



## **Oklahoma REALTORS® Beat Back Onerous “Abandoned Property” Ordinance – Sept. 2014**

There's no secret that Oklahoma is a state whose citizens are generally wary of government getting too big for its britches. So when Oklahoma City passed an “abandoned property” ordinance last November subjecting certain properties to registration requirements, mandated fees, and municipal inspections, Oklahoma's REALTORS® thought it had gone too far.

"Even well-maintained vacant properties or those making their way through a normal estate settlement process were potentially required to register after being unoccupied 60 days," explains Matt Robison, Vice President of Government Affairs for the 8,500-member Oklahoma Association of REALTORS® (OAR). In addition to initial excessive fees, city inspections of registered properties would mean added responsibility and potential cost for property owners, especially in cases of bringing systems up to code whether or not the property was even on the market.

OAR had several significant concerns with the plan, beyond the apparent government over-reach. First, the ordinance seemed simply to be a revenue generator for the city rather than a sensible regulatory tool. Second, municipalities throughout the state saw it as a model ordinance for their own consideration.

OAR acted fast. A strong political coalition was created to support legislation called the *Protect Property Rights Act*, which eliminated fee-based municipal ordinances. "We had associations representing bankers, credit unions, homebuilders, land title companies, the Farm Bureau, and the National Federation of Independent Business," says Robison, noting that these groups do not always see eye-to-eye. The fact that they all came together in support of this issue sent a very clear message to the legislature. "We placed seven logos on each of our communications, and that was a powerful image."

Robison was already familiar with the resources available from the National Association of REALTORS® (NAR), although this was the first time that OAR had requested an Issues Mobilization Grant. "I recommend to all state and local associations they get to know this aspect of the REALTOR® Party," he says, "so when the need arises, they can hit the ground running. Their team is talented, quick and responsive. They can make things happen fast, and there's a significant advantage in understanding their capabilities before an 'emergency' strikes."

NAR's assistance began with a public opinion poll, conducted to gauge statewide public awareness of the property registration issue. While the OAR Board of Directors and Government Affairs Committee were already committed to fighting this battle, polling results helped formulate the coalition's message. A \$95,000 Issues Mobilization Grant helped fund a major campaign to convince the Oklahoma legislature that fee-based property registries represented an over-reach of government into the private sector, and were an ineffective method of addressing abandoned property.



OAR led the coalition by helping create a dynamic website focused on the issue; targeting online advertising to drive the public to the site; initiating phone and robo-calls to certain legislative districts during key votes; and engaging members with Calls-For-Action. Robison and his REALTOR® team were joined at the capitol by coalition members and contract lobbyists, working tirelessly to ensure the passage of their legislation.

"The lobbying against us by the Oklahoma Municipal League and municipalities across the state was tremendous," says Robison. "We were essentially asking state legislators to vote against every city council member and every mayor in Oklahoma, all of whom had supported the ordinance in concept. That's asking a lot!" While the opposition had their 'local rights' position, the overwhelming property rights argument of OAR's coalition prevailed in the end. Oklahoma's *Protect Property Rights Act* passed overwhelmingly in both houses and was signed in to law by the governor in May.

In fact, Robison explains, the new law also expands current statutes defining "dilapidated" property and actually enhances the municipalities' ability to deal effectively with abandoned and neglected properties. "We weren't opposing the cities for the sake of it," he notes. "We're trying to help them be more effective, which is in the best interests of REALTORS® and property owners -- and all Oklahoma citizens."

*To learn more about how Oklahoma REALTORS® scored this tough legislative victory for protecting property rights, contact Matt Robison, VP of Government Affairs for the Oklahoma Association of REALTORS®, at [matt@okrealtors.com](mailto:matt@okrealtors.com) or 405-848-9944.*

