

Legislators expect to finalize decision about joining the land bank

By EMILY DREW

For the C-S-E

FONDA — Several Montgomery County Legislators are hoping to vote next week on whether the county will join the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank Corporation.

Tolga Morawski, Mohawk Valley Collective treasurer and advocate for the land bank, told legislators Tuesday the state Attorney General's Office has given an Oct. 20 deadline for the land bank's formation in order to be considered for the current round of funding, which has to be allocated to land banks before the end of the year.

The county legislature would have to vote on a resolution and the county sign the intermunicipal agreement between the cities and counties that would make up the land bank. That includes Montgomery, Herkimer, Schoharie and Otsego counties and the cities of Rome and Utica.

District 4 Legislator Ryan Weitz suggested the legislature put the resolution up for a vote during an Oct. 4 special meeting scheduled to discuss the 2017 budget. He said that would allow time if Montgomery County Executive Matthew Ossenfort were to veto the vote.

"That allows the executive some time and makes it a little less crunch time for everybody in the case of potential veto," he said.

Several legislators have stated they support joining the land bank as a way to fight blight in the county. The land bank would 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.

The government-created nonprofit corporations have special powers above typical foreclosing entities that enables it to convert vacant, abandoned and tax-delinquent properties into productive space.

Morawski said the Oct. 20 deadline was so the land bank could get certified by Empire State Development during its next board meeting. It would have to be before the Attorney General's Office by the end of November to be considered for this year's funding.

Morawski said land bank advocates and attorneys and representatives for the foreclosing governmental units (FGUs), or counties and cities, that would make up the new land bank met Friday to work out a final intermunicipal agreement.

He said the meeting lasted about three and a half hours and made a lot of progress toward creating a final agreement. As of Tuesday, attorneys for the FGUs were looking over the draft one last time.

"I feel like we made a great deal of progress," Morawski said.

Discussions ranged from spelling errors to revising the term limit the FGUs would be a part of the land bank. Originally five years, it was lowered to three, and each FGU would have to vote in their respective governments whether or not to continue being a part of the land bank.

Additionally, it was decided to have representation on the land bank's board of directors to be dictated by population size, meaning that Montgomery County would get one vote while larger counties would get two. Ossenfort said the county's one vote was due to the city of Amsterdam not being included, since the city is already part of the Capital Region Land Bank. There could be an option for the city to join in the future if it withdraws from that land bank.

"I'm still kind of wrestling that around in my head," Ossenfort said, but added that the discussions were a "huge step forward" and wanted to ensure the county was exploring all details.

"I'm in support of this, in support of getting it done," District 9 Legislator Robert Purtell said. "I don't think whether we have one member or two members, when we're talking about nine members, is going to make a significant difference."

District 2 Legislator Thomas Quackenbush said the legislature needed to determine if having only one vote is "worth missing out on some funding we could potentially have."

When asked if there would be any major changes to the final draft, county attorney Meghan Manion said the draft that was created Friday was a consensus.

"I don't think there's anything hanging at this point. The draft is what it is," she said.

Morawski said there have been regular meetings with the Attorney General's Office to determine potential projects for the land bank and he feels the representatives from each FGU are some of the best in the region.

"I really feel that we have a good team and can come off with a lot of momentum," he said.

In other county news:

- District 6 Legislator John Duchessi and Quackenbush pulled their sponsorship of a local law to establish a payment in lieu of taxes schedule for solar projects due to changes in the language of the law, which has to be in its final form 10 days before the legislature can vote.
- Legislators approved an updated Hazard Mitigation Plan for the county that will help ensure the county is eligible for funding to reduce risks caused by natural hazards.
- Legislators approved a revolving loan fund agreement for \$200,000 loan for NY Bake Factory, LLC, which is looking to set up in a former Beech-Nut facility in the village of Fort Plain at 15 Herkimer St. The company agreed to create 50 full-time equivalent jobs.

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