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## Utica council hears about regional land bank

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At a meeting Wednesday, members of the Common Council heard from representatives of the Mohawk Valley Economic Development District about how a land bank could help fight blighted and dilapidated properties.

By S. Alexander Gerould

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UTICA — The city of Utica could be getting a new bank.

A land bank, that is.

At a meeting Wednesday, members of the Common Council heard from representatives of the Mohawk Valley Economic Development District about how a land bank could help fight blighted and dilapidated properties.

“We hope to get the city of Utica to join the regional land bank to help collaborate on fighting blight in the region,” said Tolga Morawski, chairman of the Mohawk Valley Economic Development District/Keep Mohawk Valley Beautiful Land Bank Committee.

Morawski's organization, which consists of Fulton, Herkimer, Montgomery, Oneida, Otsego and Schoharie counties, is looking to create a regional land bank that could include Utica.

The primary focus of a land bank is the acquisition of real property that is tax delinquent, tax foreclosed, vacant and/or abandoned.

Several land banks – funded mainly through a 2012, \$25 billion settlement between the state and the nation's largest banks – have popped up across the state in recent years, including in Syracuse, Buffalo, Rochester and the Capital Region.

"The clear advantages of a land bank is it gives us an opportunity to take problem properties and it puts funding towards them," said Councilman Joe Marino, D-4. "Now what we'd like to get into further is what are the benefits and disadvantages of being involved in a regional land bank or being involved in a land bank that we've incorporated in and of ourselves for just the city of Utica."

Marino said he spoke with Katelyn Wright, executive director of the Greater Syracuse Land Bank, to get her take on how things could work. Marino also said that he would like to have Wright come in and speak to the council.

"We're just trying to vet the process and see where we can be," he said. "It's a tool that I don't want to leave in the tool box, and I'm sure that the city of Utica and the council feels the same."

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