



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

P.O. BOX 8952 • MADISON, WI 53708

Date: December 13th, 2017
To: Senate Committee on Insurance, Housing and Trade
From: Representatives Terry Katsma and Evan Goyke
Re: Senate Bills 621 and 622: Sheriff Sale Fairness Package

Dear Chairman Lasee and committee members,

Thank you for your prompt consideration of Senate Bill (SB) 621 and SB 622. It is our opinion that this set of two new ideas will fundamentally improve upon counties' procedures for returning troubled properties to the marketplace, and we are eager to discuss the ideas with you.

We have become aware of a troubling pattern of predatory behavior by a small number of delinquent landlords in our state. The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* has spent 18 months investigating properties, owners and tenants who are tangled in crisis; *Landlord Games*, the newspaper's series of watchdog reports on this issue, has documented how the bad actors have figured out how to turn a profit by preying on vulnerable classes of tenants. Separately, University of Wisconsin (UW) alum Dr. Matthew Desmond's book *Evicted*, selected by UW-Madison for its 2016-17 "Go Big Read" common-reading program, tells the story of the people and the neighborhoods right here in Wisconsin for whom stable, quality housing is a constant challenge.

We attended a sheriff sale of foreclosed Milwaukee properties earlier this year to see the system in action for ourselves. Our observations, and some background, may be helpful as you evaluate our legislative proposals:

- A "typical" foreclosure proceeding is a lawsuit filed by a bank against a borrower who failed to make payments as agreed. In Wisconsin, the bank first obtains a court judgment authorizing the bank to arrange for the local county sheriff to hold a public auction of the foreclosed property. Typically, at the auction, the bank bids the amount it is still owed by the borrower—because, typically, the bank prefers to take ownership of the property temporarily and then list it on the open market with the help of a real estate agent. Thus, in many Wisconsin communities, it is quite unusual for a third-party bidder—such as a private investor—to actually win a property at a sheriff sale auction. In other words, if the property has significant value, the foreclosing bank probably wants to repossess it at the public auction so that the bank may later take the opportunity to market the property to a wider range of potential buyers.

- In some instances, however—most commonly when the foreclosed property has relatively little value and the bank decides not to bid at the public auction—a third party is the winning bidder. Statute does not presently specify any requirements or qualifications as to who may purchase a property at public auction, but at the auction we attended, the local sheriff strictly required photo identification from third-party winning bidders and a cash deposit on their purchases.

The problem, in a nutshell, is this: a handful of delinquent landlords have learned how to exploit sheriff sale auctions and acquire new rental properties—invariably in neighborhoods that are already suffering from the compounded challenges of very low property values—more rapidly than the government can compel them to pay their property taxes and building code judgments.

We stood in the same room with people who already own hundreds of rental units, on which they owe tens of thousands of dollars in taxes and fines, and watched as the government awarded them winning bids for new properties. We *know* that the bad actors have no intention of paying the property taxes they rightfully owe; we *know* that they have no intention of keeping up even with routine maintenance on their properties; and we *know* that Wisconsin neighborhoods and the people who live there are suffering as a result. This predatory business model is a known problem in Milwaukee County, but it could take root in other communities as well.

We offer two proposals that we believe will give communities better tools to fight back:

- SB 621 provides a process by which any county may—optionally—enact a local ordinance to conduct sheriff sale auctions online. Homebuyers, investors and agents are accustomed in today's market to shopping for properties online. Online auctions would be more accessible, potentially better advertised and potentially less intimidating for well-meaning investors in the communities who need them most.
- SB 622 prohibits a buyer from acquiring a new property at a sheriff sale auction if the buyer is already more than 120 days delinquent on property taxes or building code judgments. The bill also gives the court a range of penalties that it may impose on bad actors who violate the proposed buyer eligibility requirements or misrepresent their eligibility.

These bills do not create cumbersome new regulations or requirements for the vast majority of potential bidders at sheriff sales or for the countless property owners who are making their communities better places to live. The bills maintain and expand an open, fair and unobstructed market for these homes.

Thank you for your consideration of our ideas. We welcome your contribution to the conversations that we have pursued for many months.



Luther S. Olsen

State Senator

14th District

TO: Senate Committee on Insurance, Housing and Trade

FROM: Senator Luther Olsen

DATE: December 13, 2017

SUBJECT: Testimony in favor of Senate Bill 621 and 622

Thank you Chairman Lasee and the Senate Committee on Insurance, Housing and Trade for holding a hearing and allowing me to submit testify in favor of Senate Bill 621 and 622.

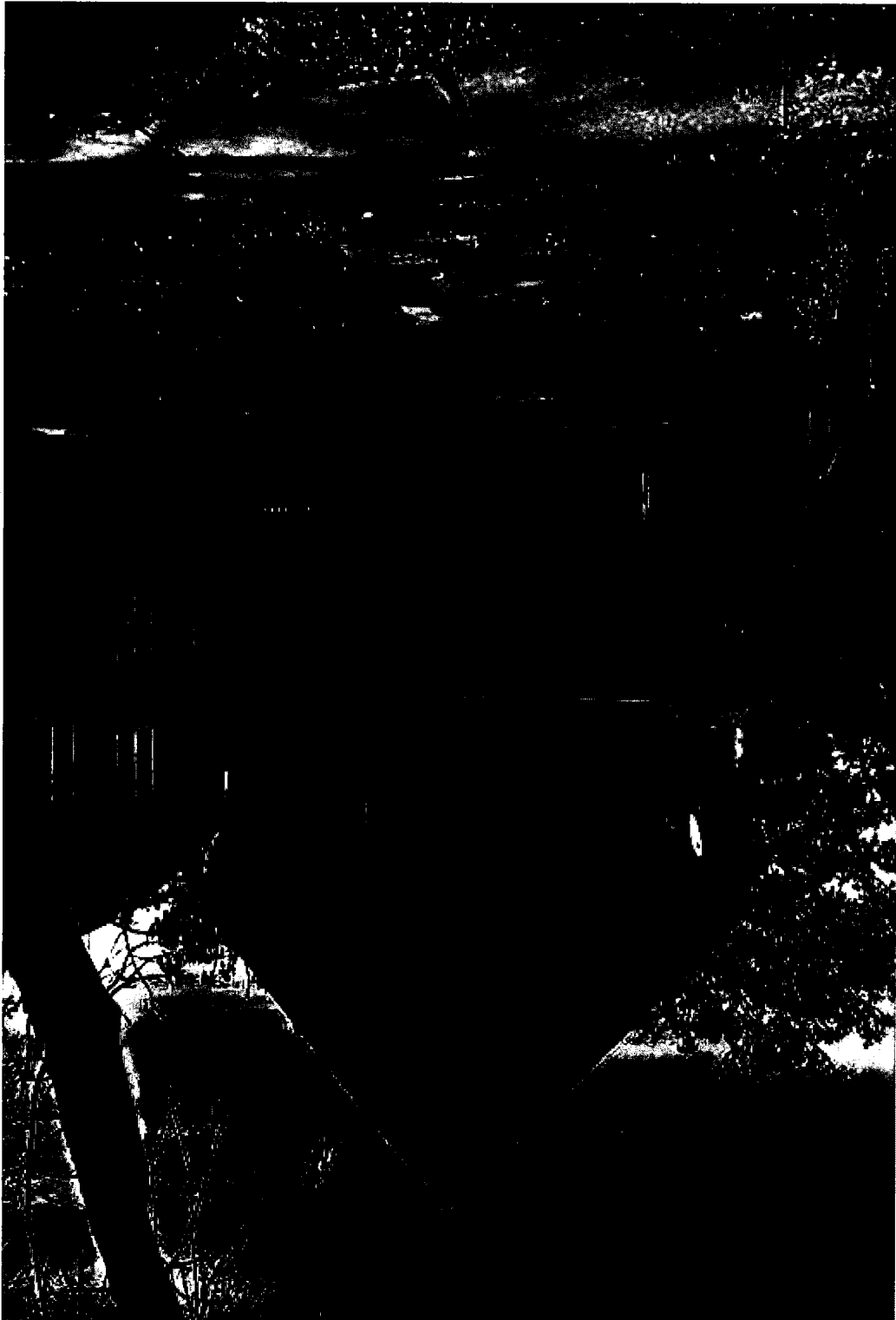
In recent years, Milwaukee has been dealing with nuisance landlord practices that are damaging city neighborhoods and compromising the safety of tenants. The bad actors routinely purchase property at sheriff sales while simultaneously avoiding to pay court fines for building codes and/or incurring delinquent property taxes on their current properties.

We worked with the City of Milwaukee to create two pieces of legislation that will improve the system. These two improvements will benefit not only Milwaukee but all Wisconsin communities.

- Senate Bill 621 enables counties to host or contract online auctions for foreclosed properties, making the process more accessible and less intimidating for bidders and investors.
- Senate Bill 622 prohibits a buyer from acquiring a new property at a sheriff sale if the buyer is already more than 120 days delinquent on property taxes or building code judgements.

These proposals will make it harder for bad actors to acquire property without creating burdensome regulations or requirements for the vast majority of property owners and well-intentioned bidders.

Thank you, members. I ask for your support and would be more than happy to answer any questions.



2872 North 44th Street - Milwaukee, WI

2872 North 44th Street

Kenneth Martin bought this duplex in 2007 and took out a \$131,000 mortgage. But like so many others, he too was impacted by the foreclosure crisis of the late 2000s.

Legacy Bank filed a foreclosure action against him in mid-2010 and took the property to a sheriff's sale on August 20, 2012.

On that Monday morning, Mohammad Choudry joined no more than a few dozen people in a basement room of the Milwaukee County Courthouse. He knew the system well because he had already purchased 23 other properties at sheriff's sale prior to that date.

The live auction lasted only a few minutes until Mr. Choudry was the last bidder standing. The sheriff's department, as required by law, deemed him to be the highest bidder at \$4,901 and awarded him a sheriff's deed. He usually carried several thousand dollars in cash with him in case he wanted to buy multiple properties, but in this case he needed to put down only \$100.

As he committed to spending thousands of dollars to acquire this particular piece of real estate, he already owned 44 other parcels and owed hundreds of thousands of dollars in property taxes on those properties.

When the judge was considering whether to confirm the sale on Oct. 1, 2012, there was no way to prevent a person like Mr. Choudry from buying that property despite how derelict he was in maintaining his other properties. With no authority to stop it, the judge confirmed the sale and Mr. Choudry took title.

He owned the property for over 2 years, but never paid taxes or made a single repair to the building. In fact, didn't even record the deed, so title showed only the prior owner's name.

On November 11, 2014, after never paying any property taxes, the City of Milwaukee took ownership of the property through tax foreclosure.

With two years of ownership, Mr. Choudry made as much as \$24,000 in rental revenue from the duplex.

While under his ownership, his only expense was the \$4,900 purchase price. He walked away, likely \$20,000 richer, leaving the taxpayers on the hook for its 4 years of tax-delinquency and total debt of \$16,891.95. The city maintained the property for a year and sold it in late 2015 for \$6,000.

At least a portion of that \$20,000 profit went toward buying more properties at sheriff's sale because he bought 34 more properties over the next 4 years until the City of Milwaukee sued him and put all 76 of his properties under receivership.

This law would have prevented Mr. Choudry from purchasing the property and running it into the ground while the rest of the city taxpayers picked up his tab. It would have saved taxpayer money and prevented Mr. Choudry from negatively impacting the neighbors on the 2800 Block of North 44th Street by letting his property deteriorate.

Appeals Court orders Milwaukee landlord Will Sherard to cough up \$64,550 in fines

Cary Spivak, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Published 6:00 a.m. CT Dec. 13, 2017

Will Sherard, long known as one of the most notorious Milwaukee central city landlords, must pay \$64,550 in municipal court fines that he has been effectively dodging as far back as 2009, a state Court of Appeals judge ordered Tuesday.

In a 16-page decision, Judge Timothy Dugan flatly rejected all of Sherard's arguments that he be allowed to continue making small payments on building code fines imposed in 19 separate cases.

"Sherard did not testify or present any evidence showing that he was actually unable to pay the money judgment," Dugan wrote.

In fact, Sherard has continued to be a regular at the Milwaukee County sheriff's sales where foreclosed properties are auctioned off to lenders, landlords, slumlords and people seeking to buy a fixer-upper to live in.

Since January 2016, Sherard and his Morocco Investments LLC have spent more than \$115,000 at the sheriff's sales to buy a dozen properties, according to a review of Milwaukee County Register of Deeds records.

Morocco Investments sold two properties for \$60,500 during that time. Sherard has testified that he is the sole owner of Morocco.

"It is frustrating to see that Will Sherard keeps buying more and more properties while still neglecting to pay his municipal debts," said Patrick Leigl, the assistant city attorney who prosecuted the civil case against Sherard. "He fought this case yet he continues to buy more and more property. It frustrates the system."

Sherard learned of Dugan's order from a Journal Sentinel reporter Tuesday. He refused to answer questions about the ruling.

"What is your reaction to it?" Sherard asked a reporter. He said he would call back and answer questions later Tuesday, but has not done so.

The Journal Sentinel, in April 2016, disclosed how Sherard and others routinely received Municipal Court approval to make nominal payments on their building codes fines. Meanwhile, some, including Sherard, continued to buy more problem-plagued inner-city properties to rent to low-income residents.

In May 2016, the City Attorney's office objected to continuing Sherard's easy payment plan. In response, Municipal Court Judge Phillip Chavez in June 2016 ordered that Sherard pay \$39,728 in building code fines within 60 days, plus an additional \$24,822 one year after that.

Since that order, Sherard and Morocco Investments have racked up an additional \$25,220 in court fines for code violations. More than \$11,000 of that amount has not been paid.

Sherard, 76, who has been in the inner-city rental business for about a half-century, appealed Chavez's order, claiming he could not afford to pay the fines.

Dugan noted that during the 2016 Municipal Court proceedings Sherard "argued he had been making a good faith effort to pay the forfeitures" and told the court "we're all struggling to make payments." He asked the court for "something that he could live with," pointing out that he owed nearly \$40,000 to various city departments, including those responsible for property taxes and water service.

The city countered Sherard's poverty plea, arguing last year that Sherard's properties were assessed at \$1.41 million and that he had paid a \$120,000 court judgment in 2015.

"The fact that Sherard recently paid a \$120,000 judgment in full provides support" the city's demand that he pay up, Dugan wrote Tuesday.

The \$64,550 owed by Sherard is being held by Sherard's attorney in an escrow account and will be forwarded to the city unless Sherard persuades the court to stay its order, Leigl said. The money was placed in escrow last year when Milwaukee County Circuit Court Judge Glenn Yamahiro rejected Sherard's appeal.

Sherard is one of a handful of problem landlords who have been subject to increased scrutiny since the Journal Sentinel launched a series of stories showing how some slumlords use various strategies to game the system.

In recent months, state lawmakers and city officials have:

Introduced state legislation that would allow counties to conduct online sheriff's sales of property — an action that is aimed at attracting a wider range of buyers to the sales. In Milwaukee County, the sales are conducted in the basement of the Safety Building and are attended largely by regulars.

Introduced a second bill that would ban individuals who owe back property taxes or court fines for building code violations from buying properties at a sheriff's sale. Firms, including limited liability companies, owned or linked to people owing back taxes or fines would also be banned from buying at the sales. Both bills have bi-partisan sponsors and are scheduled to be discussed Wednesday at hearing before the Senate Committee on Insurance, Housing and Trade.

Obtained a court order banning Mohammad Choudry from buying any more city properties and placing the properties he or his network of limited liability companies own into receivership. At the time of the action brought by the City Attorney's Office, Choudry's 76 properties had nearly 1,800 building code violations.

Charged in court that landlord Elijah Mohammad Rashaed exploits poverty-stricken and desperate tenants by renting out unsafe properties that violate city codes. The City Attorney's Office initially sought to place his properties in receivership, but last month reached an agreement calling for Rashaed to sell the 166 properties owned by him and 18 LLCs he controls.

Under pressure from the city and Robert W. Baird & Co. Inc., James Herrick sold at least seven of the problem plagued central city properties that he owned through LLCs. Herrick, a Baird executive who lives in a \$1.1 million River Hills estate, was chastised in political circles after his holdings were revealed.



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TO: Honorable Members of the Senate Committee on Insurance, Housing, and Trade
FROM: Kimberly Montgomery
DATE: December 13, 2017
SUBJECT: Support for Senate Bill 621

Chair Lasee, Vice-Chair Olsen and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would also like to thank Representatives Katsma and Goyke for their leadership on the bill, and also Senator Olsen for signing on as a co-sponsor.

The City of Milwaukee supports Senate Bill 621 which authorizes counties to conduct foreclosure sales using an Internet-based auction.

Currently, Sheriff Sales are conducted by the Sheriff in the county in which the property is located and are subject to additional terms and conditions that the Sheriff Sale shall require. Typically, all parties interested in purchasing property at a Sheriff Sale Foreclosure are required to pay a down payment of the minimum amount of 10% of their total bid in cash or certified funds at the sale.

The current process is an antiquated one. For generations these sales have been taking place in courthouses or other government buildings. In Milwaukee, the Sheriff Sales are held Monday mornings in a large windowless room in the basement of the Safety Building. Bidders must be physically present to bid. This greatly reduces competition meaning there are few bidders.

Most of the attendees at the sales are regulars. We have seen evidence of collusion in bidding among the small pool of regulars who attend. Bidders who are not regulars may feel uncomfortable and intimidated.

Allowing counties to use an internet-based auction will even the playing field by widening the audience of bidders, ultimately increasing the competition. This in turn could help increase the amount paid and therefore help to maximize bids, so that you're more likely to get market value. This will favor foreclosing lenders because with more bidders competing, likelihood that they will get their loan paid increases meaning lenders won't have to own so many REO parcels.

For the reasons stated above, the City of Milwaukee supports Senate Bill 621 and urges the committee to vote in favor of passage. Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

For more information please contact:

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