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100 N. Holliday Street, Room 553

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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) meeting 4

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

Thank you for a good meeting on February 3rd. I appreciated the sense of urgency many members expressed.

Before discussing the purpose of this letter, I want to express that residents are feeling particularly connected to their local government right now. With the national scene feeling out of control, the successes we achieve as local government, with accomplishments residents can see and feel, are more critical now than ever. Baltimore can be a shining example of effective government while celebrating our diversity.

This fourth letter continues the conversation about the sense of urgency in this moment and also talks about the context in which we find ourselves and should be working toward.

Related to the sense of urgency:

As I talked about in my last letter, $\frac{1}{3}$ of our fires are in vacant and abandoned properties, and $\frac{1}{3}$ of the firefighter injuries are because of these fires. In addition, our city is strapped for funds to pay for our core services. Yet, the recent 21st Century Cities 2022 report outlines that Baltimore City spends \$100 million a year maintaining vacant properties, including boarding, mowing, demolition, police, and fire costs. In addition, Baltimore City is losing \$100 million in tax revenues from these properties where taxes, water bills, and citations are not being paid.

While it would be easy to mow down the vacant properties to reduce costs, the revenue issue still remains, and our goals for increasing our population while creating intentional mixed income communities using our existing housing stock would not be achieved. While this takes a longer time, there are ways to accelerate the acquisition of the vacant properties and lots which will help lead to our goals.

BVRC members were very interested in articulating some short-term actions that can show progress while also helping the BVRC identify what is already working internally and which processes that may need assistance to get our work to scale. To that end, here are my suggestions for short term initiatives, many of which are already occurring through DHCD's existing work. The timeline to accomplish these could be within the next 18 months. Each of these suggestions is consistent with getting to the larger goal of reducing vacant properties and creating intentional mixed income communities.

Ensure a stellar permit office: DHCD recently launched a new technology and platform for the building permit office. They heard the development community's concerns and are actively working toward solutions. The City

Council will hold a hearing on March 11th to hear from residents and the development community about what is working and any continued concerns. Challenges in the last iteration of the Permit Office included significant time to schedule inspections, waiting for the developer or rehabber to request inspections rather than pro-active inspections, challenges with the Fire Marshall's office, and more. The list is significant. Ensuring that the changes DHCD has started answer these and other challenges will be the subject of the hearing. Getting the permit office right is a very important short term (like yesterday) initiative because it is the place where we want developers and renovators to go to ensure they are doing the job for the health and safety of the resident who will live there. Still, too many renovations are occurring without permits because they do not want to work with the permit office. An efficient permit office, with good customer service from the front desk to the inspectors, is the bedrock of any strategy to reduce vacant and abandoned properties.

Increase In Rem foreclosure filings to 200 per month. Our vacancy reduction strategy is now within reach because of the game changing In Rem foreclosure acquisition process. DHCD articulated the goal of filing 200 In Rem cases a month. Thanks to the courts and DHCD's investments, we have acquired over 280 properties through In Rem and filed over 400 in the past year and a half, which is roughly 40 filings per month. Currently, there is a significant team effort to enhance the capacity for In Rem foreclosure acquisition that I'm proud to be a part of.

Implement the Whole Blocks strategy on 50 (or more) blocks. There seems to be debate about the Whole Block strategy, including renovation of the only one or two vacant properties on a block that is otherwise occupied or acquisition and rehab of the entire vacant block. We should be working toward a whole block strategy that impacts blocks that are more than ½ vacant. In my district, DHCD and I are working on this strategy for the 1600 Block of Gorsuch, 1600 Block of Abbottston, the 1500 and 1600 Blocks of Carswell Street, and the zone 1 areas of that Impact Investment Area. Monitoring progress toward implementing the Whole Block strategy would include understanding the timelines and processes for acquisition, identifying a development partner and funding resources, disposition timeline, and completion of the block or demolition.

Demolish and/or stabilize properties. While demolishing private property requires due diligence which takes a while, there are still emergency demos that are necessary for the health and safety of the area. The current list of identified properties for demolition and stabilization should be monitored to reduce the time such demolitions occur. Demolition should include deconstruction, which is an initiative I'm working on and will be discussed in a subsequent letter.

Complete the Older Adult home repair backlog. As a vacancy prevention strategy and to ensure our older adults age in place with dignity, the backlog of requests for home repair for our elders needs to be addressed immediately. The list should be presented and followed to understand what operating dollars are necessary to assist the case management, the processes for payment to contractors, and prioritize permitting for these repairs. It is my understanding the backlog for non-emergency HUBS and LIGHT program applicants is over a year, with hundreds of older adults waiting multiple years. The challenges here include lack of operating dollars, timely payments to contractors, and challenges with the building permitting.

Ensure the roughly 2% of vacant and abandoned properties that are rehabbed but still have VBNs on them go through the process of removing that notice. These properties should be a high priority so that residents are not paying fines and can live in their homes with confidence that their property meets the health and safety requirements of the building code (we had a discussion about this issue in my last letter). Monitoring this includes having someone at DHCD who is specifically working with these residents to get through the process, funding to assist those who cannot afford the repairs, and a recognition of how this happened to ensure that changes to the permit office occur to prevent it from happening again. I made several recommendations to DHCD in this regard.

Fix the issues with the Buy into Bmore Website. There is a lot of confusion about what is on the website for purchase, what is city owned, why non-city owned properties are listed, the application process and timeline. This is a good resource for scatter site redevelopment, but the entire effort has proved confusing. (I'll talk about this more in another letter regarding disposition.)

As the above initiatives are moving forward, the BVRC can look to make sure the following questions are answered:

- Permit office reforms: Is the permit office an impediment? Does it take too much time to get through the process? Are rehabs still occurring without permits? What has to change?
- Acquisition: Does the In Rem process have the lawyers and capacity needed in the court, and what has to change? Are we doing everything we can to get every vacant properly eligible for In Rem in the pipeline? What is the hesitancy of the City to use eminent domain on vacant properties when striving for a whole block approach?
- Funding: Are the resources in place to see success in these projects and if not, where are the resources? Can the private sector play a role in these short-term initiatives?
- Management of resources: Are the internal management and operations working to ensure that funds and grants are managed properly? Does HUBS and LIGHT have the operating funding needed? Do the acquisition and disposition operations have the capacity needed for success?
- Disposition: Is the disposition timeline shortened? Are the partner and resource identification process in line with that timeline?

All of these short-term efforts fit into the larger goals of the BVRC, City government, and the work many of us have been championing for a very long time.

A note about Code Enforcement:

It was revealed during the last BVRC meeting that code enforcement inspections were down in the last several years. Code enforcement is extremely important to hold derelict owners accountable. More importantly, for me, it is to ensure that the liens stack up in a property to make it eligible for In Rem. As stated in my last letter, the City Council passed legislation last term that increases the fines and fees significantly, and code enforcement is the only way to issue those them.

I struggled with sharing the following news with the BVRC, but feel it is extremely important to do so. I received a complaint from several of the code enforcement officers last month. I immediately sent that to the Office of the Inspector General. The complaint outlines several challenges the code enforcement officers are facing, including a toxic environment, insufficient support from superiors, and so on. The complaint was also received by DHCD leadership. It should be investigated.

Growth Strategy:

All of the vacant property reduction work should be done in the context of the strategy to grow our population in our city. Investing in business development and growth, improving our schools, and reducing crime are all part of this strategy. We don't want new workers just to work here, we need them to live here. Right now, we do not have the housing inventory to assist. Anecdotally, there are still multiple contracts on homes for sale which means there is a lot of demand, and not enough supply, in certain neighborhoods. I'm working with GBBR to find a way to measure this. In the meantime, the best indicator of demand is Median Days on the Market. The lower the days on the market, the higher the demand for the area. For 2023, the Median Days on the Market citywide was 15 days (compared to 18 days in 2022). For 2024, it was 19 days, with a lot of variety neighborhood by neighborhood.

In addition, no strategy to address education and public safety will work without addressing housing and the condition of our neighborhoods. Violent crime occurs in the areas where there are the most vacant properties. Students living in substandard housing or having to walk next to vacant properties, increases their stress level and blocks learning. Investments in our neighborhoods by increasing our diverse housing options while creating intentional mixed income communities without displacement should be the primary population growth strategy.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts regarding the work of the BVRC. I look forward to continuing conversations.

Please also note that I am updating the outcomes matrix I presented in my last letter with additional input from various stakeholders. The matrix and changes to it are on [this link](#).

In Partnership,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read "Odette", is positioned above a light gray rectangular box.

Odette Ramos
Baltimore City Councilwoman, District 14