

Avoid foreclosure scams

Help for neighborhoods coming

By Mike Smith
SAND KEY SUN

PINELLAS COUNTY - Foreclosure scams are growing by the day and they're coming to your neighborhood if they're not there already. They will offer to "rescue" you. Most often they will ask you for money in advance for their services. They are often unsolicited letters coming from companies whose name you don't recognize. Some of them even attempt to get you to sign over a deed so they can "help" you. Most of these will offer no help or assistance for your money or deed once it's in their hands. They prey on desperation and will take you and your property. Don't let them take your money with the false hopes they offer. Don't wait to get legitimate help if you even think you're at risk for foreclosure. If you fear you soon won't be able to make mortgage payments or you have already missed some payments, act now before it's too late.

How can you avoid these foreclosure traps? Do not respond to the unsolicited letters. Instead, go to reliable sources of help. The major two for this area are the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) on the federal level and Pinellas County on the local level. HUD offices are located throughout the county. Pinellas County has set up a special web site for foreclosure information. It can be found at: www.pinellas-county.org/foreclosure/. There you can find free foreclosure assistance.

The site also has a foreclosure prevention workshop with videos and a list of non-profit organizations willing to help. There is a list of local HUD counselors. The general information line for the county is 464-3000. If you feel that

you have been victimized, contact Pinellas County Justice and Consumer Services at (727) 464-6200 or visit Pinellas County Consumer Protection.

There is also a group called Florida Attorneys Saving Homes which may

participate in the Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP) that is a part of the Housing and Economic Recovery Act (HERA) passed in July, 2008. Their plan is to acquire foreclosures and abandoned properties in hard-hit areas of the



been reached toll-free at 866-607-2187. Call 8 A.M. to 4 P.M. Monday through Friday. This service is for assistance to those not yet in foreclosure. According to the Florida Bar web site: "The hope is to create a relationship in which the lender and the homeowner can together create a loan that allows the homeowner to remain in the home and avoid foreclosure - a win-win situation for all involved."

What if you live in a neighborhood with foreclosures that are dragging down the values? The Pinellas County Housing Finance Authority is partici-

county, have them repaired and returned to the real estate market. HUD has provided almost \$4 billion dollars for this program nationwide, focusing on the hardest hit areas. Pinellas County will receive about \$8 million of that.

According to the HUD web site: "State and local governments can use their neighborhood stabilization grants to acquire land and property; to demolish or rehabilitate abandoned properties; and/or to offer down payment and closing cost assistance to low- to moderate-income homebuyers (household incomes not exceed 120 percent of area

median income). In addition, these grantees can create "land banks" to assemble, temporarily manage, and dispose of vacant land for the purpose of stabilizing neighborhoods and encouraging re-use or redevelopment of urban property."

The Pinellas County Housing Finance Authority is actively seeking companies to work with the NSP program, according to their

Literacy for a dollar

By Missy Kavanaugh
SAND KEY SUN

PINELLAS COUNTY - There is a group in Pinellas County whose primary aim is to promote literacy here and just about everywhere else. It's called the Pinellas Reading Council and it's actually been around quite a while—45 years to be exact. It's affiliated with the Florida Reading Council, which in turn is affiliated with the International Reading Association.

For \$1.00 parents, grandparents and just about anyone else who supports literacy can join the Pinellas Reading Council, which entitles them to banquets

that present authors reading their work and talking about their creative process, as well as Read-Ins for children, held once a month at local bookstores such as Borders and Barnes & Noble.

This past month, little girls dressed up in their fancy best to hear books in the Fancy Nancy series read by local teachers and members of the council.

The next Read-In is scheduled for May 16 from 11 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. at the Tyrone and Clearwater Barnes & Noble locations.

Pinellas homebuyers may have tax credit

By Ava VanNahmen
SAND KEY SUN

PINELLAS COUNTY - There may be hope for home ownership through the recently announced federal homeownership tax credit for first-time homebuyers. The term "first-time homebuyer" is a bit misleading, though. This really means if you have not owned a home in the past three years.

The 2009 Homebuyer Tax Credit offers up to an \$8,000 tax credit to such "first-time homeowners." This gives eligible buyers a newly increased opportunity to achieve homeownership.

"Assistance with purchase costs can make all the difference for many attempting to purchase their first home," said board chairman Rodney S. Fischer of the Pinellas

County Housing Finance Authority.

The credit, also known as First-Time Homebuyer Credit, is targeted at buyers with annual income of up to \$75,000, or \$150,000 for persons filing joint tax returns. Qualified buyers who purchase a home this year before Dec. 1, 2009 are eligible for the tax credit.

The buyer is eligible to receive 10 percent of the purchase price up to \$8,000, or \$4,000 for married individuals filing tax returns separately. The credit does not have to be repaid as long as the homebuyer remains in the home as their principal residence for 36 months or three years.

For more information, call the IRS tax information line at 1 (800) 829-1040.

County offering interest-free down payment assistance

By Ava VanNahmen
SAND KEY SUN

The Housing Finance Authority of Pinellas County announces the return of its popular Making Pinellas Home down pay-

ment program. This offers interest-free loans of up to \$15,000 to households with incomes up to 80 percent of Area Median Income. As an example, for a family of four, that's a household earning up to \$45,200 per

year. Loans can be used for down payment and closing costs. The program is available anywhere in Pinellas County. There are no payments for the first five years and no interest, ever. Homes must be priced at or below

\$240,158.

These loans are available for a limited time through HFA-approved lenders only. Lenders have been pre-screened and can not charge excessive fees or offer risky predatory loans

through this program. For more information about the Making Pinellas Home program, or for referral to an approved lender, contact the Housing Finance Authority of Pinellas County at (727) 464-8210.

Tuff Times by Bruce Norris

