

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Land bank inching forward

On Tuesday, we discussed Pottstown's LERTA program, which was approved in 2016 after two years of meetings and discussions between Pottstown Council and the Pottstown School Board.

LERTA — which stands for Local Economic Revitalization Tax Assistance — was touted as a way to encourage economic development by giving property owners a temporary tax break if they improve the value of their properties.



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

Thus far, however, only one property owner has enrolled in the program.

But that's one more property than the Pottstown Land Bank has processed.

Land banks were authorized by the state legislature in 2012 to help municipalities acquire and rehabilitate blighted properties.

Under the law, a land bank board appointed by local government — in our case, Pottstown Council — could acquire blighted properties, wipe out any back taxes and unpaid fees owed, and then sell the properties—with free and clear titles — to new owners who would rehabilitate them.

After much deliberation, Pottstown Council adopted a land bank ordinance in November 2017.

Five months later, Council appointed five volunteer land bank board members, who held their first official meeting in June 2018 and elected officers.

In February of this year, a local

attorney addressed Council about his concerns that land bank board members might have a conflict of interest in disposing of properties. Three months later, Council appointed that same attorney to the land bank board, where he will presumably make sure everything is on the up and up.

At its most recent meeting, last month, the land bank board reappointed its officers. It has also approved policies and procedures, including a right-to-know policy.

It has been allocated \$25,000 in seed money from the borough to acquire properties, and it has been assigned an expert attorney in land bank laws to guide it, who is funded by the borough at a fee of \$150 per hour.

Now it just needs to acquire a property.

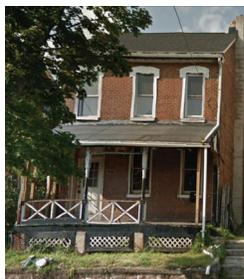
The borough has a blighted property committee which investigates deteriorated properties.

The committee has generated a list of about 75 blighted properties, but that list needs to be updated because some of the properties might have been sold and rehabilitated since they were first certified.

The land bank board will also need more money to acquire properties. At its most recent meeting, the board's consultant said there is state grant money available specifically for land banks, but someone has to apply for the money. Fine.

Land banks are a great concept, and they have done well in other Pennsylvania municipalities.

After nearly two years, it's time for Pottstown's board to advance from "talking" to "doing."



BLIGHTED PROPERTIES — above, some of the properties on Pottstown's blighted property list.