

# Land bank grant funds to pilot collaboration

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For the Recorder

FONDA — The Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank has been awarded approximately \$1.6 million as part of the Land Bank Community Revitalization Initiative.

Tolga Morawski, executive director of the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank (GMVLB) said he was “pleasantly surprised” considering how new the land bank is. The state Attorney General’s Office established a revitalization initiative in 2013 using funds secured through settlements with the nation’s largest banks for misconduct contributing to the housing crisis.

The land bank was one of 19 to receive grant funds Friday.

A total of \$20.9 million was awarded through the latest disbursement of state settlement funds secured. The Capital Region Land Bank, which includes the city of Amsterdam, was awarded \$1.7 million.

“It’s something that we are pretty excited about because I think it shows that the Attorney General’s Office is on board with our vision,” Morawski said.

The new GMVLB targeted grant funding to pilot a collaboration between the counties of Montgomery, Herkimer, Otsego and Schoharie, and the cities of Rome and Utica to significantly increase efforts to eradicate the blight of abandoned properties.

However, while many similar land banks focus their efforts specifically on eradicating blight, the GMVLB will also utilize a “systemic” approach.

“We’re really looking at how to keep buildings from becoming blighted in the first place,” Morawski said. The land bank will work with counties and cities to keep properties from falling into decline.

One of the GMVLB’s major initiatives will be the establishment of a commercial fund for “white elephant” projects, an example being the 26-plus acre former Beech-Nut property in downtown Canajoharie.

Regularly, in the instance of a factory abandonment, the property will require several, expensive pre-revitalization studies, such as the phase one and two informational gathering inquiries at the former Beech-Nut site, with funding applications being submitted to state and environmental protection agencies.

“We’re looking to speed up this process so there’s ready funds available,” Morawski said. It often takes a significant amount of time for funding to be approved and awarded.

The GMVLB's current aim for Beech-Nut is to provide stabilization funding aimed at stopping leaks, patching the roof, and generally cleaning out the facility.

"Making the site more appealing so that when somebody comes in and looks around, they can envision its future," Morawski said.

He said the GMVLB is also "talking with Palatine Bridge about potentially helping them with the Webster Wagner house."

He said the \$10,000 the GMVLB has already committed for work at the Wagner House house would be aimed at deconstruction, the land bank removing what's left of the building with the goal of salvaging what they can, including historically important pieces.

Morawski said the village board of Palatine Bridge will be a partner in the primarily safety-focused effort.

"The village of Palatine Bridge came forward and was ready to help with costs, and to really partner with us to make it a priority for the land bank," he said.

Morawski said Fort Plain is also a target area for the GMVLB. "They've really had a few rough blows, namely the last flood in 2013."

The goal in Fort Plain is to tackle projects in concentrated, distressed areas, instead of taking a scattered approach, so that revitalization results will be clear to both residents and visitors.

Morawski said he hopes that movement will happen with these western Montgomery County projects in the near future, explaining that funds from the New York State Attorney General's Office could start flowing by April, with work potentially starting in May.

"The Wagner House and Beech-Nut projects are time sensitive," Morawski said, "and the same goes for Fort Plain."

The GMVLB hopes to get properties back on the market as soon as possible.

County Executive Matt Ossenfort said the housing issue is often one of the most overlooked challenges for Montgomery County and upstate New York. He said demolition, remediation, or saving historic homes is an expensive issue to deal with. Ossenfort said the additional funding resources coming into the land bank will help address the issue.

"I think the more resources that can be directed to it can help the community deal with it and take care of its housing stock," Ossenfort said. "Having stronger property values, and a more aesthetically pleasing community is important."

Morawski said this is the third grant the Greater Mohawk Valley Lank Bank has received. It has acquired approximately \$1.9 million in total. He said the land bank is working to receive even more grant funds.

'We are working on a lot of different possibilities,' Morawski said. 'We haven't received any of them yet but they are in the works.'

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