

Hartwick hosts talk on adding land bank

By Jessica Reynolds Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, November 11, 2014 6:30 am

ONEONTA — About 20 people gathered for an informational meeting Monday night at Hartwick College's Shineman Chapel to explore the possibility of establishing an area land bank to deal with issues of abandoned and deteriorating properties.

Several members of The Mohawk Valley Economic Development District Inc. and its sustainability committee, Keep Mohawk Valley Beautiful, spoke to the audience about land banks, which are nonprofit corporations created to take over and redevelop vacant or abandoned properties to better serve the public interest, according to Empire State Development, the state's primary economic development agency.

Legislation signed into law by the governor in July 2011 permits municipalities to apply to ESD to create land banks in their communities, presenters explained.

A land bank in The Mohawk Valley Economic Development District's six-county region, which includes Otsego and Schoharie counties, would be a cost-effective way to help communities deal with problem buildings and would support efforts to return properties to tax rolls, speakers said. The other counties in the district are Fulton, Herkimer, Montgomery and Oneida.

Stephen R. Smith, executive director of the MVEDD, said the meeting was the third held on the topic. Previous meetings were held at Herkimer County Community College in Herkimer and at Fulton-Montgomery Community College in Johnstown in September. The purpose of the Oneonta meeting was to continue to "engage interest," he said. A survey regarding land banks and the city was handed out at the beginning of the meeting.

According to members of the MVEDD, state legislation allows for 20 land banks in New York, and the presenters briefly listed and described the 11 land banks already in existence. There are 120 land banks in the nation, presenters said.

Establishing a land bank that would be in control of dilapidated, vacant, abandoned buildings in the area could be a great thing, presenters said, because land bank officials would have the area's best interest in mind.

Depending on whether vacant buildings were sold, demolished, rehabilitated or deconstructed to save and reuse pieces, jobs could be created for unemployed workers in the area and hands-on experience could be provided for area trade students. At the same time, the tax base could be stabilized and tax revenue maximized, presenters said.

A key piece in making a land bank work for the area would be the cooperation and volunteerism of local organizations, Smith said.

Oneonta City Manager Martin Murphy and Barbara Ann Heegan, executive director of The Otsego County Chamber of Commerce, were both at Monday night's gathering.

Heegan said she thought the meeting was "very productive."

"It provides a new way of thinking about things," Heegan said. "And encourages us especially to value partnerships in the community and cooperation between organizations for the betterment of the city."

Two uninhabitable properties in Oneonta, at 63-65 Spruce St. and at 67 Gilbert St. went up for sale this week. Both properties require improvements and exterior work, such as roofing and siding. Requests for proposals seek not only bids but also plans to upgrade the residences. The city is selling the properties to Opportunities for Otsego, which will oversee the sales to owners.