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County works on agreement with regional land bank

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Thursday, August 25, 2016 - Updated: 10:12 AM

By EMILY DREW
Recorder News Staff

FONDA -- Montgomery County officials continue to work toward an intermunicipal agreement with surrounding counties to establish the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank Corporation.

Tolga Morawski, Mohawk Valley Collective treasurer and advocate for the land bank, provided the Montgomery County Legislature with an update on the land bank Tuesday, saying that efforts to reach an intermunicipal agreement with the six counties and three cities is progressing.

The land bank would include Fulton, Herkimer, Montgomery, Oneida, Otsego and Schoharie counties, as well as the cities of Johnstown, Rome and Utica, and would help combat blight in the region.

County attorney Meghan Manion said work is moving forward and county attorneys are attempting to set up a meeting to discuss details of the intermunicipal agreement (IMA).

"We had a meeting recently to discuss the IMA and sat down with a couple members of the legislature to go over IMA page by page, discuss any concerns, thoughts and revisions," Manion said.

Manion said they are coming up with a working draft.

Legislature Chairman and District 5 Legislator Terry Bieniek said they recognized the IMA would be extensive and are working to choose the right person to serve on the land bank's board of directors for Montgomery County.

The board would consist of nine people, one from each foreclosing governmental unit and an additional representative from the Mohawk Valley Economic Development District. Each member would serve for two years.

"We all did feel that this is going to be quite extensive, this regional land bank, to operate and we feel that each board members are key positions, so we certainly have to put the right person on the board," Bieniek said.

District 6 Legislator John Duchessi said he felt one outstanding issue to address was how to get each participating municipality or county to sign off on the intermunicipal agreement without "changing it to benefit themselves."

Duchessi added that while the county wants to participate, some of those outstanding concerns must be addressed.

Morawski said they went into the land bank process knowing there would be "some reconciliation" needed and that is why they are holding off on passing any resolutions until the intermunicipal agreement is worked out.

He said already, Otsego County changed one of its representatives. He also cited the passing of Johnstown Mayor Michael Julius.

"Some things are just unavoidable," Morawski said.

Morawski said the funding cycle from the state for the land bank has been pushed back, but that the Attorney General's Office, which decides if the land bank can be formed or funded, is looking to move quickly once the counties and municipalities move forward with the agreement.

Each participating foreclosing governmental unit is asked to create a potential project list so if the agreement moves forward, they don't have to start from the beginning, Morawski said.

At District 2 Legislator Thomas Quackenbush's question of if there are any parameters for the projects, Morawski said the Attorney General's Office wants the foreclosing governmental units to concentrate on residential properties, since the funding is coming from the foreclosure crisis, and focus on density.

"Where there's an area you can make an impact where people say 'Oh, this is the land bank,' as opposed to dispersed all over," Morawski said.

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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.

The Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank Corporation would receive administrative from the Mohawk Valley Economic Development District, but would be a separate nonprofit organization.

Legislators have been largely supportive of the land bank, saying it would be a good tool for Montgomery County to address blighted areas.

District 4 Legislator Ryan Weitz said he was looking forward to voting on the the land bank when the time comes. "I'm glad it's moving forward," he said.

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