

Citizens Not Serfs

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Ros-Lehtinen to “Lead the Way” to Protect Keys’ Homeowners with Downstairs Enclosures

Summerland Key, FL (October 21, 2008) Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen address a crowd of over 150 residents, elected officials, government employees and candidates at an open forum hosted by Citizens Not Serfs on Tuesday to discuss downstairs enclosures.

The Congresswoman opened by saying that she’s familiar with the problems that residents are experiencing with FEMA’s inspection process in the Keys. “This is unfair. This is unjust. They should stop. This must stop and I will do everything in my power to make that a reality,” said Ros-Lehtinen.

Sheena Collum, Executive Director of Citizens Not Serfs, emphasized that this situation required support now more than ever before given the national economic crisis and its affects on the Keys.

“Some believe that FEMA will not change their ways. However, we’ve seen actions taken on the federal level that have never been done before in this nation’s history in order to help people keep their homes and facilitate economic stability. To date, Congress has authorized over \$1 trillion to achieve that goal and we’d like to see that same type of flexibility and cooperation prescribed on the local level. This is not the time for thousands of residents to be pulling demolition permits for their homes,” said Collum.

Comments from the audience ranged from homeowners who legally pulled permits or purchased homes with downstairs enclosures to contractors who are being penalized because the county will not authorize permits to anyone with Floor Living Area (FLA) on their tax cards.

Mary Jane Price of Big Pine Key said, “People in this county previously pulled permits on their downstairs enclosures only to have FEMA walk in and tell people to tear them out. This is tens of thousands of dollars. How can this happen? And if this was illegal all along, why did our county authorize them?”

Steve Baird, owner of Boston Brick Company in Key West, noted that the current process is out of control, “We’ve had to give back over \$65,000 worth of deposits. I’m the delivery boy for FEMA and code enforcement by having to tell clients that the county has to inspect their homes before I can pave their driveway.”

Michelle Hardin, homeowner in Sugarloaf Key, stated, “As the caretaker, I bought my home with a downstairs enclosure specifically for my mother who had bladder cancer. If there were any indication that it wasn’t conforming, why in the world would I have bought it in the first place? This process is just wrong.”

When questioned specifically what the Congresswoman would be able to achieve, she reinforced that she can’t make promises but she will facilitate the necessary dialogue with FEMA to get the ball rolling.

“I’m am not telling you that I can have FEMA stop their abusive and unfair regulations but I can help you lead the way and I will meet with FEMA in the same tone of voice that I’m talking to you except harsher,” said Ros-Lehtinen.

Also in attendance was Mayor Mario Di Gennaro who pledged full support behind the issue, “I’m going to do everything in my power to work with my fellow commissioners to remedy this situation that’s hurting Keys’ families. I’ll travel to Atlanta, GA and Washington D.C. to advocate on your behalf because it’s the right thing to do.”

The idea of reopening negotiations with FEMA regarding downstairs enclosures was introduced at the last Board of County Commissioners meeting but no official action was taken at that time.

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