

Westport News

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Community shows its Yankee ingenuity



MARY PALMIERI GAI



KRISTA BRADFORD

When PUSH comes to shove: A unique plan to fix foreclosures

By Anthony Karge
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When Mary Palmieri Gai, a Westport Realtor, pitched her plan on how to get people back into homes and stimulate the economy to Sen. Joseph Lieberman's office, she said she received plenty of enthusiastic feedback from the staffers.

A week later, all she got back from the senator was a generic form letter about his own plans to fix housing. The response was disappointing but she isn't going to stop trying to make the wide-spread foreclosures work to someone's benefit.

"I've been literally sending it [the plan] for the last two months to everyone who could be interested," she said.

Her idea — called People United to Secure Housing, or PUSH for short — comes from her background as a veteran realtor and a former loan officer at Connecticut National Bank, which is now Bank of America.

The plan also comes from being the mother of an adult son with autism and the daughter of an elderly mother.

Palmieri Gai said the recession began with housing, and it could be solved the same way.

"I've always felt, and I'm a politics and economics junkie, that homes are a microcosm of the economy," she said.

Palmieri Gai explained that many people make a living off homes since there are a lot of services and items that homeowners need. This creates economic effects that trickle both up and down, but when homes are foreclosed, this

money dries up. Also, she said that foreclosures have a negative effect on surrounding property values and crime in the area.

The plan, which is outlined at www.pushtosecurehousing.org, essentially comes down to the banks handing over their foreclosed homes since they've received billions of dollars of taxpayer money.

"It makes sense to us since banks are not in the business of owning homes," she said. Cities such as Newark, N.J. and Cleveland, Ohio, which have faced a high foreclosure rates, would especially benefit from PUSH, explained Palmieri Gai.

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Barn-raising for modern times? Westporters Helping Westporters

By Anthony Karge
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Back in the "good old days," as Krista Bradford described the time well before she was born, there used to be barn-raising events where the entire community would work together to help out a neighbor.

She wants to foster that mindset to Westport and is utilizing social-networking tools like Facebook and LinkedIn with the goal bringing people together and lessening the pain of the recession. To do this, she created a "Westporters Helping Westporters Network" on those Web sites.

"There are no better networked people than those living in Westport, and it seems insane

Westporters Helping Westporters

To find the Westporters Helping Westporters network, search for "Westporters" in Facebook's search box at www.facebook.com. The page also links to the LinkedIn group and the donation page for the Staples High School Tuition Grants Committee.

not to leverage it," she said.

The idea to do something to help people came indirectly from her daughter, Katie Cioe, who is a sophomore at Staples. It seemed like everyday her daughter would come home with news about a parent who had lost their job, so Bradford decided to bring the issues to the Internet.

Bradford doesn't limit the group to one particular need. Job hunting, supporting struggling businesses and other problems all fall under the group's umbrella. The goal is that people who join will become connected in ways that may boost business at a store, get a foot in the door in a job hunt or simply obtain or give out valuable advice.

"The thing I thought that was cool about this is that it's an opportunity for neighbors to help neighbors," she said.

The problems of the difficult job market are particularly close to Bradford since she owns an executive search firm that helps companies fill top positions. She explained that many companies are flooded with resumes, but with a little help from a friend on the network, a person that's out of work might land a job.

"How much effort does it take to put in an introduction?" she said. "All it takes is a phone call."

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A practical partnership Businesses, town band together

By Gary Jeanfaivre
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An unprecedented partnership between town government and local organizations is taking shape as businesses look to strengthen their position during this weakened economy.

The Westport/Weston Chamber of Commerce recently hosted a meeting with the Westport Downtown Merchants Association (WDMA), local business owners and elected officials to begin brainstorming on exactly what the partnership would look like and what they hope it could accomplish.

"It's a collaboration between the Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Merchants Association and Locals for Locals as well as local banks," said Kevin Lally, execu-

utive director of the Chamber.

Lally said the preliminary plan is to develop a strategy to market the community, utilizing existing media platforms like local newspapers, radio and the Internet. The resources are at the ready, too, seeing as Locals for Locals, a group of businesses that teamed up to weather the turbulent economic seas, includes entities that specialize in marketing and printing services, among others.

"We're researching many programs to put together for the businesses," he said. "It's our task to help our members out."

Steve Knowles, owner of Allegra Print & Imaging in Westport, said he thinks the partnership is a "great idea."

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PUSH

For a detailed look at the PUSH plan, visit www.pushtosecurehousing.org or call (203) 984-2169.

Westporters Helping Westporters

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Recently, she learned that approximately a half-dozen seniors at Staples have had to change their college plans due to their parents' finances.

"We're Westport," said Bradford. "That shouldn't have to happen."

"When somebody goes unemployed in Westport, it doesn't affect them," she added. "It affects the future of their children."

Once she heard about the struggling students, she set up a page on Facebook to accept donations for the Staples High School Tuition Grants committee in order to aid students who are struggling financially.

"If people can give a dollar \$20, or give up a latte or a pedicure, then it'd help," she said.

It's OK to ask

When somebody loses their job and experiences financial difficulties, Bradford said that it's difficult for some people, especially Westporters, to ask for help because the ordeal can be so damaging.

"Westport is a place where people are reluctant to come forward when they're having problems," she said.

She hopes that people will see that there is no shame in suffering, but if people are still concerned about privacy, they can message individuals of the group rather than posting their problems for everyone to see. Local business owners are also encouraged to post.

"I put it [the group] up, but I don't own it," she said. "Everybody is free to post"

As of Monday, there is a modest following of 15 members and several discussion topics on the board. Also, \$125 has been donated for tuition grants.

Bradford hopes that more people will pitch in to help as the group becomes established, even if isn't out of generosity.

"There's a big self interest to help too," she said.

She explained that if somebody doesn't want to help simply out of kindness, helping people find jobs and stay in their homes will help maintain property values and benefit everybody.

No barns have been raised just yet but Westporters Helping Westporters is working toward that kind of communal experience.