

Baltimore planners endorse land bank proposal

Plan would hasten sale of city-owned vacant property

By Annie Linskey, *Baltimore Sun*, March 6, 2009

After a three-hour hearing that included rare testimony from Baltimore's sitting mayor, the city's Planning Commission yesterday unanimously endorsed Mayor Sheila Dixon's proposal for a new agency to streamline the sale of city-owned vacant property. The proposal for the quasi-governmental Land Bank Authority now goes to the City Council for consideration.

"What we are doing is broken, and we admit it," Dixon said, addressing the nine-member commission for about 15 minutes. "Every day that we do not do something another lot becomes vacant." Even in the down economy, developers and nonprofits are "waiting in line" to renovate some of the nearly 10,000 vacant properties owned by the city, but the current red tape hinders their efforts, Dixon said.

The proposed land bank would take control of the bulk of city-owned vacant property and market it to responsible users. Proponents say that small developers would benefit from the plan because they would have one point of contact to purchase city land. Currently it can take up to two years to buy a rowhouse from the city, housing officials said.

But skeptics, including City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake and Comptroller Joan Pratt have said current purchasing processes can be fixed without creating what they call a new, untested bureaucracy that would operate outside the scrutiny of city government. Neither spoke at yesterday's hearing. Pratt has also said she worries about the financial viability of the new entity.

As commissioners approved the mayor's legislation yesterday, they said they do not want the new land bank to be weighed down with regulations that would cause the same types of headaches that developers now face.

Dixon said she supports eight changes to the legislation that the planning commission offered, including a provision requiring that the executive director of the new entity be a city resident. She was not present when commissioners added a ninth amendment that the new authority maintain its property in a way that is "safe and secure."

After testifying, the mayor also said she agrees with a set of changes suggested Wednesday by Rawlings-Blake and City Councilman William Cole IV, including a provision that the property in the land bank should revert to the city if the new entity dissolves and the requirement that the land bank's progress be carefully measured.

Another idea offered by the pair, that the land bank be reauthorized every two years, met opposition from Housing Commissioner Paul T. Graziano, who said such a restriction could make it difficult for the new entity to borrow money.

If the City Council approves the legislation, the land bank could be running by the end of this year, Graziano said.