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County in better position to redevelop properties

Niagara County recently entered into an agreement with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) that should significantly aid on our ability to foreclose on properties that are delinquent on their taxes but have avoided foreclosure thus far because the land may be environmentally contaminated. This would then begin the process of making these sites ready for redevelopment.

First, some background. Niagara County is part of the Niagara Orleans Land Improvement Corp. (NORLIC), which is more commonly referred to as the land bank. Other stakeholders in NORLIC include Orleans County and the cities of Lockport, North Tonawanda and Niagara Falls.

This municipal partnership works with communities to acquire vacant and abandoned properties and return them to productive use, creating a better community for future generations.

Some may ask what is the purpose of a land bank when local governments can foreclose on properties. The fact is, while a tax foreclosure auction allows a municipality to recover past tax liens, it does not ensure that properties are transferred to the most appropriate party. Practically speaking, the door is open to absentee landlords who acquire but do not maintain the property. This issue is particularly challenging when a certain geographic area has a vast number of distressed properties, which can lead to significant blight.

But, through a selective in rem process, a land bank can take title to specific distressed properties in an effort to combat this blight. Furthermore, our land bank can serve as an economic develop-

ment tool by amassing blocks of these properties that can then be demolished or redeveloped within the scope of a predesigned municipal master plan.

However, one particular issue has been a sticking point for both municipal governments and the land bank, and that is contaminated properties. Foreclosing on contaminated (or potentially contaminated) properties has been problematic, because local governments do not want to assume the liability for the environmental cleanup. Knowing this, some landowners of potentially contaminated properties have simply stopped paying their property taxes.

Which brings us back around to the agreement with the DEC. To address concerns such as liability, cost recovery, and access to potentially contaminated sites, the agreement allows us to foreclose or take title of properties that are contaminated or potentially contaminated without becom-

ing immediately liable for that contamination or past cleanup costs expended by the Spill Fund or DEC.

In addition, the agreement provides a mechanism for sharing future sale proceeds from properties to help recover past costs incurred by the state for the cleanup of contamination. If a site requires a cleanup, the agreement requires the developer and/or new property owner to enter one of DEC's remedial programs, such as the brownfield cleanup program or the spill response program funded by the New York Environmental Protection and Spill Compensation Fund.

I have talked often about the need for collaboration and cooperation at all levels of government to move our community forward, especially when it comes to revitalization and economic development. This agreement with DEC is a prime example of how that can be done.

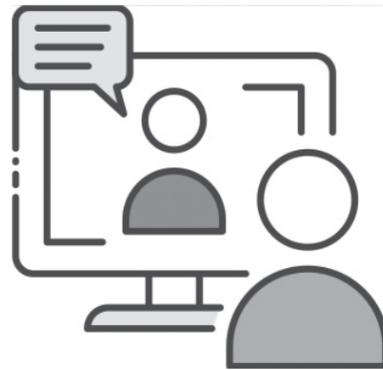


Becky Wydysh
Chairwoman

Schoolchildren better suited for in-school learning

As I scrolled the internet a few weeks ago I came across something that sparked my interest, something going on at the Rath Building in Erie County. A group called WNY Students First had organized a rally promoting their mission of getting kids back in school five days a week. I thought to myself, "Wow, I may not be the only person that seems upset at the current system. I may not be the only parent that has watched my children's mental health deteriorate; watched them struggle in general to find happiness in today's world; or witnessed those circles under their eyes growing larger and darker."

I can only speak from my experience at the elementary level, as my three children are 8, 9 and 10. For those that aren't familiar, hybrid amounts to classes being divided into two groups; one attends in person two days per week and the other on the opposite two days. On the fifth day - Mondays at Lew-Port - something called synchronous learning takes place. That is a fancy word for a couple hours of scheduled live instruction. The time not consumed with live instruction (either in person



or screen) consists of visits to many websites to practice math and reading comprehension.

That has been a huge change for my kids, as they hadn't had "screen time" outside of their work at school, but for a reward on a weekend, occasionally.

I began to wonder if there were other folks in my local district that may share the same frustrations with the hybrid model. After some searching on Facebook, I came across a group of likeminded Lew-Port parents heading up a group called "#Time4Five." I sought out the leaders of the group and found out what I could do to help.

We co-wrote a letter to the School Board president and

superintendent letting them know we were trying to find a way to get the kids back in school. They expressed their gratitude and helped us understand why we are no farther ahead now than we were in September.

It became clear to us that the school districts' hands are tied due to capacity concerns related to the current New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) and New York State Department of Education (NYSED) requirements.

Last week, some of us attended a Zoom call put on by a Hogan-Willig, spearheaded by a similar group from Grand Island Central Schools, seeking a path forward, a path back to five days of in-person learning. This is the same firm that has successfully challenged NYSDOH related to salons, restaurants and the like.

After the Zoom call, we reconvened as a group, still adamant to remain an ally to the district. We decided the first logical step is to seek the opinion of the community at large in a pulse survey to gauge your feelings related to the current model - how it may be impacting your children and family, and

how the taxpayer feels about the additional expenses related to the current environment.

With that in mind, we decided it would be best to share the survey through our Facebook group page (#Time4Five) to convince the governor there's a smarter way, as well as here with you.

We appreciate everyone's open and honest feedback. We hope to take the data we gather and utilize it to help catalyze change for the better for the youth of our district.

For those that would like to support this movement, please seek us out, or contact our state representatives to share your thoughts.

Of course, we understand that there will remain a need for remote learning for those that believe it to be best for their individual situation. Most importantly, we believe the best interests of the kids should be at the heart of any solution and that they are best served if we move forward as an entire district together.

Access the survey at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/LBN8929>.

Thank you for listening

*Kyle Heath
Concerned parent*

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PUBLISHER
Skip Mazenauer
GM/MANAGING EDITOR
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Terrence P. Duffy
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GRAPHIC DESIGNERS
Lucia Spiritosanto, Toni Snyder
CLASSIFIED MANAGER
Toni Snyder
ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT
Jennifer Walowitz
**CONTRIBUTING
PHOTOGRAPHERS/REPORTERS**
Michael J. Billoni, Kevin and Dawn Cobello,
Michael DePietro, Nathan Keefe,
Wayne Peters, Mark Williams Jr.,
David Yarger

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1859 Whitehaven Road
Grand Island, N.Y. 14072

Phone (716) 773-7676
Fax (716) 773-7190

Editorial:

Tribune@wnypapers.com
Dispatch@wnypapers.com
Sentinel@wnypapers.com

Advertising:

NFPDesign@wnypapers.com

Classifieds:

NFPClassifieds@wnypapers.com

Circulation:

NFPCirculation@wnypapers.com

Legals:

legalnotice@wnypapers.com

Website:

wnypapers.com

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