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Schoharie interested in 6-county land bank alliance

By Kyle Adams April 30, 2015

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SCHOHARIE COUNTY — The Schoharie County Board of Supervisors is backing the creation of a six-county land bank in and around the Mohawk Valley to help return vacant and abandoned properties to productive use.

The county joined two others so far, Montgomery and Herkimer, with a resolution earlier this month backing the proposal put forth by the Mohawk Valley Development District's Keep Mohawk Valley Beautiful program. Otsego, Fulton and Oneida counties are also included in the proposal, but have not yet passed resolutions supporting it.

If created, the land bank would work with the counties and other entities with the power of foreclosure — in this case the cities of Utica, Rome and Johnstown — to rehabilitate problem properties and, ideally, get them back on the tax rolls.

The county, at its discretion, could transfer a property to the land bank at no cost, absorbing whatever delinquent taxes are owed on it, in exchange for the land bank investing in renovation or other actions to make the property marketable, according to county officials. The land bank would then try to sell the property, collecting the profit for future investment, and the property would go back on the tax rolls.

"There are occasionally distressed properties that the county sells at public auction, and sometimes we sell and they simply don't get fixed up," said Schoharie County Treasurer Bill Cherry, who brought the proposal to the Board of Supervisors. "It's an eyesore, it's a distressed property. Somebody picks it up at the auction, and it needs a lot of rehab and it just sits there."

Town of Seward Supervisor J. Carl Barbic, who moved the resolution, said he supports the land bank "100 percent" for its potential for turning around blighted properties.

"There's a property right here in our town that people bought two years ago," he said. "Nothing's been done with it since they bought it. If they don't pay their taxes for three or four years, then it'll end up being sold again. So nobody gets anything out of it."

The New York State Land Bank Act of 2011 created 10 land banks across the state with $33 million in seed money, according to Mohawk Valley Economic Development District Executive Director Steve Smith. The state is once again offering seed money for the creation of another 10 land banks, he said, though the total amount is not yet known.

"So far, there haven't been any since 2013," he said. "So we want to become the 11th land bank in New York state, and we would be a multicounty land bank."

Smith said his organization is preparing an application to the Empire State Development District, which it hopes to submit this summer. In the meantime, he's working to get as many foreclosing entities as possible on board.

"The more counties, the more entities we have on board, the higher the chance of success, because then the state would see that there's interest from our region," he said.

Cherry said Schoharie County doesn't have the same blight problems as urban centers, and he would expect maybe only one or two properties a year to go the land bank if it were created.

"I don't think it's going to be a game-changer, but I do think that it gives us one more avenue to take a blighted or distressed property and put it back on the tax rolls," he said.

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