

**Testimony of Senator Jeffrey E. Piccola
on Senate Bill 543
before the Subcommittee on Crime and Corrections of the House Judiciary
Committee
December 16, 1997**

Representative Birmelin, and members of the Subcommittee on Crime and Corrections, thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 543, an important piece of legislation introduced with five other bills to address the growing problems caused by absentee and slum landlords.

I am pleased to have with me Representative Buxton from Harrisburg who joined Senator David Brightbill and I in this bipartisan effort.

I'm proud to represent our capital city of Harrisburg, a third class city. There are a number of reasons why I have that pride. The beautiful state Capitol and the many attractions in the downtown area that draw thousands to Harrisburg each year are only part of the reason.

However, there are parts of Harrisburg and Pennsylvania's 51 other third class cities that are not as attractive as the environment surrounding this building. Unfortunately, you do not have to go too far from here to find blighted neighborhoods.

In August of 1996, I joined with Senator Brightbill, Senator Joseph Uliana, Representative Buxton and Mayor Steve Reed in front of a blighted property on the 1600 block of Chestnut Street in Harrisburg to announce this package of bills. That block is a microcosm of the deterioration facing our cities and residents. On one side of the block, principally owner-occupied and beautifully kept homes where flowers bloom and children play. On the other side are homes that have seen the ravages of absentee landlords who have abused state laws, not maintained their properties and have not abided by local codes and ordinances.

This problem is not just confined to the inner city. An apartment complex in the Italian Lake area of uptown Harrisburg has been plagued by similar circumstances involving landlords that do not live in the city, do not live in Dauphin County and some do not even live in the United States. The first horror stories of this account appeared in the media in February of this year, but it has taken most of this year and countless hours of diligent work to provide improvements to these apartments. One of the main reasons why it has taken this long for results is that current state law is weak enough for slum landlords to profit more from breaking the law than to correct code violations.

I believe Senate Bill 543, along with others in the package, have the necessary safeguards to protect law-abiding landlords. Responsible landlords have nothing to fear from these bills, whose aim is to close loopholes in state law – loopholes that people who have no remorse have used again and again to contribute to the destruction of neighborhoods. In fact, I am willing to argue that responsible landlords have something to gain from passage of these bills – the fact that adequate tools will now be available for municipalities to crack down on the real violators and take steps to revitalize neighborhoods.

I am certain no one in this room opposes affordable, safe housing for city residents. I am also certain cities of this Commonwealth will welcome additional remedies to help cure urban blight and encourage private home ownership and development. We owe it to our municipal officials to empower them in this fight. These bills will let them control their own destiny by giving them the tools necessary to enforce their ordinances to make neighborhoods safe places to raise families.

Thank you for this opportunity.