

**Testimony Supporting**

S.B. No. 951 (Raised), An Act Concerning Neighborhood Protection  
Testimony of Gary Hogan, Deputy Director of Neighborhood Services,  
&

Rafael Ramos, Deputy Director of Code Enforcement,  
Livable City Initiative, City of New Haven  
To the Banks Committee

We write to you today to register our support of S.B. No. 951, "An Act Concerning Neighborhood Protection." I, Gary Hogan, serve as the Deputy of the Livable City Initiative at the City of New Haven, where I am responsible for identifying and disposing of blighted properties. And I, Rafael Ramos, serve as Deputy Director of Code Enforcement, where I am responsible for all matters related to code violations.

Vacant buildings have sky rocketed in New Haven due to the foreclosure crisis, severely impacting our city. In November 2006, on the eve of the foreclosure crisis, we hit a low of just under 300 vacancies in the city. By the end of 2008 we were over 750. We are the front line officers in charge of managing the blight that inevitably comes as a result of foreclosure. **To deal with this flood of vacant properties, city administrators such as ourselves need new tools and powers to prevent our neighborhoods from falling apart, literally. Bill 951 will provide some of those essential new tools.**

The destructive force of blight:

Vacancy from foreclosure has spread blight in our neighborhoods. If a property is left unsecured, vandals break in and steal the copper and plumbing. Broken windows, overgrown grass, and graffiti start to chip away at neighborhood morale, as they set a tone of decline and stagnation. Furthermore, this blight can start to depress housing values in the neighborhoods, as potential residents shy away from a neighborhood that appears to be in decline. New Haven has, therefore, always taken an aggressive approach to citing properties for code violations, trying to improve the look and feel of our neighborhoods so families feel safe, secure, and happy. Bill 951 will strengthen our ability to address this blight.

Code enforcement 101:

Our officers in charge of code enforcement and neighborhood services regularly walk the streets of New Haven trying to identify newly vacant properties and assess the condition of vacant properties. This process is time consuming and in neighborhoods with single family properties, it is quite difficult to determine quickly if a house is vacant. **The registration system proposed in this bill will help bring much needed efficiency to the vacant property management system at the City.** Armed with a ready list of properties, staff can focus on the critical work of ensuring proper security of buildings to prevent the theft of copper or we can clear graffiti and damage to the property to prevent blight.

Giving municipal authorities real "teeth"

The proposed bill also helps strengthen code enforcement by giving city officials real teeth to enforce violations. The properties we have filling our vacant registries these days are held by institutional property owners. When we cite a property for problems, and try to get a response from the owner, we are sent into a "voicemail vortex" with no person to speak with to address

our complaints. This bill gives us three powerful tools that we currently lack. **First, it gives us an accessible property maintenance company to speak with to address any violations.** No more will we be subject to the voicemail vortex and out of state companies who do not respond to phone calls or maintain their properties. **Second, it gives us the power to levy fines—to have fines double in some instances—and to perform necessary maintenance ourselves if needed.** Therefore, if an institutional owner is unresponsive, we do not have to passively watch the property decline, we can help restore the property and shore up the wider neighborhood to stem vandals, crime, and property value declines. **Third, it gives the fines priority lien status, and enables the city to foreclose on properties if the institutional owner continuously ignores its citations and refuses to remedy the problems.** Before, an institutional owner could ignore our fines, because they carried no real teeth. Now, we can take the property and put it back into productive use if necessary.

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Currently, cities face most of the fallout from the foreclosure crisis, yet we have had few tools at our disposal to manage the impending crisis of vacancies. This legislation helps us start fighting back and gives us the ability to save our neighborhoods, house by house and block by block.