

Land banks want state funds to raze sites

DEVELOPMENT

By Mark Ferenchik
The Columbus Dispatch

City and county land banks across the state are pushing Ohio legislators to approve \$50 million to demolish empty commercial and industrial sites that officials say hinder redevelopment efforts, along with vacant homes.

The supply of money that land banks have been using for demolition is drying up and another infusion is needed, said James Rokakis, vice president of the Western Reserve Land Conservancy in suburban Cleveland and a land bank advocate.

“The one problem is that we have been unable to attack the commercial and industrial (properties),”

Rokakis said. “All this stuff is an in-your-face reminder of what Ohio used to be, and it holds us back.”

John Turner, the administrator for Columbus' land bank, said no state fund has been set up to deal with commercial demolitions.

“Any funds on that level would be useful for the city,”

Turner said. “But our needs aren't as great as some of the other industrial cities.”

The problem is more acute in cities such as Cleveland and areas such as the Mahoning Valley, which have struggled for years with population and job losses and crumbling industrial sites.

“Everything we have done so far is predominately residential housing,” said Gus Frangos, president of the Cuyahoga Land Bank. “The arteries of the local neighborhood and retail strips have not been touched. That remains a constant blight on communities.”

State Rep. Dave Greenspan, R-Westlake, introduced a bill Thursday that creates a Land Reutilization Demolition Program. According to the bill, no land bank can be awarded more than 20 percent of the money.

The Ohio County Land Bank Network is trying to line up support in the Senate as well, Rokakis said.

“We've got to get the momentum going,” he said.

Advocates were trying to get the \$50 million request put into the state budget. But the Ohio House forwarded the two-year, \$68.9 billion operating budget on May 9 without including the land bank provision.

In 2016, Franklin County's land bank received \$12.2 million from the Ohio Housing Finance Agency for home demolitions, enough to tear down at least 600 additional vacant and abandoned houses in Columbus.

Curtiss Williams, president of the Central Ohio Community Improvement Corp., which serves as the county's land bank, said the market here is healthier than other areas of the state. "There is nothing that really stands out that is a dilapidated industrial building," he said. "But you never know what is going to pop up."

Rokakis said Columbus is the outlier in Ohio.

"It's not the way the rest of us are living" he said. In places such as Mingo Junction and Sidney and Cleveland and the Mahoning Valley, it's a different story, he added.

Debora Flora, executive director of the Mahoning County Land Bank, said her county's \$14.8 million for demolitions from the Ohio Housing Finance Agency runs out July 1. "There's nothing to come behind it," she said.