

A remedy for blight - Editorial

Our view: City land bank is a promising idea but needs stronger safeguards

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Despite owning more than 9,000 abandoned properties in Baltimore, the city sells about 250 a year to community developers and individuals. At that rate, Baltimore will never rid itself of this behemoth of blight. That lopsided ratio argues strongly for a better system of selling these rundown houses and vacant lots so that they can be returned to the tax rolls. Mayor Sheila Dixon has proposed creation of a land bank that would take control of the city's vast inventory of abandoned houses and streamline a process known to be cumbersome and time-consuming.

The proposal makes sense, even in this deflated economy, but the legislation before the City Council needs stronger guarantees of public access to the agency's work to ensure the deals are in the city's best interests.

The bill, modeled after similar efforts in Genesee County, Mich.; Cleveland; St. Louis; and Atlanta, would establish a quasi-public agency to handle and oversee the acquisition and disposition of city-owned lots and buildings, of which about 4,000 are vacant and so rundown that they would be too costly to repair. City housing chief Paul T. Graziano says a land bank authority would give the city flexibility and efficiencies that the present system doesn't allow. It would be financed through the sale of properties and be overseen by a board that would be dominated by mayoral appointees but also include the council president, city comptroller and five citizens.

But concerns about access to the land bank's work have been raised - and they are not frivolous. The land bank would be subject to state open meeting and public record laws, but they provide plenty of avenues, especially on financial deals, to conceal information from the public. And the city's record of access to quasi-public agencies is checkered. It took a ruling from the state's highest court to affirm that the Baltimore Development Corp., the city's quasi-public development arm, was indeed a city agency and its business open for public review.

Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake and Councilman William H. Cole IV have suggested several changes to the land bank proposal, which would require performance measures, biannual reauthorization and city residency for board members and the executive director. Strict conflict-of-interest provisions also should be considered.

The debate on this bill is just beginning, but the glut of vacant properties in this city - an estimated 30,000 - is too great not to approve the proposal, with some protections. Abandoned, rundown buildings have compromised the safety and health of too many city neighborhoods for too long. Most aren't owned by the city, though they are the city's problem. But 25 percent of vacant houses are city-owned, and a streamlined process to sell them would help generate more economic development opportunities and, ultimately, improve the quality of life throughout Baltimore.