

REAL ESTATE

Financial Vultures Still Hope to “Swoop” in on Real Estate Consumers

By Erik Derr

Just as South Bay consumers are emerging from their financial fallout shelters and considering whether to navigate the housing market again, lawmakers in the U.S. Senate are pushing new legislation to fight real estate scams. Cosponsored by Senators Charles Schumer, a Democrat from New York, and Jon Kyl, a Republican from Arizona, the proposal would earmark upwards of \$200 million for state and local prosecutors to go after those who, as Schumer said, “are trying to swoop in and take advantage of desperate homeowners.”

Supporters of the measure say the additional funding would bolster the efforts of states that so far haven’t had the resources to prosecute some of the industry’s most egregious cases. Competitive grants would be awarded to prosecutors’ offices to hire new investigators, accountants and attorneys. “The housing crisis has spawned a cottage industry of refinancing and foreclosure prevention scams,” Schumer said.

“It’s about time they do something,” said Jon Hernandez, a landscaper-turned-office-supply-salesman who admits he was “duped” out of nearly \$1,000 by a fraudulent refinancing outfit before he learned “they were nothing but crooks.” Hernandez says he and his wife had fallen behind in their mortgage and other payments on a two-story, four-bedroom in Orange County when “we were called by this company that told us for a small fee they would consolidate our debts and assume our mortgage payments -- but that we would still be able to stay in the house.”

The couple sent the bogus company two payments of just under \$500 before they heard a radio news report about what sounded like the same operation. “I immediately tried calling the 800 number they gave us and -- surprise, surprise -- it was disconnected. We never heard from the company again and investigators never got back any of our money,” Hernandez said with a bitter smile. “I can’t believe they can just disappear like that, and supposedly nobody can find them.”

As it turned out, a willing relative offered to help Hernandez and his wife pay their de-

linquent installments before lenders took their house away. The couple has since moved into a rented two-bedroom apartment just a few blocks away from Hernandez’s new business location in Hawthorne. And they cover their mortgage payments on the Orange County property by renting out the house.

Debbie Browne, an auto repair shop secretary who was riding a Metro bus into Los Angeles last week, said she and her family were in the midst of a foreclosure and had almost been “suckered” into what she suspected was another foreclosure avoidance scam before she discovered a government program that has helped her offset some of her debt and delay monthly payments. Browne declined to say exactly where she lives, but indicated her house was “near the South Bay Galleria” in Redondo Beach.

Kenneth R. Harney, a nationally syndicated columnist, reported in early September a multi-state task force had identified nearly 200 scams like the one that preyed on Hernandez. One such scam, said Harney, was Florida-based United Home Savers LLC, which was accused of victimizing over 3,100 homeowners across the country. The company and its officers agreed to a \$4.1 million judgment and close monitoring by federal officials, but most of the judgment came up empty after the Federal Trade Commission froze the assets tied to United Home Savers and discovered its principals only had about \$22,000 in their bank accounts.

Consumer rights advocates warn that even if the economy is truly in recovery mode, people will continue to feel financially vulnerable --- and perhaps more open to programs that promise to ease their financial pains quicker. That said, consumers must stay vigilant and protect themselves against loan modification and foreclosure prevention hoaxes.

The office of California Attorney General Jerry Brown offers five tips on its website to avoid real estate scams:

--Don’t pay up-front fees. Foreclosure consultants are prohibited by law from collecting money before services are performed.

--Don’t ignore letters from your lender or

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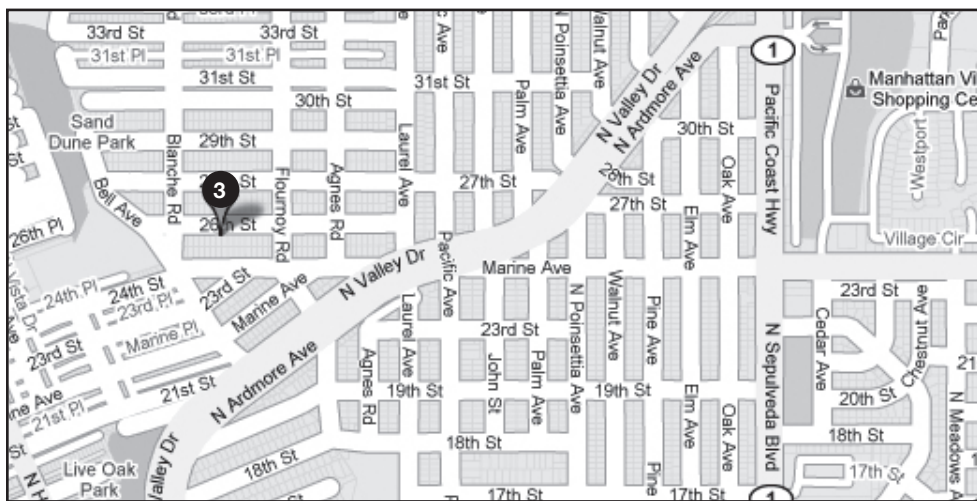
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