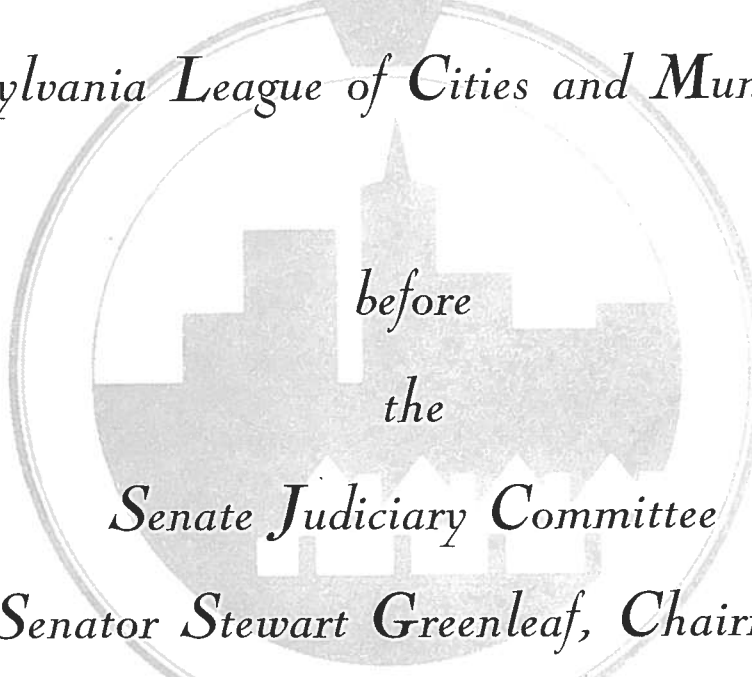


*Statement*  
*of*  
*Eugene Pacsi, Mayor, City of Farrell*  
*President*  
*Pennsylvania League of Cities and Municipalities*



*before*  
*the*  
*Senate Judiciary Committee*  
*Senator Stewart Greenleaf, Chairman*  
*Senate Bill 543*

*December 16, 1997*

Good Afternoon!

Chairman Greenleaf and Honorable Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. For those of you who do not know me, I am Eugene Pacsi, Mayor of the City of Farrell, and currently presiding as President of the Pennsylvania League of Cities and Municipalities. Seated next to me is Mr. Christopher Moonis, Director of Legislative Affairs for the League. We are both honored to be a part of this critical issue and truly thankful to the Chairman and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to present our views on this proposed legislation.

First, let me state for the record, the Pennsylvania League of Cities and Municipalities' Board of Directors strongly supports the total legislative package introduced by Senator Piccola and Senator Brightbill (Senate Bills 538 through 543), as well as the legislative package introduced in the House of Representatives by Representative Buxton. The League believes this legislative package, as a whole, takes a significant step toward changing the landscape of our urban centers and more importantly, providing safer dwellings for our citizens. In particular, Senate Bill 543 (Printers Number 1412) places a statutory offense on "slum landlords" who continually neglect and willfully ignore housing and property maintenance codes. We applaud the will of this legislature to see this bill enacted sending a clear message to "slum landlords" who put profit over safety.

Since 1950, Pennsylvania's cities have lost on the average 30% of their population. In some cases, such as Johnstown, Pittsburgh, McKeesport, New Castle, and Scranton, the loss is as high as 55%. During this time, the problems our urban communities are facing has steadily worsened. There is little argument that our urban communities have become home to growing numbers of poor, homeless, and those individuals with special service needs.

The problems urban communities are facing today are not the result of mismanagement or poor leadership at the local level, rather they are the result of years of neglect, disinvestment, and dismissal for the "greener" developments of the suburbs. Today, urban communities are at a crossroads and their continued viability, and the viability of their entire region, is threatened if we do not develop systems which address the problems associated with blight in these vitality important areas.

Today, before you, is an essential component part that can help deliver a positive response to the ever-growing problem of urban blight. For too long, local government has not had the essential tools to eradicate urban blight and in particular blight directly caused by the "slum landlord." More importantly, this legislation takes the necessary steps to ensure the health and safety of residents and addresses stricter accountability for "slum landlords" to obey laws for the betterment and resurgence of our communities or face the crime of Municipal Housing Code Avoidance.

Contrary to other groups, we do not believe this legislation impairs or impedes, in any way, the business success of the good and law-abiding landlords across this Commonwealth. Again, this legislation is designed to toughen penalties against those landlords who have continually ignored the codes established by the municipalities; codes that are reasonably complied with by all others and codes that are in place to protect the health and safety of OUR citizenry.

Allow me to take this issue one step further by citing an excerpt from a report to the Pennsylvania General Assembly entitled *Urban Opportunities - Eradicating Blight and Expediting Economic Development in Pennsylvania in the 21st Century* (resulting from House Resolution 91). The committee found: "local efforts to eliminate blight through code enforcement activities are often thwarted by the judicial process. Many times a property owner is repeatedly cited by local officials and brought to housing court or before a local magistrate for building code violations or for failure to maintain a vacant property. These violators can consistently delay addressing the problem by simply applying for a building permit, letting the permit expire without taking any action, and then repeating the process. There needs to be a limit on the number of times a repeat violator can be cited without making the required improvements to the property, or else risk losing their rights of interest in the property (Page 6)." Moreover, placing a misdemeanor provision in Title 18 of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes will put **some strength in the statute** allowing municipalities to make sure these "slum landlords" are either correcting housing code violations or facing criminal proceedings.

This is but one example of why the system needs to be tightened to give local officials the resources to take charge of the problem and fix it. I am here today to assure the committee that the Mayors and Councils of our urban communities across this great Commonwealth are ready and able to use this legislation to begin the process of eradicating urban blight.

Senate Bill 543 clearly places this criminal offense on only those landlords who after accumulating four (4) or more convictions, repeatedly and continually allow the accumulation of uncorrected violations of the same subsection of a municipal housing code for the same property. Moreover, this bill provides that violations must pose a threat to the public's health, safety or property AND may only be imposed when clearly no attempt has been made by the person to correct the violation. Only after all of these guidelines have been thwarted by the landlord can he or she be reasonably presumed to have committed the crime of municipal housing code avoidance.

Let me say in closing, although the decline of the urban community cannot be attributed to the actions of "slum landlords" alone, it is a major contributing factor. I respectfully request that it is time to take action. This piece of legislation takes a major step to ensure the health and safety of residents and address accountability to those persons who cannot obey laws for the betterment of our constituents and our communities.

Thank you for you time and attention.

Mr. Moonis and I are awaiting your comments and questions, Mr. Chairman.