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TOP STORY

Bill aimed at fighting blight signed into law

By Mike Tony mtony@heraldstandard.com Jun 20, 2018 Updated 50 min ago



Mark Soroka

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Clearly blighted homes like this one on Heslep Avenue in Donora can now be more easily addressed thanks to legislation signed into law by Gov. Tom Wolf on Tuesday.

Mark Soroka



Stefano

A bill that could give communities a helping hand to fight blight was signed into law Tuesday by Gov. Tom Wolf.

Senate Bill 667, introduced by state Sen. Pat Stefano, R-Bullskin Township, is designed to convey the same powers that land banks have to local redevelopment authorities, offering them the ability to potentially take control of blighted properties through delinquent property tax enforcement, property disposition and other means.

The state House of Representatives passed the bill in a 195-0 vote, and the Senate did so in a 49-0 vote. Stefano called the bill's passage "a landmark day in the fight against blight in our communities."

"My administration is committed to addressing blight and we have invested in community redevelopment that enhances that goal," Wolf said Tuesday in a release issued by his office.

Stefano explained that, as amended by the House, the bill allows counties to bestow land bank functions upon their redevelopment authorities without the recurring cost of setting up and supporting a new administrative board.

"This reduces redundancy (and allows) more resources to be aimed at fighting blight," Stefano said.

Stefano said that the startup and recurring costs associated with forming a land bank were too expensive for several areas within his district, acknowledging Fayette County Redevelopment Authority Executive Director Andrew French for pointing out that dilemma to him.

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 abandoned and tax-delinquent properties to productive use through delinquent property tax enforcement, property disposition and other means.

“In many of the 16 land banks that have been formed, it’s been the redevelopment authorities that have led the way in providing the staff support necessary to run the land bank’s operation,” Stefano told his Senate colleagues.

Washington County officially created a land bank in April 2016, more than two years after Westmoreland County formed one. Stefano said he could personally attest to the good work that land banks do, recalling having observed progress being made in the Westmoreland County portion of his district.

Stefano said the bill will go into effect 60 days after becoming law.

“Senate Bill 667 is not a silver bullet when it comes to fighting blight,” Stefano said. “But it is an important tool that we are providing to those areas who have not been able to put together the resources necessary to form a land bank under current law.”

The bill was one of two Wolf signed Tuesday. The second, House Bill 653, allows for an accelerated foreclosure process on properties that have been abandoned and are already in foreclosure proceedings.

Wolf’s office noted that the foreclosure bill is four years in the making from the state’s Blight Task Force. He noted that eight other states currently have expedited foreclosures laws.

The average foreclosure in Pennsylvania can last from 300 to 540 days, Wolf’s office said. The bill will reduce that time frame to about 240 days.

