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A guide to digging our way out

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Perhaps the most heart-wrenching aspect of the Great Recession has been its terrible impact on housing, with millions of Americans losing their homes to foreclosure and millions more struggling to avoid such a fate.

The Southland has been hard hit by the crisis, with about 23,000 homes going into foreclosure from 2006 to 2010, and thousands more likely to do so in the next few years, according to a new report, "Homes for a Changing Region," by two regional planning groups and two municipal associations.

The report is a blueprint for getting the region through the foreclosure mess and building upon that rescue operation to carefully plan to meet future, and changing, housing needs.

The first priority must be getting Southland officials to collaborate in taking strong action to improve and resell foreclosed houses — a goal made more attainable by the severity of their housing problems. Municipal leaders must realize that by working together they can better qualify for state and federal funds to acquire and rehab housing and pressure banks to make loans for such efforts.

It's encouraging to learn from the report that some towns are doing just that through the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association. For example, about 80 foreclosed homes in nine suburbs were bought in December with government funds to be rehabbed and resold or torn down for redevelopment.

Those who prepared the report say the higher level of cooperation in the Southland has caught the eye of federal housing officials, which could result in more grant money for large-scale rehab programs and more incentives for private investors to buy and renovate housing.

An obvious key is getting banks to lend their money. After being too loose with their cash before the recession, banks are now too stingy. They need to be pushed through local pressure and/or a government drive to support rehab programs and offer affordable fixed-rate mortgages.

The wave of foreclosures has left us in a deep hole, and it'll take an unprecedented level of cooperation and foresight to get us out of it.