

# TIMES TELEGRAM

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## Land bank approved for Mohawk Valley region

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By Times Telegram

MOHAWK — Local municipalities struggling to deal with blighted properties received some good news with the announcement the Empire State Development Corporation has approved the Mohawk Valley Economic Development District's application for a multi-county land bank.

Land banks are independent not-for-profit corporations created to redevelop vacant, abandoned or tax delinquent properties that have a negative effect on their communities.

The primary focus of land bank operations is the acquisition of real property and to use the tools of the program to eliminate the harms and liabilities caused by these blighted properties.

The New York State Land Bank Act does not permit a land bank to exercise eminent domain.

The Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank covers Herkimer, Montgomery, Otsego and Schoharie counties, as well as the cities of Rome and Utica and is one of seven new land banks certified in the last year, bringing the total number of land banks to 19 out of a possible 20 in the state.

"The establishment of a land bank is a great step forward in the rejuvenation of the Mohawk Valley," said Joseph Caruso, MVEDD executive director. "We now have a mechanism for overcoming the blight

caused by vacant and dilapidated properties which, once improved and marketed, may once again contribute to our communities' character and tax base."

In a news release, Robert Albrecht, past chairman of the Keep Mohawk Valley Executive Board, said, "The Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank is the culmination of a nearly three-year effort led by Keep Mohawk Valley Beautiful and its parent not-for-profit, the MVEDD."

"Stretching from Old Forge to Oneonta and from Rome to Middleburgh, the scope and scale of the GMVLB region is unique in New York state," said Dan Sullivan, chairman of the KMVB Board of Directors, in the release.

"New York developed land bank legislation in recognition of the blight that vacant, abandoned and tax-delinquent properties impose on our urban, suburban and rural communities," said Michael Reese, Mohawk Valley regional director for New York Empire State Development, in the release. "I congratulate MVEDD for nurturing collaboration so these communities in our region could take advantage of this important tool."

"The idea of a multi-county land bank originated with a KMVB 2014 resolution," said Albrecht. "We had no idea if county and municipal governments would see the value of providing a region-wide solution to the problem of blight which exists in most of our communities. KMVB formed an exploratory committee that has worked with the counties and municipalities to find common agreement and to support the GMVLB application."

KMVB Land Bank Committee members included Paul Archambault, of Troy; Sam Russo, of Utica; Chris Brown, of Little Falls; Steve Smith, of Ilion, Tolga Morawski, of Fort Plain, and Sullivan, of Richfield Springs.

Morawski, chair of the KMVB Land Bank Committee, and Sullivan, together with their members, visited every foreclosing governmental unit in Fulton, Herkimer, Montgomery, Oneida, Otsego and Schoharie

counties, as well as the cities of Johnstown, Rome and Utica.

"In our early days, being a standing committee of the MVEDD opened many doors for us, thanks to the efforts of Steve Smith," Sullivan said.

"Most but not all were able to pass enabling resolutions allowing the application to be drafted," said Morawski. "When others are ready, we will work with them to extend land bank benefits to them."

Foreclosing government units have selected their representatives to the GMVLB Board of Directors. Representatives include Ray Johnson and Kurt Ackerman, of Herkimer County; Karl Gustafson, of Montgomery County; Craig Gelbsman and Margaret Kennedy, of Otsego County; Steve Wilson, of Schoharie County; Mark Domenico, of the city of Rome; and Joe Marino and Brian Thomas, of the city of Utica.

"The establishment of the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank is a very positive step for our county and our region," Bernard Peplinski, chairman of the Herkimer County Legislature, said in the release. "The revitalization of our communities is key to our overall progress, and the land bank gives us another tool to make that happen."

Some municipalities without foreclosing authority also passed resolutions of support for the land bank, including the cities of Gloversville, Little Falls and Oneonta and the village of Fort Plain.

"The land bank will be another tool in our arsenal of weapons to fight blight," said Little Falls Mayor Mark Blask. "The city is enforcing building codes and has done an inventory of all city properties. The Common Council encouraged owners of certain properties to address elements of blight. We are ready to partner with the land bank."

"While initial funding comes from grants and a share of the settlement between the State of New York and banks involved in the sub-prime mortgage crisis that produced a national banking emergency in 2008 and

the subsequent recession, land banks are expected to become self-sustaining with profits from sales of rehabilitated properties funneled back into the organization," said Albrecht.