

Testimony – SB 510

Senate Committee on Local Government

March 3, 2022 9:30 AM

Karen Hiller, Councilwoman, City of Topeka District 1

Recommend AGAINST passage of SB 510

Thank you, Committee, for the opportunity to testify. I am Karen Hiller, Councilwoman for District 1 – downtown and the nearby central Topeka neighborhoods south of the River – for the City of Topeka. I have represented District 1 since 2009 and have spent my entire adult life – over 40 years – active in housing and neighborhood issues citywide in Topeka. My professional career was at Housing and Credit Counseling, Inc., retiring after 34 years as Executive Director. I will make some remarks, and would be happy to be a resource going forward.

I love Topeka....wouldn't live anywhere else. I choose to live in Central Topeka, in an area once described by law enforcement as "the box." Even though we are in Kansas, in Topeka we have big-city issues and share the State of Kansas's shrinking population issues. Vacant properties, that could be fixed up and reoccupied, are part of our lives. We respect property rights as you do. But, we in Topeka, as others do, have foreclosures and abandonments...and we simply have more properties than we have households.

Regarding Topeka's Vacant Property Registration Ordinance.... I don't like it and I didn't support it. I am not here to defend or protect it. I am not convinced such ordinances are the best way to inspire owners to improve or reoccupy properties.

However, I correspondingly CANNOT SUPPORT the proposed SB 510.

Vacant properties ARE vulnerable. As such, they create risk for neighbors and public safety personnel and are costly and risky for cities....really for any community.

The definitions of what SB 510 proposes to prohibit are far too broad...and I don't think there is any way to modify the language to improve it. Saying that municipalities cannot make a list of vacant properties – for any reason – is frightening. Could it be interpreted that Property Maintenance Inspectors, Police, Fire or even City-sanctioned neighborhoods groups could not identify a property as vacant? Could such a broad statement as SB 510 makes create liability on the part of a city for having any staff identify such properties as vacant? We do that all the time in code compliance, police and fire reports....and such disclosures are important to the community and neighbors in understanding what is going on.

SB 510 also seems to say that charging any fee, even if reasonable, to compensate a city for the extra risk and cost of keeping an eye on vacant properties, would not be allowed. That is simply not OK.

I urge you NOT TO PASS SB 510 out of this committee.