

The Recorder

County joins the land bank

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FONDA -- Two years after the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank Corporation was introduced, the Montgomery County Legislature voted to officially become part of the land bank.

Legislators voted Tuesday to approve a resolution to establish and authorize the creation of the land bank, and confirm the appointment of county Director of Labor Management Karl Gustafson to the land bank's board for a two-year appointment.

The land bank includes Montgomery, Herkimer, Otsego and Schoharie Counties, and the cities of Rome and Utica.

District 4 Legislator Ryan Weitz said he has supported the land bank since the legislature first supported the preliminary idea for the land bank in 2014.

"I've been very much in support of this because we all, in the different backgrounds we all have, we've all seen the problems of neighborhood decay, of people taking advantages of the tax foreclosure process," Weitz said.

He said the land bank provides a better way to combat blight and the state-funded organizations can spur community renewal.

The government-created nonprofit corporations have special powers above typical foreclosing entities that enables it to convert vacant, abandoned and tax-delinquent properties into productive space.

County officials have been working with other municipalities and counties to come up with an intermunicipal agreement all foreclosing governmental units (FGUs) agreed upon. There are nine members on the land bank's board. The FGUs with larger populations, Herkimer and Otsego counties, will get two votes, while the others will receive one.

The city of Amsterdam is not considered in Montgomery County's population county since it is already part of the Capital Region Land Bank.

"This can be a huge asset for the county. Montgomery County is a beautiful, beautiful area from the west

all the way to the east, it's beautiful. To preserve that history and the lands in it is something that I can support," District 7 Legislator Barbara Wheeler said.

District 3 Legislator Roy Dimond said properties in the western portion of Montgomery County are examples of how the land bank could help. He gave the example of the West Hill School, which the Mohawk Valley Collective, an organization that rehabilitates local historic buildings, has taken over to rehabilitate.

Mohawk Valley Collective treasurer Tolga Morawski has been working on the intermunicipal agreements between the FGUs and with the state to get the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank off the ground.

"In my district it's a prime example with how this could be helpful," Dimond said.

District 8 Legislator Joseph Isabel abstained from the vote. He said while he does not oppose the land bank, he recalled when the Capital Region Land Bank first began in the city and a property it had obtained sat without being worked on for some time.

"I'm not negative, I want to see what happens," he said.