Opinion: Realtors need to turn focus on short sales

By Beth L. Peerce

I write on behalf of the California Association of Realtors, whose 170,000 members continue to witness the devastating consequences the home foreclosure crisis is having on California's families, neighborhoods, and communities on a daily basis.

The number of families affected by foreclosure is staggering. During the past three years, more than 640,000 Californians have lost their homes. With the number of homeowners who owe more than their home is worth hovering at 30 percent, experts predict there will be many more foreclosures in 2011 and 2012. Unless we take immediate, aggressive action to assist these homeowners, any meaningful recovery in the housing market and overall economy will continue to be delayed.

Tragically, only a fraction of those who face foreclosure will remain in their homes when all is said and done. Those whose incomes and financial circumstances meet strict guidelines may qualify for a loan modification that will reduce their monthly payment to more affordable levels. Yet the federal Home Affordable Modification Program is expected to prevent only 700,000 to 800,000 foreclosures nationwide before it expires at the end of 2012, and the program does little to help those homeowners who are unemployed or otherwise no longer able to meet their financial commitments. Their last hope is to sell their home, which often means convincing their lender or the investor who "owns" the loan and, in many cases, the holder of a second mortgage lien and the mortgage insurer to accept a "short sale."

With a short sale, homeowners with a proven hardship negotiate

an agreement to sell their home for less than the balance owed. Although not every homeowner or mortgage is eligible, those who are able to finalize a short sale avoid a foreclosure on their credit record and can move on with their lives. Last year, 20 percent of home sales in our state involved short sales.

Short sales can play an important role in our state's economic recovery by accelerating the pace of home sales and reducing the inventory of bank-owned homes on the market. There are other benefits as well. Homebuyers who can qualify for a mortgage at today's low interest rates also are able to purchase a home at below-market prices. Banks get a nonperforming asset off their books and avoid the headaches associated with disposing of assets they don't want to own in the first place. Neighborhoods have fewer abandoned homes, and local businesses have more customers with money to spend.

Unfortunately, many homeowners are unable to successfully negotiate a short sale. According to a recent survey of 2,150 California Realtors who have assisted clients with a short sale, only three out of five transactions closed – even when there was an interested and qualified buyer.

What's the problem? For one, no two mortgage agreements are the same, so it can be difficult to standardize short sale processes and procedures. Many homeowners have second mortgages, which further complicate matters. Then there's the challenge of convincing multiple parties to take a financial loss or, in the case of loan servicers, to forego fees they otherwise might earn during the course of the foreclosure process. Poor and slow service by many banks and servicers has only exacerbated the problem. Horror stories abound from potential homebuyers and Realtors forced to wait 90 or more days for a response to a purchase offer or being required to fax short sale applications or other paperwork as many as 50 times. These delays discourage potential homebuyers from considering a short sale purchase and undermine the process

for those who short sales are intended to benefit – the hundreds of thousands of families facing foreclosure.

Increasing the number of closed short sales by speeding up and streamlining the short sale process is one important way we can help California families avoid foreclosure and move our economy closer to recovery. That's why the California Association of Realtors is taking steps to enable more families to arrange a short sale. Recently, we advocated for improvements to short sale guidelines established under the federal Home Affordable Foreclosure Alternative program. We're meeting with major banks, U.S. Treasury officials, government-sponsored entities, including Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, and others to urge them to standardize processes, comply with federal guidelines, improve communication with other stakeholders and increase staffing with the goal of eliminating service issues. We've also offered our members training in every aspect of the short sale process so they can assist their clients.

But we can't do it alone. That's why we're focusing the spotlight on short sales and calling on regulators, elected officials, nonprofits, business organizations, companies, and individuals with a stake in California's economic future to resolve this issue and others that get in the way of a recovery. It won't be easy, and some compromises will be required. The important thing is that we need to act today. Our families and our communities can't wait any longer.

Beth L. Peerce is president of the California Association of Realtors.

STHS grad: Redefine what success means in Peace Corps

Publisher's note: ***The Peace Corps turns 50 this month. Two 2005 South Tahoe High School grads are in the Peace Corps having different experiences. Michelle Aguilar today weighs in with her thoughts from Panama. On March 4, Jessica Wackenhut shared her opinions from Paraguay.***

By Michelle Aguilar

BOCAS DEL TORO, Panama – I was the first and only person waiting that morning when the gate opened. I didn't realize that a place like this had hours of operation. The guard let me in, handed me a map, and pointed me toward my desired destination. I cautiously checked my watch. I had hours until my very first Peace Corps meeting in Washington, D.C. This was my first visit to the East Coast; I was bound for Panama the next day. But first I wanted to visit the person who was responsible for me being there in the first place.

As I stood at President John F. Kennedy's burial place in Arlington Cemetery and read some of his words that are engraved in the surrounding rock, I couldn't help but feel motivated. I thought about some of the words he spoke in 1961, when he first introduced the idea of Peace Corps to our country.

"Our peace corps, I want to emphasize, is not designed as a weapon of propaganda, it is not designed as a tool during the cold war. It is a genuine effort, by the people of the United States, particularly those who are young, to play their part in working for peace and improving the lives of all mankind. They will learn as much as they will teach."



Michelle Aguilar, middle, is on a two-year Peace Corps mission in Panama. Photos/Provided

Today, as Peace Corps celebrates its 50th anniversary, I think once again about those words Kennedy spoke, and wonder whether today's Peace Corps still has the same vision.

Peace Corps is currently in 77 countries worldwide. There are more than 8,500 volunteers and we are a government run organization. What happens in Washington directly affects us in the field. Even though the Peace Corps logo can be seen and recognized globally, I think when we talk about efficiency and effectiveness of the Peace Corp organization, it is only fair to speak on a country-to-country basis. The truth is that no two Peace Corps countries are alike, and the success or failure of a volunteers project is dependent upon the support and resources the volunteer receives from their country director, program director, language instructors, and medical staff. Through personal experience, I can with confidence say that Peace Corps Panama is doing it right.

I am living in a community of less than 300 indigenous people. I was brought here to do community economic development with an artisan and tourism group. But, after living here for a year, I realize the needs were more critical than the lack of

economic income. My people live off of their land. They are not going hungry due to lack of cash flow. What they needed was clean water, latrines and clean stoves. They also need health education and basic community organization. They need the basics met before they can start worrying about bringing in tourists and stimulating cash flow. I felt like I had freedom and numerous resources from the Peace Corps Panama staff when my community and I decided to work on a water project. Yes, it was technically not part of my program sector, but it is what my community needed, and most important, it is what my community wanted.

Peace Corps has three main goals for their volunteers. One relates to providing a community with trained men and women, but the other two goals revolve around cultural exchange. There is a good reason for this. In communities like mine, the first goal, the one relating to development, could never be achieved if the other two goals didn't happen. If I didn't live with my community, work with them shoulder to shoulder, ask them questions, answer their questions, learn their traditions, customs and language then I would never be able to provide true aid. I believe there is a very fine line between helping and hurting a community like mine. I have seen too many non-government organizations and nonprofit organizations implement volunteer projects that cross that line. The saddest part is that they think they are doing good. You can't truly know what the community needs, and what the best and most sustainable way to provide aid is, until you are one of these people. Our current Peace Corps director, Aaron S. Williams, reminds us "we are not just witnesses to a countries development, we are participants."

Peace Corps has been forced to make some cuts lately. My program was recently cut. When I leave my community in October, no volunteer will take my place. I think often the in country leadership of Peace Corps struggles in trying to prove to Washington and the taxpayers that the work we are doing is

truly making a difference abroad and on our home soil. But what is the best way to measure the outcomes of our projects and experiences?

Sure, building infrastructure and/or facilities could be a type of development, and easy to measure, but what about building capacity? Capacity building refers to assisting a community to adapt a new skill or competence to become sustainable. This is a more common outcome of Peace Corps projects, and very hard to measure. Do we need to start giving our communities and host country counterparts standardized tests to prove that capacity building is happening? For example, we just installed rainwater systems in my community. That is infrastructure development and something concrete that we can count and put onto paper to show Washington. But really, the most important part of this rainwater project is the education and capacity building. My people need to learn why their babies were getting sick, how and when to use the rainwater, how to maintain and clean the tank. If we just installed the tank and left, that tank would eventually yield water that is more dangerous and harmful to their health than what they were drinking before. Capacity building is the only way a project like this is going to be sustainable. And work like that does take time, hence the two-year commitment to Peace Corps.

A common argument I hear against Peace Corps is in reference to the time commitment and how two years is a lot to "sacrifice." Sure, two years is a significant amount of time, and it really does take this amount of time to do true development work. However, I do not see the Peace Corps experience a sacrifice at all. I see it as the opposite actually. I see this experience as an investment in myself, an investment in my future and an investment in my country.

Another common argument I hear is: "Why would you go volunteer in another country when there are plenty of people to help here in ours?" I would like to remind these people that it was

the same President Kennedy who declared, “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” Do you find it a bit contradictory that he would say something so profound and patriotic, and then establish an organization that uses taxpayer money to send our “trained men an women” overseas to help other countries? Remember Kennedy also said, “There can be no greater service to our country and no source of pride more real than to be a member of the Peace Corps of the United States.”

Peace Corps volunteers help our country is two major ways. First, after 27 months abroad the volunteer usually returns to the United States. There are returned Peace Corps volunteers in every facet of the American workforce. They are in medicine, education, government and politics. They take what they have learned abroad and use these skills in their home communities. And second, these foreign countries that we are working in already have an American Embassy and American ambassadors to promote American policy. Some would say the Peace Corps volunteers are ambassadors as well, but we are not promoting American policy in our communities, we are promoting America. What could be more patriotic than that?

Nineteen months have passed since that day I stood in Arlington cemetery. I paid my respects to President Kennedy and walked away, having absolutely no idea what would lie ahead. Today, I celebrate Peace Corps 50th anniversary. I am grateful for the opportunities and experiences that this organization has given me and has allowed me to give to others. For the seven months that remain in my service, I will continue to make a “genuine effort” just as Kennedy had hope for 50 years ago.

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Sometimes the hardest part about doing a development project in our communities is finding the necessary funding. Peace Corps does not give us any monetary resources to realize our

project ideas. If you would like to donate to any Peace Corp project, go to this website.

Choose your favorite country, read the current project descriptions and make a confident donation because you can be certain that the volunteer receiving these funds is using them in the most efficient, effective and sustainable way.

Also, if you would like to follow my adventure, check out my blog.

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Opinion: Saving bear cubs, while upping hunting quotas doesn’t make sense

By Jennifer Fearing

The Humane Society of the United States applauds the California Department of Fish and Game’s heroic and resource-intensive efforts to rehabilitate little Shasta, a yearling black bear cub orphaned when his mother was shot, and four other cubs in a unique partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and the nonprofit Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care. Yet, at the same time the department is working to save Shasta and bears like him, it is seeking an increase in opportunities to kill them.

Fish and Game has proposed increasing the number of bears hunted each year by nearly 20 percent – from 1,700 to 2,000. Pressures on California’s black bears come from poachers seeking trophies or highly valuable bear parts for the illegal

wildlife trade, marijuana farmers protecting their illicit crops, and the rest of us who neglect to bear-proof our garbage and thus draw unwanted attention from bears in search of easy food. These stresses are unlikely to abate anytime soon; in fact, they are what put cubs like Shasta in jeopardy in the first place.

Jennifer Fearing is California director for the Humane Society of the United States.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Every ski day is worth celebrating

By Mandi Winnicki

When I was a kid growing up in Flagstaff, Ariz., we had a little ski resort that had sporadic snowstorms. We never really “prayed for snow” because we knew our prayers wouldn’t ever be answered. At least not the way they were in the Sierra or anywhere else for that matter. But, if it was a day off of school and the lifts were running, we were skiing.

Dad would load us up in the Subbie, drive the 40 minutes to the hill and drop us off by 9am sharp. There was no need to be there any earlier then that because we were already geared up and ready to ski. When I was a kid we’d put our boots on at home. There was no time to get dressed when you got there because Dad would drop you off right in front. We’d hop out of the car, grab our skis and sack lunch and in three minutes we were skiing.



Mandi Winnicki

We skied all day. There were no breaks. We ate our lunch on the chairlift.

We skied in all conditions, sunny, powder, snowing, blowing, raining, hard pack, dirt, grass mixed with slush, it was all the same to us. It didn't matter because we weren't at school – we were skiing.

When I was a kid we never took a day of skiing for granted. You never went home because the conditions were crappy, or the powder was all tracked out. Once we got to the slopes our only option was to ski. So we would, all day until Dad came to pick us up at 4. There were no cell phones to call for a ride home and it was a long distance call from the payphone at a lodge anyway. If you were lucky enough to have a dollar in your pocket, you wouldn't waste it on a phone call; you'd buy a darn candy bar and ski.

I feel like I should have brought this up a few weeks ago and now that we have been blessed with feet and feet of beautiful powder it's easy to forget about the last month. We went six weeks with almost no snow. It almost seemed like the end of winter. The slopes were empty; you pretty much had to stick with the groomers.

If you didn't have your G.N.A.R. scorecard it was getting a bit monotonousness. But the one thing I noticed were the people who were out there riding anyway and not complaining. Just talking about where was good and where might be a little better. If you look out there today on this perfect powder-

filled day, those guys and girls out there shredding through the pow as if they were on fire, the ones who you wish you could ski like. Those are the ones that will be out there anyway. I know it's hard to motivate to drive 45 minutes to ski boilerplate conditions. The last month of no snow, I've tried to remind myself that I ski because I love to ski and if I have a chance to ski and have fun, I'm not taking it for granted no matter the conditions.

Mandi Winnicki moved to South Lake Tahoe in 1996 when she was 19.

Opinion: Public, private sectors aren't the same

By David G. Crane

The battle in Wisconsin is not over collective bargaining rights generally but rather the appropriateness of those rights in the public sector. Readers may be surprised to learn about the very different histories and consequences of collective bargaining in the private and public sectors.

In the private sector, collective bargaining is used to equalize the power of employees and employers. When empowered by collective bargaining, private-sector workers needn't fear dismissal just because they seek a higher wage or better conditions. Accordingly, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Congress enacted the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, which conferred collective bargaining rights on private-sector workers.

However, no such rights were conferred on public-sector

workers. In fact, both Roosevelt and later George Meany, the first president of the AFL-CIO, opposed collective bargaining for the public sector. Also, in California public employees already had protection against dismissal as a result of the Civil Service Act of 1913, which endows public employees with property-like rights over their jobs.

Still, in 1962 the federal government gave collective bargaining rights to federal employees, and in 1977 California followed suit. However, because state employees already had civil service protections, collective bargaining wasn't needed to equalize their power with employers' power. As a result, collective bargaining for public employees in California changed the balance of power and – most importantly – gave public employees power over their compensation and benefits.

In the private sector, compensation and benefits are determined through negotiations conducted by unions representing employees and management representing shareholders. Neither side has influence over the other, and there is a healthy tension as each side works to increase its share of the pie. If unions don't deliver enough compensation and benefits, workers can make changes to union leadership. If management delivers too much compensation and benefits, shareholders can make management changes.

David G. Crane, a Democrat, was an adviser to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and now lectures on public policy at Stanford University. He serves on the UC Board of Regents and the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Alter pensions, collective bargaining in California

By Allan Mansoor

Recent events in the Midwest have put a spotlight on one of the most volatile budget issues of the day: pensions for public employees.

Some have described the idea of requiring members of public employee unions to contribute a little bit more to their taxpayer-funded pensions as an assault on working families. But nothing could be further from the truth.

The truth is this: Costs for public pensions have soared nationwide and will continue to soar unless reforms are made. Estimates vary, but they range anywhere from $200 billion to $500 billion in California alone. Last year, a Stanford University study estimated the state's unfunded pension liability at $500 billion, or about six times the current state budget.

Even if the actual number is less, trying to find a couple hundred billion dollars is going to be tough. Taxpayers will be forced to make up the difference either through higher taxes or more cuts in services – or both.

Assemblyman Allan Mansoor, R-Costa Mesa, is serving his first term in the California Legislature and represents the 68th Assembly District.

Read the whole story

Opinion: What do we do when the oil runs out?

By Howard Johnson

Time is running out on cheap petroleum fuels. Recent research states that we have little more than 40 years of steadily decreasing supplies of that type of energy while concurrently its price grows prohibitively high. Then it’s no more cheap oil. Then what?

We are running out of oil, period. That being said, it’s time to get down to the business of seriously developing alternatives. It is paramount that we develop realistic solutions to the energy crisis from among the multitude of products and systems that are in use, under development, or even latent ideas in the minds of America’s creative genius. We must collect and examine descriptions of fuels and energy systems – past, present, and future – and the many possible and practical ways to replace fossil fuels with renewable fuels or energy systems.

New combinations of old and emerging technologies promise amazing new ways to generate, distribute, and use energy of many kinds. The large variety of proven technologies and systems is astounding. There is no single right answer. The astonishing thing is the variety. In the long run, some will flourish while others will fall by the wayside.

I believe the greatest strength of the energy alternatives available to the U.S. is in the variety of solutions, and that there is no single right answer. He thinks the U.S. should select new energy solutions based on some or all of the following criteria:

* They should be comparatively inexpensive to use.

* They should be developed using environmentally sound, sensitive principles.

* They should be far easier, simpler and less expensive to implement than systems like the hydrogen fuel cell system.

* They should be adaptable to our existing infrastructure with minor changes.

* They should use raw materials we already have or that can be developed here, locally.

* They should be applicable to existing vehicles with upgrades or conversions.

* New fuels should be useable with existing IC (Internal Combustion) engines of all types.

* They should be developed using existing, evolving technology able to be essentially complete within ten years.

* They should create a system that is a net zero contributor of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere.

* They should use evolutionary as opposed to revolutionary changes – a good start to becoming constantly improvable, adaptable systems that drive numerous growing and improving technologies.

* They should be developed by America-based industry with the many resulting substantial benefits to our nation—social, political, and economic.

It matters not to a driver what powers his vehicle when he presses down on the accelerator pedal. Any power system that provides adequate mobile power economically when that pedal is pressed will satisfy his needs. All of the new systems could replace fossil fuels as the prime energy source for our nation

and even the world. We need to develop an entirely new and more efficient means of generating, transporting, storing, and using energy that will generate profitable domestic business, good jobs, and stop the hemorrhaging of billions of American dollars to nations that hate us.

Howard Johnson is an engineer and author of "Energy, Convenient Solutions: How Americans Can Solve the Energy Crisis in Just Ten Years."

Opinion: Vail turning South Tahoe into company town

To the publisher,

Based on Vail's commercial moves in town, i.e. buying a vacation home rental property and soon I surmise we have an octopus in our midst with tentacles reaching to put a lock on the business community to be the big shot around town.

[Mayor] Hal Cole, bless his heart, once upon a time said he didn't want South Lake Tahoe to be another Vail or Aspen. Well, head's up Mr. Cole. It seems we are doomed to be a company town divvied up between the likes of Marriott and Vail. The bottom line is this – when profits roll into these organizations the money will fly out of town. We're in the money export business. In the process, small business will be driven out. Also, judging by recent events, Vail's tentacle reach into city government.

Finally, these are events, trends, and conditions. Using the above to judge the direction commerce is going in town, be prepared for the octopus to squirt loads of ink around here.

Bill Crawford, South Lake Tahoe

Opinion: Time to usher in new era of governing water

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the Feb. 28, 2011, Sacramento Bee.***

Water is California's most precious resource. Yet in lean years and wet ones, California manages to mismanage this precious resource in spectacular fashion.

That is the take-home message from a monumental report released last week by the Public Policy Institute of California, titled "Managing California Water." The 482-page report issues both a clarion call and a road map for lawmakers and water interests to move beyond conflict and toward a new era of "reconciliation."

One clear message of the report is the need to modernize and consolidate the various institutions that govern how water is used. On the state level, decisions about water are now bifurcated between the Department of Water Resources and the State Water Resources Control Board.

The PPIC report, like the Little Hoover Commission before it, recommends that the water resources board be merged with sections of DWR that have nothing to do with running the State Water Project. This new state water department would enforce water rights, administer water quality laws, conduct statewide planning for water, oversee flood management and protect the public trust.

Making this department separate from the State Water Project would address the perception (and the reality) that state water contractors have inordinate influence over state water planning. Under the PPIC proposal, the State Water Project would become an independent public benefit corporation, similar to the Independent System Operator, which manages the state's power transmission.

The PPIC proposal is a good one. In buying and selling electricity and maintaining its infrastructure, the State Water Project would be more nimble and responsive if it didn't have to deal with the state's convoluted contracting procedures. Yet the PPIC is smart not to recommend that the state water contractors take complete control of these water works, as some of them would like to do. Contractors could sit on the board of an independent benefit corporation, but other interests would have a seat the table, too.

Read the whole story

Opinion: How can state justify traffic fine shakedown?

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the Feb. 25, 2011, Sacramento Bee.***

Unwilling (in the case of most Republicans) or unable (in the case of most Democrats) to approve new taxes, state lawmakers are squeezing citizens to raise revenue in less obvious but nonetheless onerous ways.

We are talking about soaring traffic fines that have nothing to do with deterrence but all to do with revenue generation. They cause disproportionate harm to students and people of modest means, and they undermine our system of justice.

Three years ago, it would have cost $371 if you were caught by a red-light camera failing to make a complete stop before turning into an intersection.

Today, that same violation costs $470, a 37 percent increase. Is the crime 37 percent more egregious? Or are state and local governments, the courts and other publicly financed enterprises that support themselves with these fines just more desperate?

Desperation is the answer.

Read the whole story