

Skerritt writes about Gus's upcoming Homeowners Education Seminar

In today's St. Pete Times , Andrew Skerritt writes about Gus's upcoming Homeowner Education Seminar, which will be held on February 16th from 2 to 5 p.m. at the Suncoast Richey Theatre in New Port Richey, Fla.

The white brick and concrete block house has been empty for six months, but its front lawn looked as tidy as the neighboring homes off Beacon Square Drive in Holiday. The 81-year-old who lives next door mowed the grass to keep the snakes at bay.

This used to be home for a single dad and his son who grabbed their piece of the American dream with the help of a \$70,000 bank loan and a \$40,000 second mortgage from Pasco County.

But on Wednesday morning, Pasco Community Development manager George Romagnoli drove up to the courthouse in New Port Richey to bid on the foreclosed Holiday property. During the boom years, Romagnoli found himself competing with investors. But this week, no one else wanted the two-bedroom, two-bath ranch.

"Things are bad out there," Romagnoli said.

How bad?

During the first 11 months of last year, Pasco recorded 7,809 property foreclosures, a 133 percent jump over the previous year, reported RealtyTrac, Inc.

In Hernando, 3,011 families fell behind on their mortgages and lost their homes last year, a 300 percent increase over 2006, according to RealtyTrac.

Folks are understandably desperate for government to do something.

So

Wednesday afternoon, hours after he had bought the foreclosed house, Romagnoli walked over to the Richey Suncoast Theatre to meet with representatives from U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis' office, Consumer Credit Counseling Services and other nonprofit agencies to discuss how to respond to the rising tide of foreclosures.

They plan to return to the Richey Suncoast Theatre on Feb. 16 for what is being dubbed as a mortgage prevention summit to educate the scores of working families who risk losing their homes. Pasco, Pinellas, Hernando and Hillsborough residents are invited to attend.

"We want to show folks how to avoid mistakes and get ahead in terms of homeownership," said Bilirakis spokesman John Tomaszewski.

During the last real estate boom, too many people bought homes they couldn't afford. Banks lent mortgages they had no reason to write. With the current subprime mortgage mess, unfortunately, some folks will lose their homes. But anyone who has an adjustable rate mortgage that's about to increase, those who've had late mortgage payments or have missed payments, and folks who want to learn about credit issues and refinancing can benefit from the summit. U.S. Housing and Urban Development representatives, as well as state, county and nonprofit agencies will be on hand to help financially strapped homeowners.

"We want to point out these opportunities before it's too late," Tomaszewski said.

Unfortunately it's too late for the single dad in Holiday. But his empty house? Romagnoli said after it's renovated, it should make a nice starter home for a working family.

They just can't use an adjustable rate mortgage or a subprime loan.