

TIMES TELEGRAM

Herkimer County checking into land banks

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HERKIMER — How does a region rid itself of blighted properties?

Sometimes, a municipality will sell a property at a price much below its appraised value simply to get it off its hands.

For Tolga Morawski, that's a waste of taxpayer money.

Morawski is part of Mohawk Valley Collective — a group working to restore or reuse “historic gems” in Montgomery County. He said the county sold one historic, 15,000-square-foot church for \$508. The contractor who bought it had plans to tear it down.

Morawski didn't want to see that happen, so he formed the collective to purchase and renovate the property. Just more than three years later, he and other volunteers restored some of the rooms, cleaned the building and sometimes host music events there.

“The end result is the county sold a building that was assessed at \$67,000 and owed \$12,000 in taxes for \$508, and two months later, I paid \$30,000 for it,” Morawski said. “So what that tells me is that my county, of which I am a taxpayer, is wasting my money.”

Mohawk Valley Collective, he said, functions a lot like a land bank.

And that's what Herkimer County is checking out.

Residents packed a room at Herkimer County Community College last week to find out if a land bank could help alleviate blighted properties in the county.

With a land bank, a public authority of one or a few municipality or county governments would oversee the handling of some of the six-county Greater Mohawk Valley's tax delinquent properties.

The authority would pick one of four things to do with the properties: deconstruct, stabilize, renovate or re-sell.

Deconstruction, an organized dismantling of property that focuses on salvaging a building's materials, is an alternative to demolition, which can cost about \$20,000.

Morawski said one deconstruction his collective performed cost about \$17,000, but now is \$5,000 from breaking even because of the sale of limestone and other materials.

Land banks, however, have not necessarily been successful in other areas of the state.

"The experience of other land banks is either unknown to us or it's very mixed," said Bob Albrecht, chairman of Keep Mohawk Valley Beautiful, the organization that — in partnership with the Mohawk Valley Economic Development District — called for the meeting.

He explained that while some have taken on too many properties, others still are fighting with their county legislatures for funding.

"We have learned from these other experiences," Albrecht said. "We know that if we don't do all of the foundational work, and we don't do all the educating and get all the buy-in necessary, this is going to fall apart. We want to be in existence 10 years from now if we're going to do this."

He knows they'll need community support to achieve that. So far, he said, surveys collected from attendees of the meeting — and of one in Johnstown — say the groups should keep investigating.

“There are 500,000 of us in these six counties, and we need to solve our many problems and build on our many successes,” Albrecht said. “If not us, who? If not now, when?”