

The Recorder

Land bank receives certification, can start raising funds

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Empire State Development has granted official certification to the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank, putting the organization another step closer to getting started on redevelopment projects.

The Empire State Development board approved the land bank's certification during a meeting Thursday, according to Mohawk Valley Collective Treasurer Tolga Morawski, who has been advocating for the land bank's formation. The next step will be filing articles of incorporation with the Department of State, a process that takes between two and four weeks.

Morawski said getting the certification from Empire State Development (ESD) was the most important step, as it allows the land bank to begin applying for funding.

"The certification is a big thing for most of the grants," Morawski said. "As long as you're certified, you can apply for and get the grants from the state."

He said the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank has already received \$150,000 from the state Attorney General's Office, which provides grant funding for land banks, for startup costs.

The state has also announced \$26 million is available to land banks in project funding, of which Morawski said the Mohawk Valley land bank is looking for between \$2 and \$5 million. Funding should be awarded by the end of the year.

"We plan to really hit the ground running," Morawski said.

Montgomery County is joined in the land bank by Schoharie, Herkimer and Otsego counties, along with the cities of Rome and Utica. The county decided to officially join the land bank during a special meeting Oct. 4, two years after the idea was first proposed.

The purpose of a land bank, which will be a not-for-profit corporation once approved by the Department of State, is to take control and redevelop vacant, abandoned or tax-delinquent properties into more productive uses, according to the ESD.

The Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank will be run by a board of directors made of nine members, at least

one from each county and municipality participating in the land bank. The areas 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. Director of Labor Management Karl Gustafson was appointed to the board for a two-year term.

Montgomery County Executive Matthew Ossenfort said he had not received word as of early Friday afternoon that the land bank had received certification, but the county has been working to identify clusters of property for initial funding.

"If we did get that certification, it's certainly exciting, then the real work of the group begins and any way that the county can be supportive and helpful in that effort, most specifically by identifying properties and I think identifying clusters of properties so you can have a big impact, is a good way to go," Ossenfort said.

He said discussions thus far among the land bank board have largely focused on the organizational structure of the board and getting the intermunicipal agreement ready to sign between the cities and counties.

He said the group will likely begin talking about strategy to come up with a long-term plan rather than only concentrate on specific projects.

Within Montgomery County, Ossenfort said clusters of property in the village Fort Plain had been initially identified and are high on the list, but he wants to see other areas of the county benefit as well.

"I know initially they identified from clusters in the Fort Plain area, but obviously the need is great across the county. Trying to stay geographically balanced will be important to me in identifying projects," he said.