



GREATER MOHAWK VALLEY LAND BANK

STRATEGIC PLAN FINAL DRAFT

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank (GMVLB) is a community development organization created to serve the counties of Fulton, Herkimer, Montgomery, Oneida, Otsego, and Schoharie. This Strategic Plan will act as a guide to the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank Board of Directors (“Board”) for project selection, allocation of funds and innovative and novel programs.

The mission of the organization is to strategically acquire abandoned properties, eliminate barriers to their redevelopment, and sell rehabilitated properties to new, responsible owners, returning the property to the tax rolls.

The GMVLB provides member communities with the assistance necessary to reverse decades of blight and disinvestment through four-part relationships between the GMVLB and Foreclosing Government Units (FGUs), municipal governments, and community organizations. Through these partnerships, communities are able to leverage assets and secure funding for transformative projects.

Land Bank activities will support related community revitalization efforts including zoning amendments, code enforcement, comprehensive plan updates, community health initiatives, and small business and workforce housing development.



2 BACKGROUND & PLANNING PROCESS

2.1 Land Banks in New York State

New York's first land banks were established in 2012, pursuant to the passage of the New York Land Bank Act. The Act allows foreclosing governmental units ("FGUs"), which are local units of government that foreclose on real property for delinquent taxes, to form land banks. Land banks are local public authorities, accountable to the units of government which created them, designed to acquire, stabilize, assemble, and facilitate the redevelopment of blighted and abandoned properties, in order for them to be returned to productive use.

Returning these formerly abandoned properties to productive use improves quality of life for surrounding residents and helps to grow the community's local property tax base by encouraging renovation that improves the value of the property the land bank sells, as well as surrounding property values. There are now 23 land banks across the state working to proactively intervene and take control of abandoned properties.

2.2 GMVLB Formation

The Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank grew out of the interest and efforts of various organizations in the region led by the Mohawk Valley Economic Development District (MVEDD). MVEDD is a private, not-for-profit corporation that includes six upstate New York counties: Fulton, Herkimer, Montgomery, Oneida, Otsego, and Schoharie. Its primary responsibilities are infrastructure planning and development, business loans and assistance, and local government training and assistance. In 2013, MVEDD established a standing committee known as Keep Mohawk Valley Beautiful (KMVB), which is an affiliate of Keep America Beautiful, a national volunteer organization dedicated to fighting blight and revitalizing communities.

Realizing that the greatest blight-related problem in the region was distressed residential and commercial properties, KMVB formed a Land Bank Committee. It was that committee that began the conversations with nine Foreclosing Governmental Units (FGUs) in the MVEDD region. Six of those units – Herkimer, Montgomery, Oneida, and Otsego Counties and the Cities of Rome and Utica – agreed to form the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank in 2016 through an Intermunicipal Agreement (IMA).

"The purpose of this Agreement is to create the GMVLB to help address, in a coordinated manner, the Parties' problems and concerns regarding vacant and abandoned properties; to further foster the development of such property; and to promote economic growth through the return of vacant, abandoned, tax-foreclosed, and tax-delinquent properties to productive use."

- Intermunicipal Agreement for the Creation of the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank, 2016

2.3 Organizational Structure & Oversight

The GMVLB is governed by a Board of Directors consisting of nine persons from the constituent communities. These board members are appointed by the various foreclosing government units ("FGUs") which comprise the membership of the GMVLB: the counties of Herkimer, Montgomery, Otsego and

Schoharie; and the cities of Rome and Utica. An additional non-voting board position acts as a community representative and is nominated by Keep Mohawk Valley Beautiful.

The Board meets periodically throughout the year, and, between board meetings, actively works through its committees to further the goals of the GMVLB, and to exercise oversight of the GMVLB, its staff, volunteers, and partners. Current committees include: Finance/Audit; Governance/Policies and Procedures; Executive; Space; Hiring/Personnel; and Technology. Each committee includes at least three board members, including the committee chair, as well as community representatives and volunteers.

The committees and Board exercise oversight of all relevant functions and operations of GMVLB, including but not limited to financial oversight; compliance with required laws and disclosures; personnel decisions; acquisition and disposition of properties; relationships with and reporting to grant organizations; and liaison with member FGUs.

Additionally, oversight of the GMVLB is provided by New York State and the NYS Attorney General and the Attorney General's partner in land bank matters.

2.4 Acquisition and Disposition of Real Property

As an integral part of its mission to alleviate blighted properties in the Greater Mohawk Valley, the GMVLB will acquire, through means allowed-for under the Land Bank law and other relevant laws and guidance, properties which are vacant, abandoned, tax delinquent or tax foreclosed. Factors to be considered prior to acquisition of a given property are set forth in the GMVLB's Real Property Acquisition Guidelines, which may be amended from time to time.

Within its jurisdictional boundaries, the GMVLB may obtain real property by any number of channels, such as by gift, transfer, foreclosure, or purchase. It is important to note that the GMVLB does not exercise eminent domain. The GMVLB maintains a publicly available inventory of its properties, and maintains such properties during its ownership.

Depending on the particular circumstances, and taking into account the community's needs and interests, the GMVLB may then work (on its own or with partners) to rehabilitate; stabilize; or demolish a building. Where a building must be demolished, it is the intent of the GMVLB to deconstruct and salvage such materials as may be reasonably re-used.

The GMVLB may transfer or dispose of properties for any valid purpose, such as by sale, transfer or exchange. GMVLB's Disposition of Real and Personal Property Policy, as may be amended from time to time, sets forth specific processes to be followed and factors to be considered relative to the disposal of land bank property.

2.5 Strategic Planning Process

Shortly after organization of the GMVLB, key stakeholders realized the need to develop a strategic plan that established a clear vision and mission for the organization. Not only would the strategic plan establish these important guiding statements, but the plan would serve as a dynamic road map to launch and grow the GMVLB.

After retaining the consulting firm Barton and Loguidice (B&L) to help facilitate the strategic planning process, a stakeholder workshop was conducted on September 23, 2017, to garner feedback from Land Bank directors along with key municipal and not-for-profit partners. At that workshop, attendees developed alternate drafts of vision and mission statements and participated in a lengthy SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis. Attendees were asked to suggest values which they believed should be markers of GMVLB.

Following the stakeholder workshop, a survey instrument, utilizing Google Poll, was developed by the newly created Strategic Plan Steering Committee. The survey, which centered on the vision, mission, and guiding values was widely distributed using the following lists and platforms: MVEDD mailing lists, GMVLB FaceBook page including a paid advertisement, and LinkedIn. In addition, GMVLB Board members and various nonprofits were encouraged to forward the poll invitation and directions to their contacts.

Poll participants were asked to identify themselves using the following categories: GMVLB Board of Directors, GMVLB employee, elected/appointed official, private citizen, business person, residence owner, residence renter, and community nonprofit member. Poll participants identified the following as their location: Allegany County, Canajoharie, Village of Herkimer, Herkimer County, Jefferson County with plans to move to Little Falls, Johnstown, Town of Kirkland, Little Falls, Town of Manheim, Montgomery County, Oneonta, Otsego County, Palatine Bridge, Richfield Springs, Rome, Salisbury, Schoharie, and Utica. Poll results were reviewed by members of the Strategic Plan Steering Committee who found that the poll affirmed the earlier work of the workshop attendees. The Steering Committee edited the poll items text to reflect the many very helpful comments recorded in the poll.

Members of the Committee then compiled a rough draft of the strategic plan and presented the same to the GMVLB Board of Directors in May 2018. Responses from the Board and others were considered as final editing and revision occurred. A final draft was presented for action by the GMVLB Board of Directors at its June 7, 2018, meeting. The decision was made to make any final edits and to resubmit the polished draft at the July 9, 2018 GMVLB Board meeting. Following approval development of the action plan with wide consultation will follow.

3 VISION, MISSION, AND VALUES

3.1 Vision Statement

The Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank will promote economic growth in the six-county region by mobilizing empowered citizens, governments, and other community resources including nonprofits to fight blight and to create vibrant, sustainable communities, neighborhoods, and properties.

3.2 Mission Statement

The Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank, working with Foreclosing Governmental Units (FGUs), municipalities and non-profit and community groups, will strategically acquire, assemble and market abandoned and blighted properties in a manner consistent with local, regional and state planning and preservation initiatives.

3.3 Values

Participants in the September 2017 stakeholder workshop and the succeeding survey instrument were asked to identify and define a number of values important to the GMVLB. These values, summarized below are intended to guide the GMVLB in achieving its Vision and Mission.

ACCESSIBILITY

The GMVLB will strive to be inclusive of individuals of all levels of physical, mental and economic ability.

AGENCY

The GMVLB values agency or the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. By contrast, “structure” is those factors of influence that determine or limit an agent and his or her decisions. GMVLB believes it cannot just be an organization that solves the problems of communities but instead must be an organization that develops agency in the residents of communities so that they can organize to solve their own problems.

CHANGE

Change is an important force in addressing community blight and related problems. The organization will assist community agencies and non-profits and municipal governments as these groups seek to expand their capacity for community service. Developing the Worthy Partners program in the six-county region, encouraging the revision of FGU policy regarding tax delinquent properties, and effective and consistent codes enforcement are all such examples of desirable change. The change that GMVLB envisions will stop the creation of any new blight.

COLLABORATION

The GMVLB understands that it cannot solve community problems independently. Wherever possible, the GMVLB will actively seek to build collaborative partnerships with community stakeholders. Such collaborations will be built around listening, civility, commitment, creativity, and comity. The concept of

the four legged stool —the FGU, the municipality, the local residents (sometimes organized as nonprofits) and GMVLB — in decision making will be captured in the collaborative Worthy Partner agreements.

COMMITMENT

Long-term commitment is necessary for the GMVLB as it seeks to fulfill its core mission of providing service and utility to regional FGUs. Problem properties, some over a century old, cannot be eliminated without ongoing steadfast relationships over the decades ahead.

COMMUNITY

Community is critical to the GMVLB as it both deals with properties and sites and ultimately seeks to preserve, protect and develop neighborhoods: community, then, refers to both structures and those who live and work in them. The GMVLB serves as a beacon of hope in turning the tide of what could be an overwhelming problem: neglected properties and neighborhood blight. The GMVLB is committed to bringing communities together to seek solutions and to share best practices in addressing blight. GMVLB realizes that communities require residents who are stakeholders and who are committed to investing and building in their communities. The GMVLB will play an important role in keeping community conversations positive and solutions-driven going forward.

COMPETENCY

Staff, Board member, Worthy Partner, and outside contractor competency is valued by the GMVLB. Critical functions include evaluation of the condition of GMVLB inventory properties; creation of a plan for basic maintenance, including lawn mowing and litter and snow removal for inventory properties; determination of critical repairs to be carried out either by staff or Worthy Partners or outside contractors; creation of a network of resources that includes funding sources and agencies that can achieve mission goals by providing resources to the GMVLB.

CREATIVITY

The GMVLB values creativity through its roots in volunteerism and NYS statute and will use new methods, tools, and approaches to address long-standing problems. By its design, the GMVLB's limited staff requires a reliance on diverse, committed, and well-informed volunteers and other individuals from various backgrounds to generate new and agile tools and processes to fight blight. These individuals and Worthy Partners, holding many diverse opinions and interests, will give important voice in community matters. GMVLB activity will create the opportunity to re-purpose creative new spaces for education, art, and culture.

DIVERSITY

The GMVLB values diversity and does not discriminate on the basis of income, race, color, national and ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, or disability in the administration of its policies and programs.

EMPOWERMENT

The GMVLB values local empowerment. GMVLB will work to develop the capacity of its partners to ensure stability and efficiency. By encouraging agency in its partners, developing local capacity, and sharing funding sources to support project management and decision making in each FGU, the GMVLB will empower local partners to develop larger vision and mission understandings.

EQUITY

The GMVLB values equity and will invest in and manage properties in ways which will support economic opportunity throughout the community. The GMVLB, because of its inventory of properties that were once distressed, is likely to attract first-time homebuyers and others who may not be able to raise funds for a full market value purchase.

FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

GMVLB values financial management systems that will safeguard the public's interest in the inventory of properties and financial resources by ensuring:

- Proper use of funds as reflected in ongoing public reporting including audit reviews;
- Cost-effective methods for preparing properties for sale;
- Compliance with regulations at all levels of government including oversight by GMVLB Finance Committee, the GMVLB Board of Directors, the State of New York, the NYS Attorney General, and the New York State Attorney General's partner in land bank matters;
- Development of revenue streams in addition to bank settlement funds including taxation authorities' participation the 5/50 tax remittance program; and
- Transparent financial reporting to inform the public of its progress in complying with its mission.

STABILITY

The GMVLB values stability and will work insure its own financial, vision, and mission stability.

SUSTAINABILITY

GMVLB is values the principles of sustainability including these elements:

- Provide support for local efforts by governments, community development groups, and stakeholders to encourage proactive property management planning to prevent the cycles that, over time, lead to blight. Declare today: no new blight tomorrow.
- Encourage communities to develop sustainable funding models to leverage external dollars and ensure the continuation of local anti-blight efforts.
- Educate local partners and stakeholders on blight-related issues including the benefits of deconstruction, repurposing, and rehabilitation (instead of demolition) where materials are reused and rehabilitated when possible.
- Support community planning and code enforcement through strategic partnerships with local organizations to provide boots-on-the-ground solutions including the creative application of new and existing anti-blight local ordinances.

- Involve local and regional business communities to foster the understanding that blight is an economic drain on communities and that their fiscal support is critical.
- Evaluate properties for historical or architectural significance and include that evaluation in decision making re the treatment of the property. Restoration or sympathetic harvesting of architectural elements will always be considered in such instances as an act of sustainability.

TIMELINESS

Property management from acquisition to disposition and return to the tax rolls is normally a complicated and time-consuming fully transparent process. Acquiring abandoned or tax or bank foreclosed properties involves collaboration of many parties, much research, and adherence to real property policies and statutes. Property rehabilitation requires public bidding with its own set of deadlines, just as disposition of land bank property and its return to the tax rolls do. While these processes and GMVLB's own internal committee and Board meeting processes all take significant time, GMVLB makes every effort to move as swiftly as resources allow to achieve its ultimate goal: community and economic stability through the timely removal of blighted properties.

TRANSPARENCY

The GMVLB values the importance of public access to meeting minutes, project lists, current grants and granting, organizational partnerships, staff and board names and resumes, and other pertinent information on the Land Bank which will listed on the website and social media. The GMVLB will be perceived as being fair in all decision-making processes and function with these elements:

- Consistently applied and well-conceived policies and procedures and a strong communications strategy;
- Clear articulation of evaluation criteria for project selection and property transfers and GMVLB priorities and granting parameters;
- Acknowledgement of and measured response to the local interests of all stakeholders and funders based on comprehensive community engagement; and
- Acquire and dispose of properties in a public, criteria-driven manner from property intake and inspection to evaluation by the Property Selection Committee to the GMVLB Board through rehabilitation, restoration, stabilization, harvesting, deconstruction, or demolition and to the point of sale and transfer.

4 SWOT ANALYSIS

A SWOT (Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities Threats) Analysis was conducted at the September 2017 retreat, facilitated by the Barton & Loguidice team. Stakeholders were invited to identify the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of the GMVLB in the context of the Mohawk Valley Region to inform the Strategic Plan's goals and strategic priorities. Strengths and Opportunities were tempered by Weaknesses and Threats. The identification of these realities played a major role in determining the GMVLB's path forward as well as building consensus amongst stakeholders.

4.1 Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths and weaknesses are internal attributes to the GMVLB and may be seen as existing conditions. Some questions asked to identify these attributes include:

- What does the GMVLB do well?
- In what areas does the GMVLB need to improve?
- What expert or specialized knowledge does the GMVLB have?
- What resources do you lack?

The GMVLB has an array of strengths to bring to bear on the problem of blighted properties and neighborhoods. The GMVLB possesses new approaches and statutory authorities, has access to existing financial and political institutions, as well as to new, unique, and substantial financial resources. In addition, the GMVLB enters the scene with great good will at a time when current awareness and coalition building around blight is at an historic high. Timeliness and public appeal, therefore, are current advantages. Finally, the GMVLB is in position to both recognize and work past historic boundaries through partnering and resource sharing. GMVLB softens boundaries and reduces competitive walls as FGUs work together to solve common long-standing problems for the common good of all.

The GMVLB is the vehicle for wider collaboration on root causes of property blight facing all communities in the six-county region. It is the right size to successfully interact with banks and other financial institutions. It is large enough to require support from local stakeholders which will develop their capacity and agency to solve larger and varied local problems. The emergence of the GMVLB as a key player in addressing the problem of blighted properties fits into already-existing conversations taking place in communities throughout the region. Additionally, the New York Land Bank Association provides a single state-wide voice and influence for GMVLB. The NYS Zombie Law adds political muscle and potential resources to GMVLB efforts.

However, the GMVLB must also overcome a number of potential weaknesses for it to become entirely successful. Primarily, the GMVLB is seeking to address the huge problem of challenged properties in most communities in its huge catchment area. Prioritization of projects will be challenging for GMVLB staff and board members. The all-important process of recruitment of worthy partners and other volunteers must be successful. The GMVLB must build a web of relationships though-out its six county area to be successful. Excellent communication and the resulting public enthusiasm will be required to sustain GMVLB over what will certainly be a long haul.

Weaknesses and challenges can be overcome and the GMVLB has the potential to become a catalyst for change. Concerned citizens, worthy partners, and municipal governments across the six county area all want the GMVLB to be successful.

4.2 Opportunities and Threats

Opportunities and threats are external conditions which have an effect on the GMVLB. In this way, these conditions offer the potential to help the organization achieve its vision or damage overall performance. Some questions asked to identify these conditions include:

- How can the GMVLB do more for constituent communities?
- What are competitors doing that the GMVLB is not?
- How can you use technology to enhance the GMVLB?
- How could lifestyle or market changes affect the GMVLB?

The timely emergence of the GMVLB as an agent of change as upstate communities struggle to overcome the complexity of problems associated with blighted properties presents both opportunity and threat. Its capacity to reach beyond municipal boundaries and county lines affords the GMVLB the opportunity to build coalitions and community partnerships between supportive legislative bodies and groups of residents in the six-county region.

The GMVLB can become a vehicle for information sharing for marketing and publicity purposes. The infusion of external funding sources and outside investment, beyond municipal tax and budgetary limitations, holds great potential for pilot project incubation and the sharing of best practices within the six county region.

Failed municipal and county code enforcement practices have played a major role in creating the problem of blighted properties. The opportunity exists for utilizing the NYS Zombie Law to add pressure on blighted property owners. The GMVLB can work both with banks to receive properties and to assist with municipal planning in the six county region.

Perhaps the greatest threat to GMVLB success is the immediate need to show progress and produce — quickly — positive results. The questionable availability of long term funding from NYS necessitates the need to eventually become self-supporting and sustainable. Additionally, local politicians and code enforcement personnel need to “buy in” or be reorganized in order for the GMVLB to operate at full effectiveness.

The regional need for more effective approaches to the issue of problem properties and community blight provides a great opportunity for the GMVLB to partner with municipal governments and various groups of citizens in the region.