Trash-to-dreams

Anti-blitz legislation finally passed, with the potential to improve neighborhoods and build a land bank for the city.

By R. Jonathan Tuleya
Review Staff Writer

South Philly, get ready for a facelift. Mayor Street's $295-million anti-blitz legislation finally plowed through two years of gridlock and power struggles with City Council last week.

Council's Committee of the Whole voted unanimously for the latest version of the bill, cosponsored by 10 members of Council, 15-0. Council is scheduled to have a final vote during its regular meeting today.

The final sticking point had been

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Free and clear

For 28 years, Edward Baker maintained his innocence despite a murder conviction. With the DA conceding defeat, he has a license to start over.

By Sean M. Riley
Review Staff Writer

In a last-ditch attempt to save face, District Attorney Lynne Abraham decided in January to offer Edward Baker a deal. To an outsider, her proposal seemed like a no-brainer for the 45-year-old convicted murderer who had been placed on house arrest in 1999, pending a new trial.

All Baker had to do was plead no contest to the 1973 murder of Steven Gibbons and the sheriff would cut off his ankle monitor, completing his 28-year return to freedom.

Baker didn't think twice before he told Abraham, "No."

He would take his chances with a trial for one simple reason, he said: "I'm innocent."

Baker's gamble paid off, as the District Attorney's Office dropped all charges and removed his house-arrest monitor 10 days ago.

"The only way I can explain how I felt in 1974 when I heard 'guilty' was that it was the exact opposite of the way I felt last week when [the District Attorney] dropped my case," Baker said Monday, enjoying his holiday as an electrician for the city. "There is nothing like sitting here talking and not having to worry about going to any more trials."

He said he surprised some people when he passed up his "get-out-of-jail-free card" last month to risk facing a judicial system that had found him guilty once before.

"People look at my situation and say, 'But Ed, how can you trust the very system that put you in jail for 25 years?'" he said. "I told them I had to trust the system because I would rather die in
Edward Baker is enjoying his life with his new wife, junior-high sweetheart Luzetta Thorne. Two-year-old Jasmine, Thorne’s foster daughter, sits between them.

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prison than admit to something I didn’t do.”

But even after dropping the murder charges, Abraham maintained Baker was guilty.

“We believe that Eddie Baker was properly convicted of the 1973 murder of Steve Gibbons,” she stated. “I have decided not to go forward with the retrial because the only witness to the murder is dead.”

That witness, Donahue Wise, testified against Baker in 1974, but recanted his statements in 1996.

“If we were to go to trial now, both versions of [Wise’s] testimony would be introduced, thereby presenting the jury with contradictory testimony from a now-deceased witness,” Abraham explained.

Those who believed in Baker, including his attorney Len Sonsov and minister James McCluskey—who headed Correction Ministries, an organization that helps the wrongly jailed—had long fought the courts on his behalf. McCluskey was the one who convinced Wise to recant his original testimony.

Citing improper representation, former Fairfax County Judge C. Derrall Jones 2d threw out Baker’s 1974 conviction in 1997 and released him two years later on $50,000 bail.

Wise, who died of cancer in January 2000, admitted his role in the grisly murder when he was picked up a few hours after the crime. The diagnosed schizophrenic and drug abuser gave up the names of a pair of 17-year-olds he knew from his Point Breeze neighborhood in exchange for a lesser sentence.

Wise told police that Baker, who then lived on Ringgold Street, and Clifford Walker, from the 2400 block of Federal Street, were his accomplices.

Walker admitted to being present inside Gibbons’ home on the 1200 block of South 24th Street during the crime. However, he denied being the one who bound and gagged the elderly bellhop before plunging an ice pick into the back of his neck. For police, that left only Baker.

The next day, police arrested Baker and, Baker alleges, beat a confession out of him despite that he had a solid alibi. At least a dozen witnesses came forward and said they saw the teen at a wake in Frankford at the time of the crime.

Baker blamed the alleged misconduct on the aggressive tactics endorsed by then-Police Commissioner Frank Rizzo.

“Jail is bad, but what I went through during those three days at Eighth and Race streets is the worst experience of my life,” he said. “They took turns beating me and after I rested for a while, they beat me again and again. Finally, I did the only thing I could to make the beatings stop and I confessed to something I didn’t do.”

However, because it took police so long to get the confession, it was suppressed at trial.

Before the testimony began, Baker turned down the DA’s first deal.

“They offered me three to 12 years in 1974 if I would admit I was [involved in the bashed burglary of Gibbons],” he said.

“And believe me, if I had anything to do with that crime, I would have took the deal in a second.”

Instead, he remembers sobbing with his mother when his court-appointed public defender, C. George Milner, refused to allow him to take the stand and denied the inconsistencies in Wise’s testimony.

After a two-week trial, a jury sentenced Baker to prison for life for Gibbons’ murder, while Walker—who also accepted a deal—and Wise served three years each for burglary and aggravated assault.

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t hate Donahue Wise at some point,” Baker said. “But I forgive him a long time ago.”

IT HAPPENED INSIDE: a simple chapel at Camp Hill Prison in the early ‘90s.

A group of inmates was talking about forgiveness, and the chaplain asked Baker if he had someone to forgive.

Forgiveness, she explained, would provide a multitude of blessings that would far outweigh the negative emotions of hatred and bitterness.

“I have a wife, a house, a car and a good job,” Baker said with humble pride inside his neat, comfortable home on the 2200 block of Jackson Street. “I am a testament to the

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BLIGHT continued from page 10

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ings, sheriff sales and the land-lender pro-
gram.

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er to create a land bank. His agency has sug-
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First, any building with a demolition lien on it should be classified as blighted. The Redevelopment Authority also wants the city to be able to claim any property with out-
standing real-estate taxes and municipal liens that exceed 150 percent of the value of a home. Watzel estimated these modifications to the law would take two months off the turnaround time for the city to acquire a prop-
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The city’s antiquated system of track-
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Baker didn’t even get to see his mother before she died in 1991. The DA agreed to drop his case only if he agreed not to sue, but Baker still insists he doesn’t see money as any measure of vic-
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“All the money in the world cannot buy peace of mind,” he said. He does wish, however, that Abraham did not mark his release from prison by telling the press she still believes he is guilty.

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