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Johnstown Mayor Lakata seeks meeting on land bank

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By MICHAEL ANICH , Leader Herald

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JOHNSTOWN - Interim Mayor Cindy Lakata last week told officials promoting the Mohawk Valley Economic Development District's six-county land bank that she wants a meeting to share information on the effort.

"I do want to think things through," Lakata said.

The Common Council voted in May to support the land bank plan concept, but hasn't formally involved the city via a resolution.

A land bank involves rehabbing blighted, derelict properties to get them back on the tax rolls.

Gloversville 3rd Ward Councilman Vincent DeSantis, a representative of the Gloversville Housing and Neighborhood Improvement Corp., and Tolga Morawski, chairman of Keep Mohawk Valley Beautiful, a standing committee of the MVEDD, addressed the council Monday night at City Hall to see where the city stood.

"This is the third time I've been to one of your meetings," DeSantis said.

He said he's interested in having Johnstown involved because that city and Fulton County are the only foreclosing units in the county.

Lakata told DeSantis she would like to set up a meeting with him to discuss the land bank. She said she will also gain council input on the issue.

Fulton, Montgomery, Herkimer, Oneida, Otsego and Schoharie counties would seek state money for the land bank, which buys foreclosed properties and makes them available for sale to developers or builders. The city of Gloversville has also supported the plan, while Fulton County legislators haven't taken action.

DeSantis said there will be \$17.3 million available to local municipalities to aid them through the land bank. The MVEDD land bank itself can access between \$1 million and \$4 million.

"We want you to invest in it," he said. "That's the whole purpose of the land bank. It's a real, real plus. It's kind of a no-brainer."

DeSantis said Fulton County fears giving up local control to a regional entity, but that is untrue.

"You have total control over every property you foreclose on," he said.

He said the city of Johnstown will also have a voting representative for land bank decisions.

"I'm urging you to consider endorsing the land bank and be part of it," DeSantis said.

Morawski said the funding is coming from foreclosure settlements involving financial institutions, not from taxpayers.

"We're getting down to brass tacks with this application," he said. "I don't want to miss this opportunity to get these funds."

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