

Statement of  
Mr. Kevin B. Acklin  
Chief of Staff, Office of Mayor William Peduto  
City of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
before the  
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management

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Chairman Barletta, Ranking Member Johnson, and Members of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management: Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today. My name is Kevin Acklin, and I serve as the Chief of Staff to Mayor William Peduto of Pittsburgh. I am also the City's Chief Development Officer, and serve as the Chairman of our Urban Redevelopment Authority. Our City is at a moment of transformation, as our innovation continues to fuel a growing health care, education, and technology revolution to transform our once-industrial city into a thriving 21<sup>st</sup> century metropolis.

Even as we are poised to grow for the first time in two generations, Pittsburgh still faces significant challenges. We are a city that was built for twice as many residents as we now have. Combatting blight and stabilizing neighborhoods is an issue we continue to confront. Our redevelopment has not always been equitable in the past, and we constantly strive today to ensure access to opportunity for everyone across our City. Pittsburgh's infrastructure is antiquated and under-resourced, with some critical systems and facilities entering their second century.

In order to address our infrastructure challenges, the City undertook a recent assessment of our entire portfolio of public buildings and facilities. When our administration took office, a comprehensive list of all of our facilities did not even exist. We built that list and evaluated the conditions, necessary upgrades, and opportunity costs of nearly 300 facilities. For the first time, we are able to lay out a strategic investment plan for our police and fire stations and training centers, recreation centers, maintenance facilities, offices and scores of other properties.

Pittsburgh is now beginning a process of implementing the recommendations derived from this assessment. Through a robust public process, we are evaluating where there are opportunities to enhance existing facilities, consolidate others, and dispose of underutilized assets in a way that generates the most value to our residents. Our goal is to improve city services to residents and to continue to rebuild and expand our tax base and local economy.

A major opportunity to accelerate our facility optimization program would be for the City to gain control of the former Vetrans Affairs Medical Center, a 164-acre site that has been vacant for approximately four years and has been declared excess property by the federal government. All services were transferred to other facilities throughout the Pittsburgh region by 2013, and the site has sat vacant and unused ever since. The facility is very large and comprised of 19 buildings that, while secured, are depreciating rapidly. The buildings are not connected to typical utilities and they are not regularly inhabited. As Chairman Barletta pointed out on a recent tour, it is only a matter of time before a roof leaks or a pipe bursts, potentially going unnoticed for a long period and causing significant damage to the facility.

Gaining control of the site and partnering with the Federal government for its reuse will revolutionize first responder and emergency service response and delivery in Pittsburgh. The campus is remote and surrounded by woodlands, but is in close proximity to major highways and our East Busway for convenient access to Downtown Pittsburgh. The site could hold facilities that are currently scattered around the City, including the headquarters and training academies of our police, fire, and emergency management services; our garage and machine shop; and our emergency operations center, thereby unlocking those sites for development that will grow our City and tax base. Given our strong partnership with Allegheny County Chief Executive Rich Fitzgerald and the support of State Senator Randy Vulakovich who represents the site, we believe it could become a regional law enforcement and emergency management asset that could support not only the City, but the 129 other municipalities in our county. This process of relocation could make available a number of properties in dynamic markets, including our riverfronts, which could produce a higher return on investment to the public. Additionally, rehabilitation of the VA property with an eye toward storm water management will help to alleviate significant flooding issues downhill from the property.

We have worked over the past several years on plans for the VA site, and I commend the work of the GSA and the VA in being open and accessible through this process. We have been working with partners in both Departments and the property has recently been declared “surplus”. We are now working to gain access to the site as quickly as possible. While the staffs of both agencies have been consummate professionals and dedicated public servants that have proven to be true partners with our team as we navigate this process; but, we all acknowledge that the process can be cumbersome and time-consuming.

For example, the VA had to complete various due diligence in surveying other government entities for proposed use and examining potential environmental and historic preservation issues in order for the process to be turned over to GSA. Now that GSA has jurisdiction, it seems that most, if not all, of these studies and surveys must be completed for a second time. Having a clear and well-defined process is important but we also wish to avoid redundancy and duplication that could get in the way of efficiently delivering services to residents. In much the same way that we are hoping to repurpose properties that are not providing value to our residents, we’re hoping that the federal government will consider doing the same.

On behalf of the residents of Pittsburgh, I appreciate the opportunity to work together in a way that produces value to the City and the taxpayers while reducing the burden on the federal government. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today, and I am happy to answer any questions.