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Community conversations: Foreclosure forum gives homeowners advice

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Daryl Burton was aghast when his lender told him he'd have to stop paying his mortgage for three months before someone would talk to him about working out an arrangement to lower payments.

Burton is retiring early from North Fort Myers' fire service, and he's had perfect credit up to this point. Yet paying the bills is going to be a hardship post-retirement.

Victor Luna will be out of work soon and will join the ranks of the unemployed. He's at risk of losing his home, but he wants to do all he can to save it.

Harshad Bhatt lost his job six months ago, and he and wife are trying to figure out what to do about their investment condo now that the value has plummeted, the tenant abruptly moved out and there's less income to sustain the mortgage, insurance, taxes and fees.

All three sought out answers at a public forum on foreclosures called "The Dos and Don'ts: Avoiding Fear, Mistakes and Scams," held Thursday night and sponsored by The News-Press, the Home Ownership Resource Center and the Alliance for the Arts.

The purpose was for expert panelists to provide advice, hard truths and direction to help people make the best decisions concerning their homes.

Audience members were frustrated and angry because they feel lenders are giving them the run-around and because they are faced with the combination of a depressed home value and a lost job or lost income, which in turn is leading to ruined credit and the potential to lose their homes.

Among the most commonly asked questions and a review of panelists' answers:
• What are the consequences of walking away from my property?

Answer: The lender can sue you for what you owe on the loan plus attorneys' fees and other costs.

• Why can't I get a decision maker on the phone to help with my situation, instead of one customer service rep after another?

Solution: Be assertive in demanding to submit a hardship application and make waves to speak to a supervisor, if need be. If that doesn't work, find a higher-level executive.

• How long do I have once the foreclosure goes through before the sheriff's office will kick me out?

Answer: Judges have generally been giving homeowners 60 days before they must leave.

The advice from the panelists: Be proactive.

"Don't allow lending institutions to dictate your situation. If you want to keep your home, fight to keep

your home," said panelist Eddie Felton, executive director of the Home Ownership Resource Center.

Then again, you might consider your alternatives.

"People need to look at that and make a rational business decision," said attorney Jason Holtz of the law firm of Kevin Jursinski, P.A. "How long are you going to pay, struggle and gradually fall in foreclosure as opposed to acknowledging where this situation is heading? 'I see where I am and I need to move beyond it.' It requires a plan."

Communication is key and doing nothing can only prolong the pain.

Felton and Holtz were joined on the panel by Fifth Third Bank executives Jayne Malinowski and Jon Meade, and Terry Cerullo, representing Florida Chief Financial Officer Alex Sink.

People who couldn't physically attend watched the video live on news-press.com and typed in their questions, which panelists answered.

Find a replay of the video and chat on news-press.com/foreclosure. You'll also find resources to get help and the "Surviving Foreclosure" series, which ran in July but is still relevant today.