

## Ilion seeks land bank's help with blighted properties

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ILION — Ilion village officials are looking to the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank for help with some of the blighted properties in the village, but the land bank is also looking for a commitment from the village.

Tolga Morawski, of the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank, and Herkimer County Legislator Raymond Johnson, a member of the land bank board, attended Wednesday's village board meeting at the request of board members to discuss where Ilion stands with regard to gaining assistance from the land bank.

Morawski said the land bank is interested in working with communities on long-term solutions to the problem of blighted properties, including some dilapidated houses in the area of Lester Avenue, Maple Place and View Terrace.

"There are a couple of properties there we could take tomorrow," Morawski said, "but we want to have an agreement that the village and land bank will work together to get funding to demolish these properties."

If several properties need to be demolished, it would make the most sense to acquire all of those properties and have them demolished all at once, he added.

The village should also have a plan in place for what is to happen to the properties once the houses are taken down, Morawski said. For example, would the land be designated as a park or could it be stabilized so that it could be used again as a building site? He added the village should look at stabilizing the land to prevent further erosion that could impact other properties.

“We want to move forward with a plan,” he said. “We want to know what the costs would be and what the village can contribute to that.”

Village Trustee Kalman Socolof said the board was not aware of the need for an agreement other than those that were passed last year, agreeing to partner with the land bank and agreeing to the 5/50 split, meaning that half of the taxes from any property the land bank puts back on the tax rolls would go to the land bank for the first five years. He added the board would be happy to approve a memorandum of agreement with the land bank so a project could move forward.

Mayor Terry Leonard said Tim Carter, who serves as part-time property maintenance officer and acting codes enforcer, has identified a number of properties in the village that could be candidates for the land bank program.

Morawski said he would forward examples of a memorandum of agreement to Village Attorney Mark Rose. He noted the village could be eligible for funding from other programs to assist with the cost of removing blighted properties.

The process for obtaining parcels of property for action by the land bank was also discussed. Johnson said the in rem process the county uses to deal with tax-delinquent properties takes two years. During that time, the county reimburses municipalities for the taxes that were not collected and tries to collect them from the property owner, he said. If the taxes cannot be collected, the county could then sell the property at auction or, if it is not in good enough condition to sell, it could be removed from the tax rolls.

That move is to protect the county from liability and from having to pay the cost of upkeep, he said. It also means no municipalities are receiving taxes from the property.

“It there any chance the owners of the properties on Lester Avenue would sign off on them,” Johnson asked.

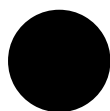
Morawski said the process of obtaining property moves more quickly if the owner cooperates. He added that the so-called zombie law should make it easier to obtain information about property ownership.

“The limbo list is huge,” said Johnson. “If we can get properties back on the tax roll, it benefits everyone.”

The problem with four abandoned houses on Lester Avenue came up for discussion several years ago. A slide in the earthen embankment along the rear of the houses had left them uninhabitable. Village officials looked into the possibility of have them demolished, but the more than \$80,000 cost estimate was prohibitive.

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. Blighted properties must be turned over to the land bank with no liens and could be rehabilitated and resold or buildings razed. The focus is on getting properties cleaned up and back on the tax rolls.

The Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank area covers the counties of Herkimer, Montgomery, Otsego, and Schoharie, including the cities of Rome and Utica.



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