

Testimony of Mike McLaughlin

* Municipalities need to be able to raise the level of charges we can file against a severely derelict property owner. Current laws only allow a misdemeanor to be charged. We have had complete property collapses, after months of citations and the best we can do is a misdemeanor charge. Our current court system in Northumberland County is not jailing anyone on a misdemeanor. Property owners walk away with a \$100 TO \$300 fine, and nothing more. Even if they fail to pay the fine, we currently do not have enough constables to follow through with arrest, and the property owners are fully aware of this.

~~~A comment from a neighboring code officer:

"The biggest problem with fighting blight in Northumberland County is the legal system itself. As code officers we write Non-Traffic Citations which get turned into the local MDJ. Very few defendants actually PLEA on the citation; in fact, that's the whole game. They know not to PLEA and eventually the citation is thrown out after 5 years. We have been told that there aren't enough Constables that actually go out and transport defendants after a Bench Warrant is issued. After 3 citations are issued, the Police file criminal misdemeanor 2 charges for having a Public Nuisance. A court date is set and IF (BIG IF) the defendant shows up, the DA plays "let's make a deal" and promises are made but very little changes occur at the property. The biggest problem is that NOBODY shows up at the criminal hearing so they are found "Guilty IN ABSENTIA" According to our Solicitor, that is not good enough for the Township to move forward with abating the nuisance even though the Property Maintenance Code states a Code Official has the right to abate the violation, including demolition."

~~~~~

\* We need more help in funding code enforcement. There are grants and CBDG funds available for demolition, but very little available to help combat the problem BEFORE it gets that bad. The city of Shamokin currently employs one full time code officer, and one part time. In order to even put a dent in our issues, we need at least two full time, and one part time code officers. The more we have been pushing, the more expensive it gets. The cost of involving the police for criminal complaints,

and then the cost for code and police to attend the court hearings. Let us just say on average it takes three citations to earn you a criminal complaint. With our highest fine structure that would be a total of \$900.00 in fines. That is never what ends up being handed down by the magistrate, and they are almost always allowed to make minimal payments on the fine. In the meantime, the city has numerous hours of documentation for both code, police and secretarial staff involved. Then add to that the time spent in court between the magistrate and county court. Even when we win, we lose. At this point the property is still in the same condition, and the city has not received any payback whatsoever.

~~~~~

* We need a way to change or correct the tax sale process. After the city puts all the time and effort into trying to correct code violations, the property owner can let the property go for taxes. Even if the city has a lien on the property, all can be lost at a county tax sale when even municipal liens are forgiven. At this time the process needs to start all over with the new owners of the property.

A recommendation from a neighboring code officer:

"If someone wishes to purchase a CONDEMNED property at the county tax sale, they must be required to establish an ESCROW account held by the municipality with a minimum of \$10,000 showing proof they have the resources to renovate the structure. Due to the low property values in this area, this will prohibit the rise in "OUT OF STATE" buyers and possibly the municipality being able to purchase the property after the Judicial Sale and before the Repository Sale for \$122. Once the municipality owns the structure, they can incorporate other programs for renovation and future sale to Owner Occupied with stipulations similar to the CDBG First Time Home Buyer Program."

A second recommendation from a neighboring municipal leader:

"Change to the tax sale law to give municipalities first shot at properties, rather than having to bid against the average person at the public sale. In addition, the municipality shouldn't have to pay any of the back taxes/fees so long as they are acquiring for the betterment of the community."

~~~~~

\* We need a way to "RED FLAG" a property from the county tax sales, and/or a better way to qualify the person purchasing one of these blighted properties. Possibly a way to specify "Demolition Only" on a structure that is completely compromised. Currently we have buyers from outside of the county, and state purchasing these properties. It is almost impossible to force compliance from these buyers. Our local municipalities and our county cannot afford to go after them, the cost is just too great.

*A comment from a neighboring local community leader:  
"Some type of change to Limited Liability Corporations and the fact that you cannot find out who the person really is behind them."*

~~~~~

* At our blight meeting on 2/04/2025, we were provided with estimates for a list of 8 properties that have been slated for demolition this year. The prices range from \$16,830.00 to \$126,944.00 for a grand total of \$316,243.00 to remove just 8 properties. These are just average size homes in Shamokin, nothing large or commercial. That averages out to \$39,530.00 PER PROPERTY. An average empty lot in the City of Shamokin might bring \$5,000.00 per lot when sold, and that is being gracious. That would leave the city with a (-\$276,243.00) deficit just on the demolition cost from one year. That does not factor into it the time and effort to get these properties to this point, or the cost of the environmental study for each property. The City of Shamokin currently has approximately 75 blighted properties and that number is growing. With an average demolition cost of \$39,530.00, that totals out to \$2,964,750.00 just to get caught up.

* Bottom line for me is accountability. We need better tools and laws to be able to make derelict property owners responsible for THEIR property. We need to STOP utilizing precious CBDG funds and grants on fixing issues like this and put that funding to better use like paving streets and elevating services that will improve the lives of our law-abiding, taxpaying citizens.

If the level of the offense and fines are raised, and the probability of jail time is added. I think we can take a huge bite out of blight.