportunity Zones:** Areas in Sunbury that are designated as opportunity zones could attract investment through state-level tax incentives for businesses and developers to invest in redevelopment projects.

3. Land Banks

- **State-Supported Land Banks:** The state could encourage or provide resources to create a land bank, which could acquire abandoned or tax-delinquent properties and return them to productive use. This process helps streamline the process of acquiring and redeveloping vacant properties.

4. Code Enforcement Assistance

- **Strengthening Code Enforcement:** The state can help local governments by providing training, resources, and funding to enhance code enforcement. This ensures that landlords and property owners are held accountable for maintaining their properties.
- **State-Backed Legal Support:** State attorneys can support municipalities in legal actions against absentee landlords and property owners who neglect their properties.
- **Legislation:** There needs to be stronger laws for municipalities to throw out bidders who are currently “problem landlords” due to delinquent taxes and have constant and unmitigated code violations. Without these safe guards, these types of landlords are free to purchase properties at a low price to provide equity for their next project and the municipalities are right back where they started.

5. Incentivizing Homeownership

- **First-Time Homebuyer Programs:** The state could provide incentives, such as down payment assistance and low-interest loans, to encourage homeownership in neighborhoods experiencing blight. Homeownership can foster pride in the community and reduce the incidence of neglected properties.
- **Revitalization through Homeownership:** Local programs could partner with state resources to assist low-income families in purchasing and restoring homes in areas that have experienced blight.

6. Public-Private Partnerships

- **Collaboration with Developers:** The state can encourage public-private partnerships to foster development in blighted areas. This could include offering incentives for developers to build market rate housing and mixed-use developments that improve the aesthetic and economic conditions of neighborhoods.

7. Blight Reduction Task Forces

- **State-Supported Blight Task Force:** The state could establish task forces or workgroups focused on blight reduction in specific regions, including Sunbury. These task forces could assess the scope of the problem, coordinate funding, and bring together various state and local agencies for a unified effort.

8. Community Engagement & Education

- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** State-funded campaigns could be used to educate residents on how to address blight, including reporting abandoned properties and organizing community clean-up efforts.
- **Neighborhood Partnerships:** Supporting grassroots organizations that work directly with residents to address blight through neighborhood watch groups, clean-up days, and beautification projects could create a sense of ownership and pride within communities.

9. Infrastructure Investment

- **State Infrastructure Support:** Blighted areas often suffer from deteriorated infrastructure (roads, streetlights, sidewalks). The state could direct funds towards upgrading and improving these key aspects of infrastructure, which in turn would make neighborhoods more appealing to investors and homeowners.

Blight in Sunbury is a complex issue that requires both immediate and long-term solutions. While the city has faced significant challenges, there are numerous opportunities for revitalization. By investing in infrastructure, encouraging economic development, and empowering residents to take part in the restoration of their neighborhoods, Sunbury can overcome the devastating effects of blight and create a brighter, more vibrant future for its community. With a combined effort from local government, businesses, and residents, Sunbury can revitalize its historic downtown and neighborhoods, ushering in a new era of growth and prosperity.