

WEST VIRGINIA LEGISLATURE

2016 REGULAR SESSION

Introduced

House Bill 2970

2015 Carryover

(BY DELEGATES MARCUM, R. PHILLIP, REYNOLDS, J.
NELSON, R. SMITH, ELDRIDGE, PERDUE, HAMILTON,
IRELAND AND FOLK)

[Introduced January 13, 2016; referred to the
Committee on Political Subdivisions then the Judiciary.]

1 A BILL to amend and reenact §7-1-3ff of the Code of West Virginia, 1931, as amended; and to
 2 amend and reenact §8-12-16 of said code, all relating to authorizing county commissions
 3 and municipalities to cooperate and enter into agreements removing or demolishing
 4 dwellings or buildings unfit for human habitation.

Be it enacted by the Legislature of West Virginia:

1 That §7-1-3ff of the Code of West Virginia, 1931, as amended, be amended and
 2 reenacted; and that §8-12-16 of said code be amended and reenacted, all to read as follows:

CHAPTER 7. COUNTY COMMISSIONS AND OFFICERS.

ARTICLE 1. COUNTY COMMISSIONS GENERALLY.

**§7-1-3ff. Authority of county commission to regulate unsafe or unsanitary structures and
 refuse on private land; authority to establish an enforcement agency; county litter
 control officers; procedure for complaints; lien and sale of land to recover costs;
 entry on land to perform repairs and alterations or to satisfy lien; receipt of grants
 and subsidies.**

1 (a) Plenary power and authority are hereby conferred upon every county commission to
 2 adopt ordinances regulating the repair, alteration or improvement, or the vacating and closing or
 3 removal or demolition, or any combination thereof, of any dwellings or other buildings, except for
 4 buildings utilized for farm purposes on land actually being used for farming, unfit for human
 5 habitation due to dilapidation, defects increasing the hazard of fire, accidents or other calamities,
 6 lack of ventilation, light or sanitary facilities or any other conditions prevailing in any dwelling or
 7 building, whether used for human habitation or not, which would cause the dwellings or other
 8 buildings to be unsafe, unsanitary, dangerous or detrimental to the public safety or welfare,
 9 whether the result of natural or manmade force or effect. Every county commission may

10 cooperate with municipalities and enter into agreements with municipalities to effect the purposes
11 of this section: *Provided*, That each county commission and municipality shall use its own
12 employees and equipment when removing or demolishing dwellings or buildings subject to this
13 section.

14 (b) Plenary power and authority are hereby conferred upon every county commission to
15 adopt ordinances regulating the removal and clean up of any accumulation of refuse or debris,
16 overgrown vegetation or toxic spillage or toxic seepage located on private lands which is
17 determined to be unsafe, unsanitary, dangerous or detrimental to the public safety or welfare,
18 whether the result of natural or manmade force or effect.

19 (c) The county commission, in formally adopting ordinances, shall designate an
20 enforcement agency which shall consist of the county engineer (or other technically qualified
21 county employee or consulting engineer), county health officer or his or her designee, a fire chief
22 from a county fire company, the county litter control officer, if the commission chooses to hire one,
23 and two members at large selected by the county commission to serve two-year terms. The
24 county sheriff shall serve as an ex officio member of the enforcement agency and the county
25 officer charged with enforcing the orders of the county commission under this section.

26 (d) In addition to the powers and duties imposed by this section, county litter control
27 officers ~~shall have authority to~~ may issue citations for open dumps, as prohibited by subsection
28 (a), section ten, article fifteen, chapter twenty-two of this code, unlawful disposal of litter, as
29 prohibited by section four, article fifteen-a, chapter twenty-two of this code, and failure to provide
30 proof of proper disposal of solid waste, as prohibited by subsection (a), section ten, article four,
31 chapter twenty-two-c of this code, after completing a training course offered by the West Virginia
32 Department of Environmental Protection. Nothing in this subsection supercedes the authority or
33 duty of the Department of Environmental Protection or other law-enforcement officers to preserve

34 law and order and enforce the litter control program.

35 (e) Any ordinance adopted pursuant to the provisions of this section shall provide fair and
36 equitable rules of procedure and any other standards considered necessary to guide the
37 enforcement agency, or its agents, in the investigation of dwelling or building conditions,
38 accumulation of refuse or debris, overgrown vegetation or toxic spillage or toxic seepage and
39 shall provide for fair and equitable rules of procedure for instituting and conducting hearings in
40 the matters before the county commission. Any entrance upon premises for the purpose of
41 making examinations shall be made in a manner as to cause the least possible inconvenience to
42 the persons in possession.

43 (f) (1) Complaints authorized by this section shall be brought before the county
44 commission. Complaints shall be initiated by citation issued by the county litter control officer or
45 petition of the county engineer (or other technically qualified county employee or consulting
46 engineer) on behalf of and at the direction of the enforcement agency, but only after that agency
47 has investigated and determined that any dwelling, building, accumulation of refuse or debris,
48 overgrown vegetation or toxic spillage or toxic seepage is unsafe, unsanitary, dangerous or
49 detrimental to the public safety or welfare and should be repaired, altered, improved, vacated,
50 removed, closed, cleaned or demolished.

51 (2) The county commission shall cause the owner or owners of the private land in question
52 to be served with a copy of the complaint. Service shall be accomplished in the manner provided
53 in rule four of the West Virginia Rules of Civil Procedure.

54 (3) The complaint shall state the findings and recommendations of the enforcement
55 agency and that unless the owner or owners of the property file with the clerk of the county
56 commission a written request for a hearing within ten days of receipt of the complaint, an order
57 will be issued by the county commission implementing the recommendations of the enforcement

58 agency.

59 (4) If the owner or owners of the property file a request for a hearing, the county
60 commission shall issue an order setting this matter down for hearing within twenty days.
61 Hearings shall be recorded by electronic device or by court reporter. The West Virginia rules of
62 evidence do not apply to the proceedings, but each party has the right to present evidence and
63 examine and cross-examine all witnesses.

64 (5) The enforcement agency has the burden of proving its allegation by a preponderance
65 of the evidence and has the duty to go forward with the evidence.

66 (6) At the conclusion of the hearing the county commission shall make findings of fact,
67 determinations and conclusions of law as to whether the dwelling or building: Is unfit for human
68 habitation due to dilapidation; has defects that increase the hazard of fire, accidents or other
69 calamities, lacks ventilation, light or sanitary facilities; or any other conditions prevailing in the
70 dwelling or building, whether used for human habitation or not and whether the result of natural
71 or manmade force or effect, which would cause such dwelling or other building to be unsafe,
72 unsanitary, dangerous or detrimental to the public safety or welfare; or whether there is an
73 accumulation of refuse or debris, overgrown vegetation, toxic spillage or toxic seepage on private
74 lands which is determined to be unsafe, unsanitary, dangerous or detrimental to the public safety
75 or welfare, whether the result of natural or manmade force or effect.

76 (7) The county commission ~~has authority to~~ may order the owner or owners thereof to
77 repair, alter, improve, vacate, remove, close, clean up or demolish the dwelling or building in
78 question or to remove or clean up any accumulation of refuse or debris, overgrown vegetation or
79 toxic spillage or toxic seepage within a reasonable time and to impose daily civil monetary
80 penalties on the owner or owners who fail to obey an order.

81 (8) Appeals from the county commission to the circuit court shall be in accordance with

82 the provisions of article three, chapter fifty-eight of this code.

83 (g) Upon the failure of the owner or owners of the private land to perform the ordered
84 duties and obligations as set forth in the order of the county commission, the county commission
85 may advertise for and seek contractors to make the ordered repairs, alterations or improvements
86 or the ordered demolition, removal or clean up. The county commission may enter into any
87 contract with any contractor to accomplish the ordered repairs, alterations or improvements or the
88 ordered demolition, removal or clean up.

89 (h) A civil proceeding may be brought in circuit court by the county commission against
90 the owner or owners of the private land or other responsible party that the subject matter of the
91 order of the county commission to subject the private land in question: (1) To a lien for the
92 amount of the contractor's costs in making these ordered repairs, alterations or improvements or
93 ordered demolition, removal or clean up, together with any daily civil monetary penalty imposed;
94 (2) to order and decree the sale of the private land in question to satisfy the lien; (3) to order and
95 decree that the contractor may enter upon the private land in question at any and all times
96 necessary to make ordered repairs, alterations or improvements, or ordered demolition, removal
97 or clean up; and (4) to order the payment of all costs incurred by the county with respect to the
98 property and for reasonable attorney fees and court costs incurred in the prosecution of the action.

99 (i) County commissions ~~have the power and authority to~~ may receive and accept grants,
100 subsidies, donations and services in kind consistent with the objectives of this section.

CHAPTER 8. MUNICIPAL CORPORATIONS.

ARTICLE 12. GENERAL AND SPECIFIC POWERS, DUTIES AND ALLIED RELATIONS OF MUNICIPALITIES, GOVERNING BODIES AND MUNICIPAL OFFICERS AND EMPLOYEES; SUITS AGAINST MUNICIPALITIES.

§8-12-16. Ordinances regulating the repair, closing, demolition, etc., of dwellings or buildings unfit for human habitation; procedures.

1 (a) Plenary power and authority are hereby conferred upon every municipality to adopt
2 ordinances regulating the repair, alteration or improvement, or the vacating and closing or removal
3 or demolition, or any combination thereof, of any dwellings or other buildings unfit for human
4 habitation due to dilapidation, defects increasing the hazard of fire, accidents or other calamities,
5 lack of ventilation, light or sanitary facilities or any other conditions prevailing in any dwelling or
6 building, whether used for human habitation or not, which would cause such dwellings or other
7 buildings to be unsafe, unsanitary, dangerous or detrimental to the public safety or welfare.
8 Every municipality may cooperate with and enter into agreements with county commissions to
9 effect the purposes of this section: *Provided, That each municipality and county commission*
10 shall use its own employees and equipment when removing or demolishing dwellings or buildings
11 subject to this section.

12 (b) The governing body in formally adopting the ordinances shall designate the
13 enforcement agency, which shall consist of the mayor, the municipal engineer or building
14 inspector and one member at large, to be selected by and to serve at the will and pleasure of the
15 mayor. The ranking health officer and fire chief shall serve as ex officio members of the
16 enforcement agency.

17 (c) Any ordinance adopted pursuant to the provisions of this section must provide fair and
18 equitable rules of procedure and any other standards deemed necessary to guide the
19 enforcement agency, or its agents, in the investigation of dwelling or building conditions, and in
20 conducting hearings: *Provided, That any entrance upon premises for the purpose of making*
21 *examinations is made in a manner as to cause the least possible inconvenience to the persons*
22 *in possession.*

23 (d) The governing body of every municipality ~~has plenary power and authority to~~ may adopt
24 an ordinance requiring the owner or owners of any dwelling or building under determination of the
25 State Fire Marshal, as provided in section twelve, article three, chapter twenty-nine of this code,
26 or under order of the enforcement agency of the municipality, to pay for the costs of repairing,
27 altering or improving, or of vacating and closing, removing or demolishing any dwelling or building.

28 (e) Every municipality:

29 (1) May file a lien against the real property in question for an amount that reflects all costs
30 incurred by the municipality for repairing, altering or improving, or of vacating and closing,
31 removing or demolishing any dwelling or building; and

32 (2) May institute a civil action in a court of competent jurisdiction against the landowner or
33 other responsible party for all costs incurred by the municipality with respect to the property and
34 for reasonable attorney fees and court costs incurred in the prosecution of the action.

35 (f) Not less than ten days prior to instituting a civil action as provided in this section, the
36 governing body of the municipality shall send notice to the landowner by certified mail, return
37 receipt requested, advising the landowner of the governing body's intention to institute such
38 action.

39 (g) The notice shall be sent to the most recent address of the landowner of record in the
40 office of the assessor of the county where the subject property is located. If, for any reason,
41 such certified mail is returned without evidence of proper receipt thereof, then in such event, the
42 governing body shall cause a Class III-0 legal advertisement to be published in a newspaper of
43 general circulation in the county wherein the subject property is located and post notice on the
44 front door or other conspicuous location on the subject property.

45 (h) If any landowner desires to contest any demand brought forth pursuant to this section,
46 the landowner may seek relief in a court of competent jurisdiction.

47 (i) For purposes of this section, "owner" or "landowner" means a person who individually
48 or jointly with others:

49 (1) Has legal title to the property, with or without actual possession of the property;

50 (2) Has charge, care or control of the property as owner or agent of the owner;

51 (3) Is an executor, administrator, trustee or guardian of the estate of the owner;

52 (4) Is the agent of the owner for the purpose of managing, controlling or collecting rents;

53 or

54 (5) Is entitled to control or direct the management or disposition of the property.

55 (j) All orders issued by the enforcement agency shall be served in accordance with the
56 law of this state concerning the service of process in civil actions, and be posted in a conspicuous
57 place on the premises affected by the complaint or order: *Provided*, That no ordinance may be
58 adopted without providing for the right to apply to the circuit court for a temporary injunction
59 restraining the enforcement agency pending final disposition of the cause.

60 (k) ~~In the event~~ If such application is made, a hearing thereon shall be had within twenty
61 days, or as soon thereafter as possible, and the court shall enter such final order or decree as the
62 law and justice may require.

NOTE: The purpose of this bill is to authorize county commissions and municipalities to cooperate and enter into agreements removing or demolishing dwellings or buildings unfit for human habitation.

Strike-throughs indicate language that would be stricken from the present law, and underscoring indicates new language that would be added.