

# Squatters: Fresno scrambles to fight a growing nuisance

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Fresno police officers including officer T. Higginbotham and his police canine, Laci, prepare to enter a home in central Fresno to search for squatters Tuesday, April 1, 2014. **CRAIG KOHLRUSS — THE FRESNO BEE**

The ax blows began falling with loud booms on a plywood board covering a window on a bright Friday morning.

Neighbors in the 300 block of North Poplar Avenue who heard the crashing ran into their front yards and called police. Officers arrived quickly and several residents pointed them to an abandoned home nearby, where the ax-wielder had dropped his break-in tool and ran. It was the start of another day on a street in central Fresno plagued by squatters who enter boarded-up homes, despite efforts by police, code-enforcement officials and neighbors to keep them out.

The decrepit, empty homes on Poplar covered with plywood and warnings to keep out are not peculiar to the Lowell District neighborhood in central Fresno. It's a problem shared to some degree by every part of the city, partially fueled by the national mortgage crisis that began in 2007. It taxes the resources of the city and saps the morale of neighbors trying to make a better quality of life.

Elaine Robles-McGraw, the city's neighborhood revitalization manager, calls the problem of keeping squatters out of vacant homes a "shell game." Police receive a complaint of someone living in a vacant home and arrive to make an eviction or detain the suspects, then code enforcement workers follow to see that the home is boarded up again. The ejected occupants often move up the street to another vacant home and the cycle starts again. Often left behind when the squatters leave are piles of trash, kicked-in walls and electrical outlets stripped of copper wire.

As for those doing the damage, Robles-McGraw bristles at the suggestion that they are simply homeless. "These are people doing bad things," she said, "in a neighborhood where they don't belong."

She cites a historic home at 386 N. Poplar, one built in the early part of the 20th century and recently destroyed by someone who set it afire. It is one of several in central Fresno razed by flames in the past several years by either vandals or squatters starting what the Fresno Fire Department calls "warming fires." The ruined hulks add to neighborhood blight.

Back on Poplar in the wake of the chase of the ax-wielding man, a neighbor stands in front of his house and shakes his head. He declined to give his name out of fear of retaliation.

"He broke into (the same) house two days ago and now he's back for the rest of his goodies. They break in, they start fires. I think (police) officers are just overwhelmed. I've been here 30 years. This has gotten to be the worst. Last week, there was a man walking around naked on drugs.

"We're the last of the Mohicans," he says, pointing to his fellow neighbors. "It's OK in the daytime, but at night you better lock your gates."

### **City at work**

Howard Lacy, a senior supervisor for the city's Community Revitalization Division, no doubt knows as much as anybody about board-ups in Fresno, but driving through the area around the Poplar neighborhood, he is quick to point out successes. At a nearby home in the 200 block of North San Pablo, he stops his truck to admire a vintage home that has been restored to past glory. In the 400 block he stops by a home where damage from a fire has been repaired and in the 300 block he compliments the job done on the restoration of the bungalow court on Divisadero Street and Van Ness Avenue.

As for the board-ups, he has a list of every one in the city and keeps tabs on what the city has spent to seal them off. Contractors are paid \$120 to close the first opening and \$60 for the others with five-eighths-inch plywood. Driving to southwest Fresno, he stops at the former Fresno Family Foundation, at Whites Bridge and Marks avenues, once a state Department of Corrections facility for non-violent female offenders. That was then. Now, it's a wreck. It cost \$6,000 just to board up the block-long facility, which includes bedrooms, meeting rooms, a dining hall and a kitchen facility. Lacy won't even try to estimate how much it would cost to restore the building, but the cost of replacing the vandalized wiring alone would easily hit \$50,000.

"They get tricky," he says of squatters who repeatedly break into the former facility. Sometimes, squatters remove the plywood but put it back up with a single nail so that they can have a convenient swinging door. He points out the stolen fire extinguisher equipment and notes that the sheet rock and plumbing are also gone. At a large electrical service box, the copper wiring is missing. Lacy said wire is sometimes taken when power is still on.

"How these people don't fry themselves, I don't get it."

Or blow themselves up. Another stunt is to replace gas pipes from a stove with an automotive radiator hose. Without any pressure regulation of the gas, that creates what Lacy calls "a blowtorch."

Lacy's next stop is on Santa Clara and E streets, a block from the Poverello House, where he has been called by another city worker because a group of people have torn through a fence and ripped a hole in a house to take up residence.

"Right across from the Poverello House and they still have to tear stuff up," Lacy says. The call is put in for more plywood.

Moving into north Fresno, Lacy drives through El Dorado Park, near Sixth Street and San Jose Avenue just west of Bulldog Stadium. The area was once a shambles, but he credits the city's efforts to get neighbors to work together for changing that. Alleys once clogged with trash are clear, apartment complexes are freshly painted and "even the frat house planted flowers," he jokes.

He gives credit for such improvements to city policies like a new ordinance through which owners who wish to buy problem property can have punitive fines removed if they fix the problems.

### **Efforts cheered**

The battle goes on. Police and code enforcement arrived recently at a neighborhood near Del Mar and Cortland avenues, two blocks west of Manchester Center, to remove squatters from a two-story home. Neighbors turned out to give them a thumbs-up.

Bernie Ferris, who lives across the street from the home, says the problems started when the house became a foreclosure. Then people began moving in. "These people just acted like it was theirs," Ferris says.

Problems followed, including increased thefts in the area and shopping carts piling up on a nearby canal bank.

"We're all working people and we (almost) can't work because we're afraid we're going to get broken into and have all of our stuff stolen. Then, they want to get violent and start fighting with us.

"We've been waiting for this for days," Ferris says of the eviction. "We're going to have a barbecue party right here tonight."

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