

Battling the Neighborhood Eyesore

How to battle the neighborhood eyesore when it's next door to your listing.

By Melissa Dittmann Tracey | June 2011

Abandoned homes can be an unpleasant sight. Overgrown lawns, boarded windows, sagging gutters, and unsightly mold—not to mention, a higher risk of fires, vandalism, rodents, and mosquitos.



Properties are often left to deteriorate while in foreclosure limbo; the owner is already gone but the bank can't take possession until the foreclosure process is finalized.

So what happens when you have to sell the property next door? According to research by the Center for Responsible Lending, foreclosures will affect 91.5 million nearby homes by 2012 and reduce property values of these homes by \$20,300 per household.

"We were getting a lot of complaints from real estate professionals about these properties looking unkempt and asking what we can do about it," says Bud Humbert with Century 21 Associates in Waldorf, Md., and also the chairman of the legislative committee for the Southern Maryland Association of REALTORS®. On behalf of his association, Humbert, also an REO specialist, approached Charles County officials to request that they update the county's nuisance abatement law to include a "clean and lien" provision. The rule would allow the county to step in and clean up vacant properties and put a lien on them for the cost of the cleanup. Other cities and counties have enacted similar ordinances.

If that neighborhood eyesore is bringing down your listing, here are some steps you can take:

Notify the homeowners' association. Most HOAs will pay to have the grass mowed and take care of maintenance issues, and then tack the expense on to the HOA bill, which will have to be cleared by the bank before the property sells, Humbert says.

Investigate local and state laws. Some states, such as California, will fine owners for not maintaining properties. New Jersey passed a law that puts banks in charge of maintaining the property from the beginning of the foreclosure process. Whom should you contact with your gripe? Start with your city's building division; it's often in charge of making sure a vacant property is boarded and secured. The bylaw department can check for building code violations, the fire department can inspect for fire hazards, and the police can help if there's vandalism.

Make property boundaries clear. "We are called on to handle this situation frequently," says Margaret Innis, owner of home staging company Decorate To Sell in Andover, Mass. "On the outside, fences make good neighbors; so does landscaping with arborvitae shrubs—a fast fix worth the investment. Inside, use plantation blinds turned down so the light comes in but the view does not."

Help with cleanup. Stepping in to help with the maintenance can be tricky. Regardless of your good intentions, your actions could be considered trespassing. First figure out who owns the property, which can be a challenge in itself, and then offer your assistance. Some cities and counties have started a vacant property registration that makes it easier to locate the owner. When Andy Hood, with Weichert, REALTORS®—Covington Group in Madison, Miss., struggled to sell a condo that overlooked the patio of a foreclosed property, he called the neighbor and asked if he could clean. "The woman was grateful and accepted my offer," he says. "I hauled away a truckload of junk, pressure-washed the exterior, washed the patio furniture, and weeded and pruned her flower beds and shrubs." Hood's listing sold immediately after.



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