

Report Highlights

Commonwealth and Local Government Efforts to Ameliorate Blight

HR 740 directs the LB&FC to assess the adequacy of government efforts to combat urban blight, including the feasibility, cost, and effectiveness of a state registry of property maintenance code violators.

Findings

- Housing vacancy rates, a surrogate measure of blight, have increased in all classes of Pennsylvania municipalities except 2nd class townships. Vacancy rate increases have been most notable in our mid-size cities (27% increase between 1990 and 2000) and in Pittsburgh (22%).
- The loss of manufacturing jobs, coupled with an older housing stock, makes remediating Pennsylvania's blighted neighborhoods especially difficult. Pennsylvania's manufacturing jobs decreased 10.7% between 1990 and 2001.
- Many federal and state programs (we counted 30 state and 32 federal programs) have as at least part of their mission to remediate and rehabilitate neighborhoods, but the Commonwealth has not done a good job in assessing the effectiveness of these programs.
- A new Office of Housing and Community Revitalization was created in 2003 to address problems in coordination and policy development related to community revitalization efforts.
- Property maintenance codes, if properly developed and enforced, can be effective tools against blight. We found, however, that municipal codes and their enforcement vary widely, perhaps in part because DCED has not developed or encouraged a model code enforcement program.
- Computerized information systems can also be powerful tools in transforming neighborhoods, but most municipalities do not maintain a computerized inventory of vacant properties or code enforcement actions, and there is no Commonwealth program to encourage such efforts.
- Only moderate support exists for a statewide registry of property maintenance and nuisance code violators. Although initial costs may not be prohibitive (estimated at \$1 million), ensuring that such information is useful and accurate would require a major effort by all participants.
- Several recent reports cite the need for a better linkage between the Commonwealth's economic and community development strategies and the need for a stronger state role in focusing and coordinating policies. Various House and Senate Committees have also been working to identify legislative steps to better address the problems of blight.

Recommendations

- The Governor's Office of Housing and Community Revitalization should take the lead in creating a task force to develop a long-range plan for revitalizing PA's cities and boroughs.
- In the interim, the General Assembly should consider enacting legislation in the following areas: credit reporting, private action, adverse possession, permit denials, en masse judicial actions, and limited letter of estate administration.
- DCED should develop a model property maintenance code program for the various classes of municipalities. In conjunction with this effort, DCED should also:
 - compile and share best practices among municipalities;
 - provide additional technical assistance and hands-on training and supports; and
 - develop a specific code enforcement training module for district justices.
- DCED should take the lead in developing a prototype neighborhood information system to support municipal efforts to address blight and neighborhood revitalization. If a need can be demonstrated, this system could be later modified to incorporate a property maintenance and nuisance code registry.
- The General Assembly and DCED should consider adjusting the criteria outlined in Act 1984-179 for distributing Community Development Block Grant funds to more effectively target these resources to high-impact projects.