

TIMES TELEGRAM

Fighting blight takes community effort

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By Donna Thompson donna@timestelegram.com

LITTLE FALLS — Fighting blight in local communities will take more than one approach and the results won't be seen overnight.

There are steps communities can take, however, and some of those ideas were discussed during a presentation at Benton Hall Academy Wednesday evening.

The problem of blight will also be discussed at the Main Street First meeting scheduled for 6:30 p.m. on March 13 at 690 Main St. in Little Falls, according to Main Street First President Judy Wolfe, who chaired Wednesday's session. She invited the public to attend.

The Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank is one tool local communities hope to use to rehabilitate abandoned buildings and put them back on the tax rolls. Codes enforcement activities and the involvement of community organizations also play a role, according to the speakers who addressed Wednesday's gathering.

Robert Albrecht, past chairman of the Keep Mohawk Valley Beautiful Executive Board, said there were more than 150 cleanups in the six-county Mohawk Valley region last year as part of the Great American Cleanup and

the largest amount of the debris that was picked up came from blighted neighborhoods.

Keep Mohawk Valley Beautiful and its parent not-for-profit, the Mohawk Valley Economic Development District, led a three-year effort to establish a regional land bank that includes Herkimer, Oneida, Fulton, Montgomery, Otsego, and Schoharie counties.

Land banks are independent not-for-profit corporations created to redevelop vacant, abandoned or tax delinquent properties that have a negative effect on their communities. The county or other foreclosing unit must give a property to the land bank. The land bank would then renovate it, stabilize it, deconstruct it to take materials that could be used for other projects and demolish the rest or simply demolish the building. Foreclosing units besides the counties are the cities of Johnstown, Rome and Utica.

"A lot of times people get overwhelmed," Tolga Morawski, of the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank, said of the blight problem. "People don't want to look at it, they don't want to deal with it."

He said with the loss of jobs and loss of population "we get to a place where the normal supply and demand process doesn't work."

There are 270,510 vacant housing units in New York state that are not for sale, for rent or seasonally occupied and 34 percent of housing units in the state were built before 1940, Morawski said.

The traditional foreclosure and auction process is not working to rehabilitate abandoned properties, he said, and he outlined examples of different approaches that have worked in Canajoharie.

An old church with an out-of-state owner had gone into foreclosure. Back taxes totaled \$12,000. A group of residents formed the Mohawk Valley Collective Inc. and raised \$30,000 to purchase the building. There was

mold inside, collapsed floors, burst pipes and rotten beams. The group rehabilitated the structure and the building now serves as a community center.

Behind the church, there was a house that had been foreclosed on three times. The group purchased the building for \$1,000 and, after assessing the damages, decided it would be impossible to rehabilitate. Local workers were trained and hired to take down the building.

"Ninety percent of the material was sold and reused," said Morawski.

The collective is working to create a park in that space.

The group also worked to patch the roof and stabilize an old school building.

"We wanted to get it so it would survive until we find the right partner," he said.

Another solution is to flip a property — fix it up and put it back on the market, said Morawski.

He also presented the example of a house that was designated as a New York State Landmark Building and historic site and was eventually demolished as a case against tax sales and speculation.

Michael Brown, executive director of Rome Main Streets Alliance, said the alliance is made up of local volunteers who are working to improve the city by focusing on sustaining and expanding the city's downtown commercial center.

"If people don't live in and adjacent to downtown, you're not going to have a base," he said.

Brown said the alliance will be partnering with the city of Rome and the land bank.

"We can be an interface between Big Brother — the city — and what can happen," he said.

The alliance is one of only half-dozen National Main Street Center-recognized programs in the state, according to Brown.

Mark Domenico, chief enforcement officer and building inspector in Rome, showed before and after examples of houses in Rome that had gone from being eyesores to nice looking buildings as a result of the actions of the codes department.

Domenico said that instead of simply issuing a citation and ordering that a problem be remedied within 30 days, his department works with property owners to set a time frame to bring their buildings into compliance and assist them in finding aid if they are income eligible. A formal agreement is drawn up and in 85 to 90 percent of cases, the property owners meet their obligations, he said.

He also spoke about the Zombie Property law that went into effect last year. In the past, abandoned bank-owned properties often remained in limbo because it was impossible to determine which bank owned the property.

Under the law, bank and mortgage servicers must complete an inspection of a property subject to delinquency within 90 days and must secure and maintain the property if it is vacant and abandoned. Banks and mortgage servicers are required to report all such vacant and abandoned properties to the Department of Financial Services and submit quarterly reports detailing their efforts to secure and maintain the properties and any foreclosure proceedings. Violations are subject to a civil penalty for each day the property is not maintained.

Little Falls Mayor Mark Blask said after he took office he quickly learned how important a solution to blighted properties is to the people of Little Falls. He said he set a goal of fixing two or three properties in a year. He

approached the county about selling one abandoned property to a neighboring homeowner who wanted to take the building down and build a garage there.

"They told me it would take two to three years," he said.

Blask said the city has a goal of "becoming a worthy partner with the land bank."

This included a resolution the Common Council passed stating that half of the taxes from any property that the land bank puts back on the tax rolls would go to the land bank for the first five years.

The Little Falls school board passed a similar resolution, he said.

"These are properties we have not gotten a red cent out of in five, six or seven years," said Blask.

The city has put together a list of 15 or 16 properties for the land bank to consider, he said.

Albrecht recommended that people take action to help resolve problems in their communities by calling the New York State Zombie hotline at 1-800-342-3736 to report abandoned properties.