

## Senate bill would give redevelopment authorities land bank powers

Local redevelopment authority executive directors weigh in on Senate Bill 667, which passed the Senate last week and would grant area redevelopment authorities the same powers currently allotted to land banks to rehabilitate blighted properties.

If someone gave the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority \$50 million, authority Executive Director Andrew French figures that might be enough to address all the blight in the county.

But French knows that isn't going to happen.

"We're trying to do more with less," French said.

For French, that included acknowledging that smaller counties such as Fayette could not handle what he said was the redundancy and costs incurred by redevelopment authorities elsewhere forming and staffing land banks to fight blight.

French pointed that out to state Sen. Pat Stefano, R-Bullskin Township, and the result was Senate Bill 667, which passed the Senate last week and would grant local redevelopment authorities the same powers currently allotted to land banks to rehabilitate blighted properties. Stefano represents areas in Fayette, Westmoreland and Somerset counties.

"That was one of those aha moments," Stefano said of French and others asking why they can't have the same powers that land banks do, since they share many of the same responsibilities.

Stefano the bill's formulation began this past winter and noted that the legislation would allow local redevelopment authorities to acquire tax-delinquent properties at a judicial sale without competitive bidding.

French identified this part of the bill as a "key power."

"When we got to that point (of judicial sale), we as an authority would have to go in and bid on it," French said.

"Anything that can help us step in and get the property before it goes to a judicial sale would be very, very helpful," Greene County Redevelopment Authority Executive Director David Calvario said, noting that Greene County also does not have a land bank.

The bill was referred on Thursday to the House Urban Affairs Committee, and Stefano said House amendments to the bill were expected and likely to include provisions addressing concerns about redevelopment authorities jumping ahead of private bidders at judicial sales.

"If we were targeting possibly viable properties (for development), I don't think that would sit too well with people," French said. "(But) I think the types of properties we're going to get for that particular use, I hope that's not controversial."

The legislation would also permit redevelopment authorities to discharge tax liens on blighted properties and share up to 50 percent of the real property taxes for five years after conveyance of authority-owned property.

The Pennsylvania Land Bank Act, enacted in 2012, allows counties and municipalities with populations of 10,000 or more to establish land banks that help return vacant, abandoned and tax-delinquent properties to productive use through delinquent property tax enforcement, property disposition and other means.

"Land banks have been very successful when they're formed," Stefano said. "They're just difficult to form."

Washington County officially created a land bank in April 2016, which county redevelopment authority Executive Director Bill McGowen said has been "working out very well so far," attracting three municipalities -

Charleroi, West Brownsville and Marianna - to its land bank program.

Susan Morgan, who is Washington County Redevelopment Authority's brownfields and municipal planning manager as well as a county land bank administrator, said she saw how Senate Bill 667 could be good for smaller counties without a land bank.

Stefano and French are confident that Senate Bill 667 will make fighting blight easier for area redevelopment authorities, enabling them to take control of severe problem properties and spur greater private development and property upkeep in the neighborhoods surrounding them.

"A lot of times, all it takes is one spark," Stefano said.