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Saturday, June 21, 2008

Collaborative tackles foreclosure crisis

Neighborworks Homeownership Center opens doors

By Paula J. Owen CORRESPONDENT

FITCHBURG— Five local nonprofit organizations have formed one of the first collaboratives in the state to address the foreclosure crisis and are making educating potential and current homeowners about complex financial and housing market information a priority.

Yesterday, state and local officials, including Undersecretary of Housing and Community Development Tina Brooks, and Mark Siegenthaler of the Department of Housing and Community Development, and Fitchburg Mayor Lisa A. Wong, along with heads of local community organizations, packed the conference room of the MART building on Water Street to announce the opening of the North Central Massachusetts Neighborworks Homeownership Center.

The center is a “one-stop resource for homeownership information, education and counseling,” Mr. Siegenthaler said, and is client focused. People need only call (888) 978-6261 to access a myriad of services through the Greater Gardner Community Development Corp., Montachusett Opportunity Council Inc., Montachusett Regional Planning Commission, RCAP Solutions Inc., and Twin Cities Community Development Corp. or visit www.ncmhomes.net, he said. Services that previously had to be accessed through the organizations separately include homeownership counseling, first-time homebuyer classes, down payment assistance, budget counseling, home rehabilitation programs, and foreclosure prevention counseling and classes. Mr. Siegenthaler said the people hit the worst by the sub-prime mortgage crisis were those of moderate income and of color. In a small, two-block Elm Street neighborhood in Fitchburg, 12 foreclosures were started in November and 10 of the 12 have been foreclosed on or abandoned, he said.

He said the collaborative is reaching out to those most vulnerable to provide services. Ms. Wong said she knew people in some of those homes and was working with one of the families about to be displaced, and called the collaborative heartwarming, brilliant and selfless.

Martha Rivera, a participant in DHCD programs, shared her story of having to call numerous agencies to get help purchasing her new condominium.

Ms. Rivera said she received homeownership education, and assistance with paying for a down payment, closing costs

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and private mortgage insurance.

She wrote a check out for \$1.99 at closing, she said.

"I grew up in apartments," she said. "This helped me give stability to my boys."

Ms. Rivera said it was a good feeling to live and work in the same community that allowed her to purchase her first home. With the collaborative, she said she will now be able to give friends that ask her how she did it one phone number instead of a list of several agencies, phone numbers and Web sites.

State officials in attendance added their offices are dealing with a high volume of cases of families being displaced and organizations have requested them to hold back on referrals because they cannot handle the number of requests for assistance. The problem is compounded by families that bought homes with three or four apartments in them to use as a primary residence and pay for the mortgage through rentals of the other units. Tenants that had nothing to do with the mortgages, lose their apartments through foreclosure.

State Rep. Jennifer L. Flanagan, D-Leominster, said the collaborative is one avenue people can take to get help.

"My office sees the people that are coming in and crying because they are going to lose their homes," she said. "They come in as a last resort."

Educating homeowners on how to protect themselves and stay in their homes long-term, and set them on the path to economic stability was "true empowerment," Mrs. Brooks said.



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