

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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September 10, 2026

Mr. Brian J. Hanlon
Director
District of Columbia Department of Buildings
1100 4th Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Director Hanlon:

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is continuing its oversight of the District of Columbia's housing policies.¹ On June 16, 2026, the Committee sent a letter to D.C. Council Chairman Phil Mendelson expressing concerns about the District's ongoing unconstitutional practice of seizing the home equity of homeowners in foreclosures involving outstanding tax obligations.² Chairman Mendelson responded that the D.C. Council intends to pass legislation correcting a practice that results in unjust takings of residential property equity in excess of owed tax obligations.³ More recently, the Committee has seen reports that the D.C. Department of Buildings (D.C. DOB) is working with the D.C. Department of Transportation and the Office of the Chief Technology Officer to utilize vehicles with mounted panoramic cameras and artificial intelligence (AI) to surveil homes to determine if they are vacant and subject to external property maintenance violations.⁴ Specifically, the Committee is concerned about the potential of this initiative to ensnare District property owners in a regime of excessive fees, external property maintenance violations, and unpayable tax debt, putting them on a path towards foreclosure. The Committee therefore seeks a briefing and information from D.C. DOB regarding this initiative and supporting technologies.

Washington, D.C. has one of the highest vacant property taxes in the U.S.⁵ Many residents who lost their entire home equity in foreclosure after the District sold their tax lien to third party investors fell behind on their property taxes because the District imposes punitive

¹ See Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Gov't Reform, to Phil Mendelson, Chairman, Council of the District of Columbia (Jun. 16, 2026) [hereinafter "Letter from James Comer"].

² *Id.*

³ See Letter from Phil Mendelson, Chairman, Council of the District of Columbia, to James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm on Oversight and Gov't Reform (Jul. 14, 2026).

⁴ DC DEPARTMENT OF BUILDINGS, STRATEGIC ENFORCEMENT PLAN FY26-FY28, 17 (2026).

⁵ *Vacant Real Property*, OFFICE OF TAX AND REVENUE (last visited Aug. 14, 2026), available at <https://otr.cfo.dc.gov/page/vacant-real-property-0#>

Properties that are declared "vacant" and "blighted" are taxed as 5 and 10 percent, respectively, of the assessed value.

penalties on properties it declares vacant or blighted.⁶ D.C. also levies steep fines for external property maintenance infractions, which start in the hundreds of dollars and escalate to thousands of dollars.⁷ Many who have lost their property and home equity from the District's unconstitutional takings⁸ are elderly or ill and minorities.⁹ The Committee's June 16, 2026, letter highlighted the District's long record of disregarding the constitutional property rights of homeowners who have fallen behind on their property taxes by continuing the sale of home equity to third-party investors.¹⁰ The Committee has also advanced legislation seeking to address the District's use of cameras, particularly traffic cameras, as punitive revenue-generating mechanisms.¹¹ Given this history, the Committee is concerned that D.C. DOB's new initiative could be utilized to put more property owners on the path to foreclosure for the ultimate purpose of raising revenue by declaring a property vacant or levying excessive external property maintenance violation infractions.

To assist the Committee's oversight of this matter, we request that the D.C. DOB provide a briefing to Committee staff by September 17, 2026. The D.C. DOB should be prepared to discuss topics including, but not limited to, the following:

1. How the D.C. DOB intends to utilize vehicles with mounted panoramic cameras and artificial intelligence to determine if a property is vacant or has committed external property maintenance violations;
2. Any forecasts of additional revenue for D.C. generated as a result of implementing these technologies;
3. What providers the D.C. DOB is in discussion with, and what capabilities these providers offer;
4. How many additional properties the D.C. DOB forecasts will be determined to be vacant after these technologies are implemented;
5. What steps the D.C. DOB takes to ensure that a property is actually vacant, including but not limited to attempts to contact a resident or property owner; and
6. What steps a property owner can take to contest a declaration that their property is vacant or has committed an external property maintenance violation.

⁶ Brittany Hunter, *House Oversight Committee to investigate home equity theft in D.C.*, PACIFIC LEGAL FOUNDATION (Jun. 22, 2026).

⁷ See 16 District of Columbia Municipal Regulations §§ 3201, 3300, and 3309.

⁸ See *Tyler v. Hennepin County, Minnesota, et al.*, 22 U.S. 116 (2022).

In 2023, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled in *Tyler v. Hennepin County* that retention of the excess value of an individual's home above their tax debt violates the Takings Clause of the Constitution.

⁹ Benjamin Freed, *Hundreds of DC Residents Lose Homes Over Small Tax Bills*, WASHINGTONIAN (Sept. 9, 2013).

¹⁰ Letter from James Comer, *supra* n. 1.

¹¹ *Full Committee Business Meeting: Mark-Up of Several Bills for the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform*, 119th Cong. 2, at 19 (Mar. 18, 2026).

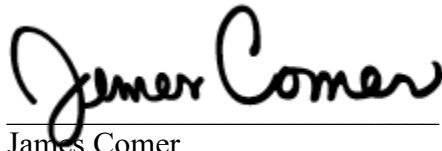
Director Brian J. Hanlon

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The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. Further, Committee also has jurisdiction under Rule X over the “[m]unicipal affairs of the District of Columbia in general.” To schedule the briefing or to ask any related follow-up questions, please contact the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Majority staff at (202) 225-5074. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James Comer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "James" and last name "Comer" clearly distinguishable.

James Comer
Chairman

cc: The Honorable Robert Garcia, Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform