



Odette Ramos

Baltimore City Councilwoman

District 14

(410) 396 - 4814

odette.ramos@baltimorecity.gov

100 N. Holliday Street, Room 553

Baltimore MD 21202

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The Honorable Jacob Day
Secretary, Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development
Chair, Baltimore Vacants Reinvestment Council
Sent via email

RE: Furthering Discussions Regarding the Baltimore Vacants Reinvestment Council (BVRC) 5th Letter

Dear Secretary Day, Commissioner Kennedy, and the Members of the BVRC:

Thank you for a good meeting on March 3, 2025. In this letter, I add to the discussion about the community engagement work and more details on a whole block strategy in my district. I also add one point to the VBN misclassification discussion that I neglected to mention in my 3rd letter.

Community Engagement and Capacity

In the March BVRC meeting, there was a substantial conversation regarding community engagement and capacity. In Baltimore City, the majority of our 275 neighborhoods are organized with volunteer leadership, which meet each month or thereabouts, and work together to resolve problems in the neighborhood. There are already opportunities for these leaders and aspiring leaders to access training to assist their work. As Delegate Stephanie Smith said in her comments, the Baltimore City Planning Academy is one such training where residents learn about planning and zoning in our city. The United Way has also developed the Neighbors United University, a cohort of residents who are learning community empowerment and engagement along with the city's planning and zoning systems. There used to be more of this great training during the core days of the Citizens Housing and Planning Association (CPHA).

In addition, several neighborhoods or clusters of neighborhoods partner with nonprofit community development organizations. These community development organizations are meeting residents where they are to help raise their voices, utilize their knowledge of the development process and markets, and have the capacity for attracting funding and resources. These community development organizations are not everywhere, as Councilman Bullock pointed out. However, they are necessary. It takes a two phased approach to build this capacity citywide, and the Community Development Network of Maryland has been working on this since before I was the director there.

In Baltimore City, the nonprofit community development sector includes Neighborhood Housing Services of Baltimore, CHAI Baltimore, Southeast CDC, Banner Neighborhoods, Brooklyn Curtis Bay CDC, Park Heights Renaissance, Central Baltimore Partnership, Coppin Heights CDC, Druid Heights CDC, St. Ambrose Housing Aid Center, and more.

Investment in our City's community development capacity will require additional dollars and work to ensure that neighborhoods without this capacity that need it most are able to get it. While Baltimore Regional Neighborhood Investment (BRNI) funding has been invaluable, it is not enough.

Starting the redevelopment work in neighborhoods that have community development organization capacity and a high rate of vacant properties and lots is a good first step. But building that capacity intentionally in areas that need it most should also be a part of the strategy. While DevelopHER and other initiatives are moving forward - which are great to build small developer capacity - community development organizations need funding, staffing, and technical assistance to partner with neighborhoods to advocate, attract resources, and transform their communities.

Whole Block Strategy

In my last letter, I outlined one of the immediate goals could be completing several whole blocks as soon as possible to show impact. While I believe the closed session taking place during the next meeting will reveal some of those blocks, I wanted to give an example in my district of the type of short term work we can do for maximum impact.

I often talk about the 1600 Block of Gorsuch Avenue in Coldstream Homestead Montebello. This was our test case block for In Rem and it is working. The odd side of the block was our first target. Appendix A shows a map from Codemap of this block. It has 14 homes, and all but three are vacant and abandoned. In 2023, only one vacant property on this block was city owned - and now the majority of the block is city owned. The quick acquisition through In Rem was game changing for this block and an example of how this type of acquisition can ensure maximum control of the outcome of the block and impact for the neighborhood. We know In Rem works! It needs to be expanded by investments in the courts to ensure more cases can be heard, more legal assistance at DHCD, and implementation of In Rem 2 (all of which I talked about in a previous letter). I very much appreciate the partnership with DHCD here and our work together to expand this important tool.

Disposition needs to be quick as well. Last year, DHCD put out a call for development partners for the various blocks and neighborhoods in which DHCD intends to work. In the case of the 1600 Block of Gorsuch, the identified developer is a local couple who do outstanding work, having renovated one of the houses on that block already which sold immediately to a homeowner who has also become an advocate for the work on that block. There is a pending Land Disposition Agreement to transfer two vacant homes on that block to this couple for the next phase of development. The disposition process for these two vacant properties has taken five months, and we just received notice this week it could take another 45 days. There was also confusion internally.

Last year, DHCD announced that the goal for the disposition of vacant properties from the City's inventory was 90 days. The entire point of fixed pricing was to minimize the time between application and disposition of city-owned vacant and abandoned properties. Having a fixed price reduces the disposition timeline because negotiations are not necessary. Admittedly, delays can occur if the buyer is slow to send in specific information. However, in this case, the delays were not attributed to the buyer. Any delays in disposition could cause challenges in funding and momentum. A full discussion about Buy Into Bmore and fixed pricing is forthcoming.

Continuing in Coldstream Homestead Montebello (CHM), DHCD has been working in the CHM Impact Investment Area in the Zone 1 areas completing blocks that used to have a few vacant properties on them. In Rem and Receivership were used. You can see the diagram from Codemap in Appendix A; the blue diamonds are rehabbed properties within the last three years.

While I generally think of whole blocks strategy as what we are doing on the 1600 Block of Gorsuch, I understand it is important to add context to the hard work of acquisition with the other successes in the area. Clustering the Whole Blocks in areas like this where some are fully vacant while others may need one or two homes renovated, allows for maximum impact. However, it is important to focus on those blocks that can have maximum impact, and not just those we can call whole blocks because one or two houses were renovated.

Misclassification issue:

In my 3rd letter I described in detail about some of the challenges with the current definition of VBN and the need to either expand the definition or create another class of vacant property designation to fully describe the scope of the vacant property crisis - the set of properties that are empty but don't quite meet the VBN criteria as

uninhabitable. I also listed a few issues that have come up regarding the misclassification of properties, like residents accidentally purchasing fully rehabbed properties that still have vacant building notices on them, and what my suggestions are.

In this discussion, I neglected to add one misclassification issue related to tax sale.

Each year for the past four years, Mayor Scott has removed owner-occupied properties from tax sale in an effort to assist residents who have fallen on hard times and are not able to pay their taxes and fees, while we work together to reform the predatory method of property tax collection.

After Mayor Scott removes homeowners from the tax sale, I receive that entire list of owner-occupied properties that were removed from the tax sale, averaging roughly 2,000 homes, and totaling roughly \$13 million in liens. Each year, I send the list back with my analysis of what is likely to be vacant given the lien amounts - some liens are over \$300,000 on properties that are classified as owner-occupied. My analysis in 2023 and 2024 outlined that approximately 56 properties are potentially vacant and abandoned but misclassified as owner-occupied, totaling \$7.6 million in liens.

Related to these specific properties, we are missing out on the opportunity to take action on the vacant and abandoned properties that are In Rem eligible because they are misclassified as owner-occupied. Thankfully, DHCD has done a better job of inspecting these homes since I brought up the classification issue. Ensuring that the Finance Department has the updates as to what needs to be removed from the tax sale is the next step.

This misclassification occurs in a couple of ways:

- The indicator for owner-occupied used by SDAT is the presence of the Homestead Tax Credit. The Homestead Tax Credit is applied for one time and never has to be applied for again. In this case, no one told SDAT that the person had died or moved away. 311s indicating a vacant property begins the process that DHCD uses to inspect and then once the building is given a VBN, notification is sent to SDAT.
- There may be minimal calls to 311 to report these properties as vacant and there are few proactive inspections. Photos of two cases of clearly vacant properties classified as owner-occupied are in Appendix B.

In addition, some of the 56 owner-occupied homes on the tax sale removal list with extremely high liens do not look vacant but may not have anyone living in them. High taxes and water bills could be an indicator of a home that is empty and no one lives there, but it does not meet the “uninhabitable” criteria. However, these are properties that are likely to become classified as vacant and abandoned in the coming years since no one is living in them and they are neglected. We are researching ways to create this new classification of properties to fully understand the scope of the vacant property crisis in our city.

I focus a lot on acquisition, because it is one of the most important steps in the process to tackle our vacant and abandoned properties and vacant lots. Baltimore City only owns 7% of the vacant and abandoned properties and ½ of the vacant lots. While in the past Baltimore City did not want to own so many vacant properties for fear we could not maintain them, now it is the only way to get control of the properties and make sure they are renovated based on our City’s and the community’s goals. Acquisition is the key to attracting investment to meet our growth, economic diversity, and strategic goals. Getting the classifications and the data correct to ensure that every vacant property and lot eligible for In Rem has the opportunity to move through that process.

Thank you again for this discussion. I look forward to the next BVRC meeting.

In Partnership,



Odette Ramos
Baltimore City Councilwoman, District 14

Appendix A.

Codemap image of the 1600 Block of Gorsuch, odd side. Green means City Owned, Purple means Owner Occupied, red diamond is vacant and abandoned, yellow cross is vacant lot.



Codemap image of part of the Zone 1 area in CHM. Purple means owner occupied, green means City-owned, red diamond is vacant and abandoned property, blue diamond is the recent rehab where the Use and Occupancy Permit was issued within the last three years.



Appendix B.

1800 Riggs Avenue is still classified as owner occupied (purple on Codemap) but it is a vacant lot and is indicated as such on Codemap.

\$255,447.03 in outstanding liens as of Sept 2024.



1617 Ashburton Street is still classified as owner-occupied (purple on Codemap) but is clearly vacant and abandoned.

\$96,845 in liens as of Sept 2024

