

## How to battle urban blight

October 8, 2012 at 5:00 am by [Jim McGrath](#)

*Our opinion: A county land bank is critical to controlling Albany's rash of abandoned buildings. A Nov. 30 deadline should be a galvanizing force.*

Oh, to have been at the Howe library in Albany's South End last Tuesday night when about 100 people — the usual activists, community leaders and politicians — gathered to talk some more about a county land bank. How tempting it would have been to shout across the city to bring more urgency to an idea that's as critical to Albany as it is overdue.

Even good intentions still make for costly delays. It's hard not to observe this painfully slow and cumbersome deliberative process and think of all the once-abandoned buildings, now demolished, that might have been preserved if the right people with the right tools had acted sooner.

A land bank would free Albany County from the trap of being the disinterested owner of all that neglected, tax-delinquent property as it further deteriorates. It would help break the vicious cycle of foreclosure and demolition and neighborhood decay. Instead, the county could buy and then resell abandoned buildings to people committed to restoring them. The city, meantime, would be spared much of the \$1 million or so it spends each year on demolition.

Land banks are an idea that's working elsewhere in New York. Five land banks have been created since the Cuomo administration established a statewide program 15 months ago.

Albany County could be No. 6, if only it takes the appropriate steps before the Nov. 30 deadline for an application to the state. Let's see if the strong consensus that emerged from last week's meeting in the South End grabs the necessary attention across town in the halls of county government.

Let's see if County Executive Dan McCoy in particular is listening. Does he share the vision that others have to best confront the 809 abandoned buildings, by the city's recent count, that undermine the quality of life in almost every neighborhood in Albany? Or is he instead one more casualty of the fiefdom mentality that tends to hinder both county and city government?

Surely he knows, as a former Albany firefighter, the menace posed by such an accumulation of dilapidated property. He must know, too, as county executive, the fiscal burden that being a landlord of last resort imposes on a county already facing a \$35 million deficit.

Finally, Mr. McCoy might see the political opening that supporting a land bank represents.

“He needs a signature issue,” says County Legislator Chris Higgins, who’s been pushing for a land bank for two years and finally senses that his proposal is gaining traction.

Mr. Higgins is pushing for a November vote by the County Legislature. His colleagues might see the chance to use the funds provided by a land bank to make better use of abandoned property as one more way to overcome urban blight — and before another lost building collapses.

To miss that Nov. 30 deadline is to invite the wrecking ball to come down on Albany again. And just to be on the safe side, why wait till the last minute?

