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FAYETTE BECOMES FIRST TO ADOPT LAND BANK LEGISLATION

Uniontown, PA – Fayette County became the first in the state to grant land bank powers to its redevelopment authority Thursday, making it easier for local officials to fight community blight.

The ordinance was made in accordance with Pennsylvania Act 33, which was introduced by state Sen. Pat Stefano, R-Bullskin Township, last year and signed into law by Gov. Tom Wolf in June. Act 33 grants redevelopment authorities the same powers currently allotted to land banks through the Pennsylvania Land Bank Act.

The new legislation, which will enable redevelopment authorities to take a more active role in acquiring and rehabilitating blighted properties and neighborhoods, was passed by both the Senate and the House of Representatives in consecutive unanimous votes.

Stefano thanked Fayette County commissioners for adopting the ordinance Thursday.

“I’ve been on several task forces and blight tours throughout the region, visiting some of our cities and boroughs and there’s a common theme everywhere,” Stefano said. “We have abandoned buildings and homes and issues with trying to address who owns them.

“How do we rehab them and can we get that done before they become a danger?”

Stefano said, while the county has many tools to address blight, the land bank legislation “started right here.” The overall goal is improving communities and their properties, he added.

“There are 16 land banks throughout Pennsylvania and they are helping,” Stefano said. “But it’s difficult and very expensive to form them, not just in rural Pennsylvania, but in urban areas, because it’s government duplicity.”

Fayette County Redevelopment Authority Executive Director Andrew French said, while the county’s redevelopment authority has been performing the same functions for a long time, it will now be “more official.”



“We are setting precedence right here in Fayette County,” French said, adding that the commissioners are to be commended for their many contributions since the original legislation passed. “This will give us one more tool in our toolbox, so we thank you.”

Since the Land Bank Act’s passage, French said, the redevelopment authority has acquired and rehabilitated nine properties for resale to low-income homebuyers; rehabilitated 33 owner-occupied residential properties; demolished over 40 residential blighted properties and seven commercial blighted properties; and aided in the construction of over 40 new homes for sale to first-time, low-income homebuyers.

In total, French said, the authority has invested over \$7.1 million in those efforts using a variety of local, state and federal resources.

Fayette County Commissioner Chairman Vince Vicites said many people helped make the “significant” legislation a reality.

“I think it’s important,” Vicites said. “It not only puts Fayette County on the map as being the leader in this effort, but it helps a lot of other counties that don’t want to form land banks who can now do that through their own redevelopment authorities.”

Vicites said the county is prepared to move forward with tackling various dilapidated structures.

“Having these types of powers for the authority is important, because we can do a lot of proactive things to manage blight,” he said.

Commissioner Dave Lohr thanked Stefano and French for their hard work on the land bank legislation and said Fayette is proud to be the first county to enact it.

“Everyone who worked on this - kudos to them, hats off to them,” Lohr said. “They did a great job bringing us to the top.

“We have some great people working together to make this stuff happen, and things really are happening.”

Lohr said that while the legislation’s overall impact may be “a slow process at times,” it will also be a “huge asset to move the county forward.”

“We can address the blighted areas, get some things cleaned up,” he said. “It’s going to be great.”

Commissioner Angela Zimmerlink said she was pleased when Harrisburg amended the former Land Bank Act.



“This amended legislation can benefit Fayette County only if truly used towards the removal of blighted properties that then are redeveloped for economic growth,” Zimmerlink said. “It is essential that open discussion and planning are done to reap the benefits of the legislation and to use these public dollars for the betterment of our county.”

With commissioners’ approval, French said, the redevelopment authority is “ready to hit the ground running” with multiple projects that are already in the works, including continued rehabilitation of existing homes and development of new single-family homes on previously blighted properties. The authority has also targeted several strategically located blighted commercial properties throughout the county for possible acquisition and demolition.

In addition to pursuing the designation, the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority has been working to form a county-wide blight strategy for several years, partnering with many municipalities and their code enforcement officers to tackle problem areas.

“Obviously our ultimate goal is not only to help eliminate blight throughout the county, but to also undertake projects and initiatives in our communities which continue to help make Fayette County such a great place to call home.”

For more information, contact French at 724-437-1547, ext. 210, or afrench@racfpa.org.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.info.

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