

**ORAL STATEMENT OF ELLEN GOLDSTEIN
TO THE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE
COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
CHAIRMAN PHIL MENDELSON**

Re: Bill 22-465 "Foreign Government Owned Vacant and Blighted Building Amendment Act of 2017"

Wednesday, September 26, 2018- 10:30AM
Hearing Room 412

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Council: My name is Ellen Goldstein. I currently serve as ANC Commissioner in Sheridan-Kalorama, an historic district where an estimated 15-20% of our residential housing stock is foreign-owned missions—we have more than any other neighborhood in DC.

While most embassies are good neighbors there are lots of problems associated with such a strong presence of foreign mission property in our neighborhood. They contribute more traffic, trash, parking issues, congestion, building code and aesthetic violations, etc. Embassies often do not have to follow the same rules as their neighbors when it comes to their property.

We are here today to discuss one specific problem embassies sometimes present and that is abandoned, derelict buildings.

Such property poses many threats to a predominantly residential neighborhood like ours. These eyesores pose safety and security issues – rats chewing electrical wires, dark corners where people of ill will can gather, trash, overgrown weeds, and so on. They lower the value of neighbors' properties and the longer they

remain vacant, the greater the damage, and the more costly it is therefore to fix them up—becoming a vicious cycle.

When I first became commissioner in 2015 we had a long list of long-empty and derelict properties. I am pleased to say that most of these properties have been renovated --or have firm plans to renovate in the coming two years.

Such “success stories” are no accident and are the result of years of persistent pressure, cajoling, soft coercion, lobbying, shaming, and so on by neighbors and commissioners, and sometimes with an assist by State.

One glaring exception is Pakistan – they own 4 properties in S-K-- whose formerly splendid classical building at R and 22nd St NW continues to degrade. This property – vacant over 20 years – provides a good example of just how far the District can go to protect residents and property in DC. Last year the State Department finally became convinced to remove its diplomatic protection and the City was thus able to levy property taxes on it. Not surprisingly, the taxes went unpaid and DC was able to put it up for a tax sale. But there is a provision in law that permitted the Government of Pakistan to pay off the tax bill and buy it back. Which it did. And the property, with a fraying Pakistani flag flying from a rusted, flaking flag pole, still sits, empty, crumbling and rotting -- a close neighbor to multi-million dollar homes.

A welcome development is that this year after years of discussion, an informal coalition of DC agencies and offices – “The Embassy-Neighborhood Relations Task Force” —which includes MPD, the S-K Commissioners, and the leadership of the State Department Office of Foreign Missions, was formed and has met twice so far this year. We have a good relationship with State and have been

working together to identify and address lots of issues that involve safety and security, DC public schools, trash disposal, parking, and so on. We continue to address clarifying jurisdictional ambiguities like – is it OK for the MPD to enter the grounds of an abandoned foreign property if neighbors have reason to believe there are drug dealers or trespassers hanging out there? Etc.

Mr. Chairman— we think your bill is a good start, but without appropriate pressure and enforcement, I fear little will change.

Here are some things I would ask you all to also consider:

1. There is no accurate and dynamic census of all foreign-owned properties across the District that also assesses their condition and whether they deserve historic status, etc. Let's get that done.
2. I've walked extensively around major capitals like Paris, London, and Amsterdam, including their embassy areas, and I never see such derelict properties or such massive violations of neighborhood protocols and norms like we see here. I recently walked our neighborhood with a reporter from Amsterdam and he was stunned by some of the properties I showed him. Maybe we should find out how other world capitals manage to get better compliance from embassies.
3. Let's codify and institutionalize the new Task Force I mentioned. The Task Force should be required to meet at least 4 times a year and possibly be convened and organized by DCRA or the Office of Planning.

4. Finally, let's get the City to stiffen its resolve to address these issues in a determined manner and not shrug its collective shoulders and say there's not much we can do. There is! Even the State Department would like to see DCRA take a strong stand against serious building and property violations. Maybe your proposed bill to create a new Department of Buildings can improve this kind of needed resolve.

Let's not let these buildings crumble – it would be a real shame and a blow to our cultural heritage.

9-25-18