A bill that would allow counties to collect up to $15 on deeds and mortgages they record to establish a demolition fund for use on blighted properties is expected to come up for a vote in the Senate next week. Sen. John Gordner (R-27) said he supports the bill, which is sponsored by Sen. David Argall of Schuylkill and Berks counties. If approved by the Senate, the bill would move to the state House of Representatives.

Jon Hopcraft, Argall's communication director, said the senator wanted to create a specific fund for the use of demolishing blighted properties. He explored multiple methods of raising money before settling on the recording of deeds and mortgages because it "made the most sense," Hopcraft said.

Ed Christiano, leader of Northumberland County's Blight Task Force, said demolition funds are needed, especially in the southeastern portion of the county. "The Shamokin-Mount Carmel area seems to have the most blighted property that just owe for back taxes and sit there. Year after year they get worse," he said. "A lot of them can't be rehbabbed - they're just that far gone."

Christiano said some state and federal grants are available to demolish blighted properties, but many times a county match is needed. Because this legislation stipulates all money raised in the county remains there, he hopes the fund would make matching grants easier.

Mary Zimmerman, county register and recorder, said 5,253 documents were recorded last year, which she said is a typical number. If the maximum $15 fee was imposed, approximately $79,000 would have been raised. Christiano said he was unable to estimate the amount needed to demolish all of the county's blighted properties that could not be rehabilitated. "We're talking big bucks," he said.

Rick Bozza, Shamokin code officer, said the city had 40 or 50 blighted properties that need to be demolished, a fraction of the "well over 100" total blighted properties. "A lot of them I'd like to rehabilitate to keep them on the tax rolls," he said. "We have other avenues for that."

Edward T. Cuff III, Mount Carmel Borough manager, provided a list of 22 properties that should be demolished, including several damaged by fire. He estimated it would cost $365,000 to demolish all - nearly five times the total amount the fee would raise county-wide.

Tony Matulewicz, borough council president, said blight is the number one issue council members receive complaints about. While he said he typically opposes new taxes, he believes removal of blighted properties would result in increased property values throughout the borough - a benefit he thought outweighed the small fee. "No one wants to purchase a home or build a new home anywhere near a blighted property," he said. "The few that we can afford to remove are only the worst of the worst."

Christiano said the blight task force is currently working on an ambitious project that would rehabilitate and demolish blight in the Shamokin-Coal Township area. Though the project is funded by a million dollars of state and local money, only a fraction of the total blight will be removed. To continue fighting blight, more demolition money will be needed because many of the buildings are so damaged a private sector buyer could never turn a profit on them, he said. "That's where the public sector needs to step up," he said.