



TESTIMONY OF STEFANIE F. SELDIN, PRESIDENT AND CEO,  
REBUILDING TOGETHER PHILADELPHIA  
Bill No. 200556  
COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE  
December 1, 2020

Council President Clarke and members of Council,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Rebuilding Together Philadelphia revitalizes communities by transforming vulnerable, owner-occupied houses into safe, healthy and energy-efficient homes. Every year, RTP repairs 100 to 125 homes. Since 1988, RTP has repaired 1,810 homes with 38,000 volunteers for 38 million dollars of repairs.

RTP supports Bill No. 200556, which implements a 1% Construction Impact Tax to be used for affordable home construction, repair and other needs to provide an equitable post-pandemic recovery for Philadelphia. I want to tell you about just two homeowners that RTP has served during the pandemic. Mr. Guzman, age 78, is a disabled homeowner living alone, with cancer, but without a stove to cook his meals due to a flooded kitchen from a roof leak. Carrie B., a disabled senior, had no bannister and had to crawl up her stairs because she was terrified of falling. She also had no functioning kitchen for years. Staying at home prevents the spread of COVID-19, but a home can only be a sanctuary when its residents can live in safety and health.

The need is vast: the City's 2019 Housing Action Plan "acknowledge[s] that one of Philadelphia's biggest challenges is to revitalize our existing housing stock. Nearly 90 percent of units are over 30 years old, and many are in need of repairs and upgrades." The Plan notes that there are 31,000 housing units without complete kitchens and 27,000 units without complete plumbing facilities. Our neighbors are living without ovens, without showers, without toilets.

Kudos to our partner, BSRP, for essentially eliminating the years-long waiting list for home repairs with the proceeds from a 2016 City Council-sponsored bond fund. There were 4,000 people on that list. While the City handled the backlog from 2016 to now, there were hundreds if not thousands of homeowners who could not receive home repairs – the waiting list was closed. Without the CIT, the city will be back in the same hole we were in before the bond fund – with a years-long wait for a safe and healthy home for vulnerable homeowners and their families.

While we need the City to continue to prioritize homeowners with incomes under 50% of Area Median Income (AMI) – those that are currently served through BSRP -- RTP also urges the City to use the proceeds of the CIT to assist homeowners who need repairs and earn between 50 and 100% of AMI and cannot qualify for a Restore, Repair, Renew home repair loan.

When homeowners like these -- who aren't eligible for either a grant or a loan -- but who wait years to repair a roof leak, consequences mount exponentially. Repairs become more expensive and residents can often move out -- swelling the numbers of Philadelphians struggling with housing insecurity and adding blighted or abandoned properties to the block. As Philadelphians lose their jobs and incomes decrease, deferred home maintenance will increase. Philadelphia will bear the costs of this deferred maintenance one way or another, either through home repairs now or through negative health outcomes, increased homelessness, and more blight.

Many of the homeowners that RTP helps are older. With Philadelphia's rowhouses not designed for the elderly to live in safely, home modifications are literally a life-saver: falls are the leading cause of injury and injury-related death in people over 65. RTP installs grab bars and handrails, installs raised toilets, improves lighting and fixes uneven floors. RTP replaces heaters and roofs so children have a safe home to focus on learning and so their parents don't have to choose between putting food on the table or repairing their home.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, many of our older neighbors had to move into congregate care facilities and suffered devastating consequences. On November 30, 2020, the Philadelphia Department of Public Health confirmed that 64% of residents hospitalized for COVID were seniors and seniors made up 92% of the deaths due to COVID; the majority of those who died lived in long-term care facilities. We must do everything we can to help older Philadelphians live and age safely in their own homes.

We know that COVID-19 is hitting our poorest communities and communities of color hardest -- the same communities that are most likely to struggle with inadequate and unstable housing. This funding will give so many Philadelphians the leg-up they need: homeless families will get that first apartment; tenants will receive legal services to avoid eviction; and new homeowners will receive down payment assistance.

RTP calls on Council to create an Advisory Committee with community representation to oversee how funds are spent, provide input and direction, establish equity goals, and have access to data to report whether those goals are being met.

RTP further recommends that Council and the Administration work with the building trades to negotiate an affordable labor rate for use of these funds. Labor costs make construction cost prohibitive, thus requiring significant additional state or federal subsidies to make any project work. We must be able to stretch these new dollars further and serve more Philadelphians.

I commend the Council President and the sponsors of this bill for recognizing that the City we want to be is a City that invests in efforts to provide safe and healthy housing to all its citizens.