

Interview with Congressman Brian Higgins, Co-Chair of the Revitalizing Older Cities Task Force

Congressman Brian Higgins, who represents the 27th district of New York, including Buffalo, recently helped to start the Revitalizing Older Cities Task Force, serving as its co-chair with Congressman Mike Turner (OH). He also recently introduced the Neighborhood Reclamation and Revitalization Act, which would target funds to communities for the demolition and reclamation of vacant properties.

Can you tell me briefly about your legislation, the Neighborhood Reclamation and Revitalization Act of 2007, and why you decided to introduce this bill?

Vacant housing in Buffalo is a huge problem. All it takes is a quick tour of the city to see how immense the problem is. Community re-engagement is difficult, but it happens house-by-house, block-by-block. This bill would respond to the needs of leaders at the grassroots level by providing micro-targeted grants for vulnerable neighborhoods to help stabilize the vacant housing problem there and breathe new life into the urban context.

How serious is the problem of vacant properties, and why is federal action needed on this issue?

The numbers are frankly astonishing. Buffalo was constructed to be a 600,000-person city. The population has decreased from 580,000 in 1940 to 280,000 in 2006 – more than a 50 percent drop. I have heard estimates from community experts that approximately 20 percent of the homes in the city are vacant. Even amidst this immense need, federal government assistance has dropped pretty much in tandem with the population. In order for us to thoughtfully and comprehensively address the vacant housing problem, that's going to have to change by critically looking at programs that already exist and providing new opportunities like those proposed in H.R. 3498.

Where is the legislation at in the process? Do you anticipate action or hearings on it this session? Next session?

Well, per the rules of the House, the bill has been referred to the Housing and Community Opportunity Subcommittee over at Financial Services. I've been really impressed with Chairman Frank, Chairwoman Waters, and the rest of the committee's leadership in addressing the major problems in our country's housing policy. They have crafted some great legislation that I have been very proud to vote for. I am hopeful that the vacant housing problem gets included in their agenda next year.

What can people do to help build support for this legislation?

I have been pleasantly surprised by the level of interest community leaders across the country have shown in the vacant housing problem. We need more community leaders to reach out at the federal level to let leaders know how the vacant housing problem affects the health and livelihood of communities.

More broadly, you recently decided to chair the new Revitalizing Older Cities task force, which is part of the Northeast Midwest Congressional Coalition. What unique needs do these cities have, and how do you want Congress to better aid in the revitalization of these cities?

I was honored when Chairman Oberstar asked me to chair this task force. Cities like Buffalo were once the engine of our country's economy, but have been left behind for a whole variety of reasons. While many have left Buffalo, often for places with less snow, lots of people still live here. These citizens need to have optimism for the future. The federal government must be a proactive partner in providing that optimism, and that requires giving a fresh look at a wide cross-section of federal policies and assessing how those policies could better assist Buffalo and other older industrial cities.