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County committee signs off on joining land bank

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By EMILY DREW
For the C-S-E

FONDA -- The Montgomery County Education and Government Committee moved forward with a resolution to join the Mohawk Valley Economic Development District's land bank.

The Montgomery County Legislature will vote whether or not to join the newly created land bank, which, under an intermunicipal proposal, would consist of Fulton, Herkimer, Montgomery, Oneida, Otsego and Schoharie counties, as well as several cities.

Education and Government Committee Chairman and District 6 Legislator John Duchessi said he felt it was time the legislature discuss joining the land bank.

"I don't know of ay downside to Montgomery County becoming part of this particular land bank," Duchessi said. "Abandoned properties are such a huge, huge problem and they have been for a long time."

He said he felt the state was slow in responding to the needs of communities, particularly former industrial communities, that have problem with abandoned properties, and that the county needs "all the arrows to put in a quiver to shoot at this target" in order to remedy the blight.

Duchessi said the legislature was not on as strict a deadline to join the landbank than first thought during May's committee meeting.

The legislature first heard the land bank proposal last year, and more recently heard a request from Tolga Morawski, Mohawk Valley Collective treasurer, and Sean Jordan, executive director of the Mohawk Valley Economic Development District, Inc. (MVEDD) to consider being the first county to sign a preliminary application of interest.

Morawski and Jordan had requested the county, one of the foreclosing governmental units, sign the application in order for the land bank to be considered for grant funding through Empire State Development. The application would also ensure the MVEDD land bank would get one of three more slots available in the state to create a new land bank.

While Morawski and Jordan explained that signing the application did not come with financial commitment, the legislators were hesitant.

Tuesday evening, however, Morawski provided the legislature with a draft intermunicipal agreement, and they considered a resolution opting into the land bank.

"I think it's pretty much an upside. The land banks I've seen and been involved in the past have benefited from them, even if it's just demolition in areas with depressed housing," District 9 Legislator Robert Purtell said.

Purtell said he wants to ensure Montgomery County gets its fair share of grants in the future.

The role of the land bank is to acquire title to problem properties, eliminate liability and transfer the properties to new, responsible owners in a transparent manner that results in outcomes consistent with community-based plans.

A land bank is a government-created nonprofit corporation that has special powers above typical foreclosing entities that enables it to convert vacant, abandoned and tax-delinquent properties into productive space.

Districts 2 Legislator Thomas Quackenbush and District 4 Legislator Ryan Weitz also said they supported joining the land bank.

Weitz and District 7 Legislator Barbara Wheeler questioned how the land bank would work in regard to grant funding.

Duchessi said applications would be made by municipalities as the foreclosing governmental units.

Purtell also said small communities in Montgomery County would be the ones benefiting from the land bank with the county taking the responsibility.

The legislature is expected to vote on the land bank next week during the full board meeting.

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