

Rome Sentinel

Mohawk Valley land bank gets OK from state agency

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The Empire State Development Corporation has approved the application for a multi-county land bank submitted by the Mohawk Valley Economic Development District (MVEDD).

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 (GMVLB) currently covers the counties of Herkimer, Montgomery, Otsego, and Schoharie, 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 chair of the Keep Mohawk Valley Executive Board said, “The Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank (GMVLB) is the culmination of a nearly three-year effort led by Keep Mohawk Valley Beautiful (KMVB) and its parent not-for-profit, the Mohawk Valley Economic Development District.”

“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, chair, KMVB Board of Directors.

“The City of Rome is pleased to participate in the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank,” said Jacqueline M. Izzo, mayor, City of Rome.

“We believe the Land Bank will be an important economic development tool to assist our ongoing efforts with blight remediation. The Land Bank will offer another avenue, in addition to our Real Property Committee, for acquisition and rehabilitation of foreclosed, bank owned and privately held properties to return them to the active tax roll and further grow our tax base,” said Izzo.

“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 (ESD). “I congratulate MVEDD for nurturing collaboration so that 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, Troy; Sam Russo, Utica; Attorney Chris Brown, Little Falls; Steve Smith, Herkimer County IDA, Ilion; Tolga Morawski, Committee chair, Fort Plain; and Dan Sullivan, Richfield Springs, KMVB chair.

“Russo is an ardent supporter of the green practice of deconstruction, the reuse of building materials following demolition, and an advocate for Veteran’s issues, seeing a great opportunity for their retraining and employment via land bank projects,” said Albrecht.

Tolga Morawski, chair of the KMVB Land Bank Committee, and Dan Sullivan, together with their members began an education effort, visiting every foreclosing governmental unit (FGU) in the Mohawk Valley: Fulton, Herkimer, Montgomery, Oneida, Otsego, and Schoharie Counties, as well as the cities of Johnstown, Rome, and Utica. Sullivan said. “In our early days, being a standing committee of MVEDD opened many doors for us, thanks to the efforts of Steve Smith.”

“Most but not all were able to pass enabling resolutions allowing the application to be drafted,” said Morawski, “and 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. They include Ray Johnson and Kurt Ackerman, Herkimer County; Karl Gustafson, Montgomery County; Craig Gelbsman and Margaret Kennedy, Otsego County; Steve Wilson, Schoharie County; Mark Domenico, City of Rome; Joe Marino and Brian Thomas, City of Utica.

Earl Van Wormer, Chairman of the Schoharie County Board of Supervisors, said in a news release that “the land bank offers possible solutions to fixing up vacant properties that seem to be in between private ownership and banks and taps a funding stream we would not otherwise have access to.”

“The GMVLB will enable the city of Utica and municipalities throughout the Mohawk Valley to more proactively combat blighted and abandoned properties within our respective communities by providing the necessary tools and resources to improve the condition of properties that currently hinder the redevelopment of our neighborhoods,” said Utica Mayor Robert Palmieri.

“For the entire region, this land bank will open a new revenue stream to combat blight and run down properties plaguing our neighborhoods,” said Joseph A. Marino, Utica Common Council, 4th Ward. “For Utica this program will offer money and hope to combat zombie properties and will allow us to double down on efforts to clean up impoverished neighborhoods” said Marino.

“Otsego County supports the GMVLB,” said Margaret M. Kennedy, Otsego County Board of Representatives, District 5. “The land bank serves as a means for distributing funds allocated for improving properties currently beyond the scope of our influence. We hope to work with the land bank to return blighted properties to useful productivity and to the tax rolls.”

Some municipalities without foreclosing authority also passed resolutions of support for the land bank: 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 Mark Blask, Mayor, City of Little Falls, “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,” said Blask.

“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.

Albrecht added that while municipal and county governments collaborated with KMVB and MVEDD to make this happen, “it’s important to remember that New York State land banks are local public authorities that are independent of any single municipality. The GMVLB is an authentic example of a rising tide raising all boats, of working together for the common good.”

“There are very few voices representing the entire six-county region, “ said Alice Savino, President, MVEDD Board of Directors, “but the GMVLB could only exist when governments acted collaboratively to address a common problem and to become eligible for funds through the NYS Attorney General’s settlements with large banks. All of us will, over time, win.”

“The establishment of the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank is a very positive step for our County and our Region, “ says Bernie Peplinski, Chairman of the Herkimer County Legislature. “The revitalization of our communities is key to our overall progress, and the land bank gives us another tool to make that happen.”

“I’m optimistic that the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank can bring about positive changes in how this region combats blighted properties,” Montgomery County Executive Matthew L. Ossenfort said. “This land bank should be a resource to our local communities looking to rebuild, revitalize and strengthen our neighborhoods. I’m hopeful this land bank provides an organization that will focus on innovative solutions to addressing abandoned properties and the negative impact they have on all of our local communities.”

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