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Contact: Keegan Gibson
(412) 526-7038

Housing Alliance Commends Woodland Hills School District for Joining Innovative Land Bank

Tri-COG Collaborative Land Bank now has critical mass needed to begin operating

Churchill, PA. – The Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania commended the Woodland Hills School Board for its decision to join the proposed Tri-COG Collaborative Land Bank. The school board’s vote Wednesday means Pennsylvania’s first multi-municipal land bank that works through the COG structure now has the level of community participation necessary to form.

Woodland Hills is the first school district in Allegheny County to join the land bank. Most of the 12 municipalities comprising the district have either voted to join the land bank or expressed an interest in joining. Pending the approval of Allegheny County Council, the land bank will begin to convert vacant, tax delinquent and abandoned properties back into productive use.

“This is a very exciting day for community advocates in Allegheny County and across Pennsylvania. Thanks to its forward-thinking leadership, the Woodland Hills School Board has put the Tri-COG Collaborative Land Bank within reach,” said Elizabeth Hersh, Executive Director of the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania. “With this decision, the school district is acknowledging that their mission of educating children extends to the health and viability of the community. They are investing in the success of the land bank to rebuild property values and the tax base over time.”

Earlier this year, the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania hosted an event in Tri-COG member municipality Homestead to mark the release of [“Blight to Bright: A Comprehensive Toolkit for Pennsylvania,”](#) a new, data-driven manual that identifies key strategies to eradicate the harmful effects abandoned, blighted properties have on communities.

Featured in the manual is a discussion on the importance of land banking as an anti-blight tool. Hersh has visited communities throughout the state to promote the idea.

“Renewing and growing our communities is hard work,” Hersh said. “Success requires leaders who are willing to look beyond the status quo and represent the long term goals of our community. Constituents and taxpayers in the Woodland Hills School District are well served.”

A 2013 study by the three Councils of Government that comprise the Tri-COG (Steel Valley, Twin Rivers, and Turtle Creek Valley) found Woodland Hills, like other schools districts, loses millions of dollars to blight every year.

Woodland Hills communities spent \$2.3 million in 2012 to mitigate the direct impact of blight, including costs like police and fire services, code enforcement and public works. Vacant and abandoned properties racked up an additional \$1.8 million in tax debt.

The indirect cost of blight was even higher because blighted properties have a decaying effect on neighboring property values. Blight decreased Woodland Hills School District property values by \$56 million in 2012.

The direct and indirect costs of blight equate to an annual cost of \$2,702 to each and every one of the 22,261 households in the Woodland Hills School District.

Overall, the 40 communities of the Tri-COG lose over \$19,000,000 every year in direct costs of blight. Property values in the community decrease by as much as to \$247,000,000.

By contrast the land bank is estimated to cost \$536,000 in its first year, just a fraction of what communities are already spending.

School districts have equal representation on the land bank board, which will select vacant, abandoned and tax delinquent properties to be converted for reuse and resale. The Tri-COG Collaborative Land Bank will receive 50 percent of taxes collected on properties that it sells and return to taxpaying status, as well as a portion of delinquent real estate tax collections from participating municipalities, school districts and Allegheny County.

Seven communities throughout the state have adopted land banks so far: Pittsburgh, Venango, Harrisburg, Dauphin, Philadelphia, Pittston/West Pittston/Duryea/Jenkins and Westmoreland. The Housing Alliance has been working through the Local Government training Partnership to provide training and technical assistance to nearly thirty communities throughout the state on the power and potential of land banks.

For more information about land banks and how they work, visit:
<http://www.housingalliancepa.org/issues/blight>

For more information about the Tri-COG Collaborative Land Bank including its business plan, visit:
<http://tcvcog.com/land-banking/>

The **Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania** is a non-partisan, statewide public interest advocate working to help increase the supply of safe, affordable and accessible homes available to all Keystone State residents – especially low-income, elderly and disabled individuals. By serving as a central information hub for housing advocates, providers and the media and seeking ways to collaborate with local, state and federal policy makers, the Housing Alliance helps Pennsylvania's most vulnerable residents find stable, secure homes to use as the foundation of prosperity. For more information, visit www.HousingAlliancePA.org.

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