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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) 8th Letter

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

Thank you for the great meeting last month and for your ongoing commitment to this work. Thanks also for the opportunity to serve on the Delivery Chain Working group. This letter outlines some of the highlights from the FY2026 budget for the vacants reduction work, thoughts on the Whole Blocks list relative to the BVRI funding, listening and offering support, and the permit office.

FY2026 Budget Highlights:

The FY2026 budget is passed, after a lot of negotiating. Here are the highlights to enhance the work to reduce vacant and abandoned properties:

- Adding \$270,000 to match the \$300,000 from the General Assembly for the Circuit Court to expand their In Rem capacity. The state's funding will add hours or add another magistrate along with staffing capacity. The city's funding increases staffing capacity and makes two positions from contractors to full-time staff. The Courts are updating the current MOU between the city and the Court to outline the use of this new funding.
- \$2.5million for additional staffing. \$1.5million in positions that were created mid-year and an additional \$1million to hire additional staff for acquisition and disposition purposes. During the budget hearings, I asked for specific details about the staffing plan with this funding and I'm awaiting the details. Some of the positions created mid-year are for In Rem lawyers and paralegals.
- Moving \$5million worth of staffing (56 positions) from code enforcement service to the building permitting and compliance service. This move includes 11 attorney positions, 8 paralegal positions, 11 code enforcement officers and 5 office support specialists. Apparently, this shifting of positions between services fits with the current configuration of the staffing and does not remove code enforcement officers from their current work. I am waiting for the answers to several questions I had during budget hearings about this transition of positions and what exactly the roles will be. The "Permit Czar" outlined in Bmore Fast does not seem to be in this mix.
- Added \$500,000 in capital for the Housing Upgrades to Benefit Seniors (HUBS) program for older adult home repair. I am advocating for additional operating dollars to add more social workers and case managers to assist older adults at the intake phase. Right now, there is a backlog of over 1,000 households because there is a backup at intake. The City Council is hosting a hearing about the Older Adult repair programs on July 24th.
- \$30.6 million in capital funding for the Impact Investment Areas, including acquisition, disposition, and developer incentives. This funding source is a combination of General Obligation bonds (voter approved), federal and state funding. There is additional capital funding for projects citywide.
- \$6.5million in capital funds for the Affordable Housing Trust Fund (AHTF) which is consistent with the past several years since the founding of the AHTF. These capital dollars are from the voter approved General

Obligation (GO) bonds which is an ongoing commitment placed in an MOU with the founders of the AHTF initiative (including me in my former role). Additional funding for the AHTF comes from a small yield tax on real estate transfers and recordings above \$1million.

DHCD can add any further details on what was added in the budget if I missed anything. These are great investments, and I look forward to clarifications around the use of funds for staffing.

BVRI Applications and Whole Block transparency:

Thanks to Secretary Day and team for working hard to get the next round of BVRI funding out the door. It is very exciting that 89 applications came in for BVRI funding, and there are four that I know of in my district:

- GEDCO in partnership with Coldstream Homestead Montebello which is the Impact Investment Area in my district. Funding is slated for rehabilitation of vacant homes on Harford Road and The Alameda adjacent to the Tivoly redevelopment project.
- Healthy Neighborhoods in partnership with Coldstream Homestead Montebello for facade and home repair in the strong part of the neighborhood. This is in an Impact Investment Area, but not one of the target first round of Whole Blocks.
- Volunteers of America and 52 Ventures for the 2600 and 2700 Blocks of Greenmount Avenue in the East Harwood/Better Waverly area. This uses a whole blocks approach, but it is not in the Whole Block list.
- Healthy Neighborhoods in partnership with Schreiber Brothers for the demolition of the portable building to make way for the redevelopment of the old Venable School into 27 apartments in Waverly. This is not on the Whole Blocks list.

Only one of these applications is for an area with designated Whole Blocks. The others are for the amazing projects in my district that are very necessary.

This issue of what constitutes the “Whole Blocks” comes to the fore again in this situation. The Whole Blocks list was built using block level planning in Impact Investment Areas, if there is development interest and the community’s outcomes. However, the BVRI application simply asked for a description of how this project uses a whole blocks approach, not that the blocks were actually designated as Whole Blocks. Very few, if any, applicants citywide knew where those Whole Blocks are located. The list is not available. So, out of the four applications in my district, will the only one funded be addressing Whole Blocks, even though the other projects are important, necessary, and utilize a whole blocks approach?

It is unfair for applicants to put time and energy into the applications when their projects aren’t chosen, but are excellent projects anyway. Theoretically, if block level planning occurred, the CDOs that apply would know where these Whole Blocks are. I do hope that is the case, but I would not want good projects to be eliminated from consideration just because the list was never published.

Moreover, we should know if the list of Whole Blocks that are prioritized are those that will have maximum impact (like the 1600 Block of Gorsuch that has more than ½ of the block vacant) or they only have one or two vacants on them, which will reduce the number of whole blocks but not necessarily the number of VBNs expediently.

Last, it has been described to me by a senior member of the DHCD team that the number and location of the Whole Blocks can be flexible depending on where development interest lies. If that is the case, while it would help the other BVRI applications in my district, the targeting of the 308 Whole Blocks would not be intentional and deliberate as we had anticipated.

The same can be said for the In Rem pipeline. The BVRC dashboard states that 374 properties have been acquired through In Rem, and that 692 are in some part of the In Rem process. Because the list is not transparent, we have no idea if these are in the designated Whole Block areas, or if these are already in the pipeline for BVRI funds. Once BVRI awards are made, getting the properties that are to be funded into the In Rem pipeline if they are not already in there will be critical.

Given all of this, a strategic and thoughtful discussion about the Whole Blocks transparency is needed and what targeting means in relation to areas where investments and strategic partnerships can have maximum impact.

Support For Refinement:

The BVRC is in a unique position to work with DHCD and the city and state levels to offer support to critical processes needed in the work to reduce and eliminate vacant and abandoned properties. The Delivery Chain group has listed several processes to examine. I hope we (or a subgroup) get an opportunity to work directly with staff to listen to their challenges and offer support to make changes to ensure success. I believe OPI is tasked with some of this work and can report to the BVRC on their findings.

Approaching in a manner to offer assistance to support staff success is critical. Honoring the skillset and expertise of the staff working hard in that particular process by listening to their challenges, ideas, and perspectives is necessary. Allowing conversations to occur is essential.

The work we have been doing to create and enhance In Rem is one example of how such an approach might work. After passage of In Rem in the General Assembly in 2019, and the City Council in 2020, we worked together to ensure In Rem was implemented. Meeting with the Circuit Court asking for a dedicated docket proved a critical piece of the puzzle for success. While the first year was learning and implementation, all parties worked to make the process efficient and effective. I am grateful to have been involved from the beginning and can be relied upon to advocate where changes were needed. Two years ago, DHCD requested an enhancement for additional In Rem lawyers, which was denied. I was able to advocate strongly for those additional lawyers, and DHCD hired even more since then. Last year, the Circuit Court came to me directly saying they needed additional capacity to be able to keep up with and expand the Judicial In Rem court caseload. This was also recognized as an issue by DHCD and our friends in the General Assembly. Together we worked to get the funding needed.

While this critical partnership continues, the same type of approach is needed at every other critical stage in the process - disposition, permitting, demolitions, stabilization, code enforcement. Working in partnership with staff is critical. Coupling this with additional resources and assistance for any changes that need to be made in the Code or charter will be productive. Being open to receiving learning and growth for success works.

The Permit Office

I have been very public about the fact that the reboot of the Permit office has been a complete failure. The specific word I used is an “abomination.” While this opinion has not changed, I am interested in working toward solutions and I remain optimistic that it is possible with significant collaboration at all levels. There is a City Council hearing on July 22nd to continue the conversations and actions for reform.

In past letters I mentioned that I’d set out a full analysis of the challenges with the Permit office. Instead, the Mayor’s Office has committed to a report to be submitted to the City Council next week. The challenges are significant, vast, and deep. Staff are working hard to get permits through but often are working from a deficit and reprioritize when a Councilmember intervenes. The report from the Mayor’s Office may be more fruitful than my describing the challenges here.

Before this reboot, complaints included communications, timing of inspections, fire marshal delays, and other process and management issues. A few years ago, I had asked that a thorough examination be conducted to understand the challenges before making reforms. Specifically, I asked for an “in/out, up/down, forward/backward,” analysis of the issues and flows in the office, and a plan for repairs. As far as I understand, that never occurred. Instead, DHCD focused on using technology to resolve internal flows, processes, policies and personnel challenges.

A complete rethinking of the workflows, staffing, processes, and communications are needed. Additionally, some of the items that were working in the old online system - like the message board - were eliminated in this reboot

system. Also, more roadblocks were added to the system, like no ability to amend permits. There was not enough testing with practitioners. Proper training for all staff also was not conducted, or if it was, not enough repetition and preparation was made available before the launch. However, in a public hearing a year ago regarding this subject, DHCD claimed that the delay in launch was because of additional configuration, testing and training.

Taking into consideration the above analysis of how intervening in processes are important, the Permit office also has staff – reviewers, inspectors, processors - that are dedicated and working hard to serve the needs of residents and contractors seeking permits. They need to be heard and supported through this transition. The Tiger Team the City Administrator assigned for analysis and reform, and possibly some members of the BVRC, will need to have access to listen and learn, offer support to make changes and add capacity as needed, advocate for additional resources or code/charter changes as needed, and put in place the feedback loop from contractors, staff, and management as corrections are rolled out.

The damage from this failed reboot of the building permit office is substantial. Developers, contractors, and property owners are not happy doing business with the city. Some will continue the work but without permits, causing very deeply concerning health and safety issues. Contractors may also charge substantially more for the work because of the inconvenience. The setback has reduced the speed at which our vacant and abandoned properties get renovated and the pace of building more units for more housing has slowed down as well.

Once the building permit system is resolved, getting the confidence back will take a significant amount of time, careful communications, and strategic outreach to ensure contractors and developers know we can be trusted to be efficient and effective. Including practitioners will help. Please count us in as partners.

Importantly, the Fire Department has made significant strides to change the operations of the Fire Marshal's office after the complaints continued even with the new permit system. The Fire Marshal plays an important role in the renovation of buildings and new construction to ensure that the work is done up to the fire code, the capacity of a business is safe, fire plans are in place, and more. Prior to the Permit reboot we had several complaints mostly about the delays in inspections and reviews. After the permit reboot the Fire Marshal listened to the feedback about the continuing issues and took immediate action to reform their operations to meet the demands. Baltimore City Fire Department leadership Chief Wallace removed the head of the Fire Marshal office, re-worked staffing, added more reviewers and inspectors, and enhanced the communications with a new website that outlines what contractors can expect. You can find that website [here](#). The Fire Department also started a pilot third party review process for minor permits so their staff can concentrate on the larger projects.

The Bmore Fast plan was announced a few days before our March hearing regarding the Permit office. The Bmore Fast plan offers a roadmap to how to integrate additional development processes into a seamless system, like the Right of Way through DOT (needed to dig up sidewalks and streets for utilities), zoning, and more. Coordinating this work is a Permit "Czar" to assist the process of integration but also making sure that the permits are getting through. Capacity for the work is not yet outlined, although it might be answered in the questions regarding the increased funding for staffing I mentioned at the beginning of this letter. The integration of the other development processes are not likely to occur soon given the permit office challenges.

Thank you again for your time reading my letters. I appreciate the consideration and opportunity.

In partnership,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read "Odette", is positioned above the printed name.

Odette Ramos
Baltimore City Councilwoman, 14th District