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In Their Own Words: 7th District Councilwoman Maria Quiñones-Sánchez

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Statement from Councilwoman Sánchez on the Need for a Comprehensive Enforcement Strategy for Vacant Property, on the Anniversary of the Tragic Buck Hosiery Fire

I have the great fortune and challenge of representing a City Council district that includes Philadelphia's historic manufacturing corridor, with vacant factory and warehouse buildings that loom over the nearby residential blocks that once housed their workers. While we work to bring activity and life back to those buildings, and repurpose them for a 21st century economy, we must ensure that they are secure and safe for the present.

It has been one year since fire destroyed Kensington's Buck Hosiery building and took the lives of two brave firefighters. At the same time that I take stock of this anniversary, I am sharply aware that the Buck tragedy was not an isolated incident – a slow, steady drumbeat of these fires both preceded and followed it. There is no single law or policy that can prevent these fires, and so instead we need a comprehensive approach and strategy that is coordinated across government agencies, from Licenses & Inspections to Revenue to the Fire Department. This requires a paradigm shift, from responding to complaints and problems, to affirmatively pursuing compliance for all of these vacant structures before they give rise to another tragedy.

At the time of last year's fire, I had introduced legislation aimed at better securing the vacant buildings that are such a public safety hazard in our neighborhoods. Following the fire, I worked with my Council colleagues to amend the bill to specifically address "large vacant commercial and industrial properties,"

which create a unique fire hazard. The new law, which was unanimously adopted, requires special registration and bonding, use of more effective sealing methods, regular owner inspections, and appointment of a local property manager to be responsible for ensuring compliance. We now must assess the City's progress in implementing this law, and we must support whatever additional funding may be needed for Licenses & Inspections to manage inspections and abatement.

We also must take the step of transforming our vacant land and tax foreclosure systems by creating a "Philadelphia Land Bank" to acquire and repurpose vacant, often tax-delinquent, properties. Our current system is broken, with often no way for neighbors or developers to force the sale of properties that are creating blight and fire risk. State law authorizing cities to create such land banks gives us a powerful tool to better get long-time abandoned properties into the hands of responsible owners, and will finally allow our tax collection system to focus on more recent, collectible debt. We also need to ensure that we are fully liening the value of all municipal debt, including Licenses & Inspections fines and costs, to force owners to care for their properties or lose them.

It can no longer be a business model in this city to sit on a poorly-maintained property, speculating in hopes it can be sold or developed someday. We have taken real steps towards reform, but have the duty to do more to ensure we have the right funding and tools – and that we are using them effectively.

In Their Own Words is a series looking back on the Thomas Buck Hosiery Fire in Kensington. If you would like to submit your own comments, please correct for spelling and grammar and it will be posted here, unedited. Send your submissions to philadelinquency@gmail.com

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