

Why vote no on land bank? - LeaderHerald.com | News, Sports, Jobs, Community

September 27, 2016

Leader Herald

In a few short months the Johnstown Common Council has gone from passing a resolution in May that stated it was in the "best interest" of the state and city to "confront the problems caused by vacant, abandoned and tax-delinquent properties through the creation of land banks in a coordinated manner," to interim Mayor Cindy Lakata simply stating, "The council has come to the consensus the land bank is not a good fit with the city of Johnstown" at its last meeting, without any resolution ever being put forward for the city to join the proposed six-county Mohawk Valley Economic Development District land bank.

Inbetween endorsing the concept and rejecting, by consensus, joining the land bank, Johnstown's Common Council listened to a presentation from land bank advocates Gloversville 3rd Ward Councilman Vincent DeSantis and Tolga Morawski of Keep Mohawk Valley Beautiful.

DeSantis and Morawski argued the benefits of joining a land bank: access to potentially millions of dollars of private sector money from the state's settlements with the big banks after the 2008 financial crisis, and local control over which, if any, distressed foreclosure properties would be given to the land bank for redevelopment.

These arguments did not sway the council. Our understanding of Johnstown's consensus is that the council likes the foreclosure system they have now; they don't have very many properties that remain in foreclosure for prolonged periods of time; they don't have as much blight as Gloversville, and they are wary of a 50/50 split of property tax revenues for five years of properties acquired and rehabilitated by the land bank.

We admit that Johnstown does not quite have the blight problem that Gloversville has, but we still don't like the council's choice to reject the land bank. Fulton County, which handles the foreclosures for Gloversville, does have a history of revolving door foreclosures and of actually choosing not to foreclose on brownfield contaminated properties out of fear of the liability cost of owning them, something land banks are designed specifically to address.

Members of the Fulton County Board of Supervisors have said they don't want to be a member of a multi-county land bank where Oneida County would have three seats on the board of directors, one for itself and its two cities Utica and Rome, which each have the power to foreclose on property. This argument holds little water in terms of Fulton County losing local control given that the county board of supervisors would still have the ability to chose on a case-by-case basis whether to give distressed foreclosures to the proposed land bank, and it would have held even less water had Johnstown joined the land bank, giving

the local area two permanent members on the land bank's board.

The Johnstown Common Council and the Fulton County Board of Supervisors made the wrong decision to reject the regional land bank for our area and will deny the public access to much-needed funding to help rehabilitate distressed and polluted properties in the county, particularly in Gloversville.