

Olympia Fields' response criticized

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Eugene Broyles, who has lived in Olympia Fields since 1993, believes his pristine community is at a turning point.

In the last few years, he's watched some homes in his upscale neighborhood decline slowly and subtly, and he's on a mission to reverse that process.

So passionate is Broyles about upkeep that he created a community watch group called SHARP, or See, Hear and Report to Police, which has its own monthly newsletter. In it, he details code violations and urges residents to keep up their properties and maintain positive relations with neighbors.

He doesn't name names or list addresses, but he posts pictures of alleged code violators, hoping the scrutiny will inspire them to comply.

"I walk down the street with a camera in my hand," Broyles said. "They know when I'm coming, if I'm snapping pictures, they're going to be in the next edition. The problem is, why should I have to go out and find these problems? I didn't have to do that when I first moved here."

He's used the same squeaky wheel technique with the village, with varying success, saying he's invested too much in his home to just roll over. He recently reported one resident who left a sectional couch out on the front lawn for a week.

"Until my last dying day, they can't shut my mouth," he said. "What we've seen is a ... more laissez-faire, laid-back attitude from the village. There are things I'm seeing that I'm not happy with. Olympia Fields needs a coat of paint."

He said he thinks Mayor Linzey Jones should be the first to grab a roller.

Jones said that his office has been responsive, that it's taken on neglectful homeowners, cutting the lawns of residents who fail to care for their properties and even razing homes that have been long abandoned.

"My attitude about code enforcement is that we have to be vigorous," Jones said. "A house that's allowed to be neglected affects everything around it."

The village issued 64 notices related to overgrown lawns in a six-week period this summer. Of those, the village's contractors will cut more than 40 and a hefty bill will go to the homeowners.

"It's meant to be expensive so you don't put the burden on the village," Jones said, adding that the bill for an average lawn is more than \$300. "It's meant to send a message: Do it yourself."

Nevertheless, Broyles said he's troubled by what he regards as a double standard. Although village officials chased after R. Kelly for infractions--the R&B singer is the mayor's neighbor--they've failed to crack down on other routine code violations, he said.

Jones said the same standards apply to everyone, no matter how many Grammy Awards might rest on the mantle. He's aware residents might think he's not acting quickly enough, but he has to balance a homeowner's rights with a neighbor's wants.

"We have to have due process," Jones said, noting a resident's complaints aren't going to be resolved "the moment they pick up the phone and tell us there's a problem."

Although they may not be in agreement regarding village response time, residents and leaders agree on one thing: More people are moving into Olympia Fields in recent years who cannot afford it.

Building Commissioner Jim Peterson said foreclosures are way up. There were 110 foreclosures between July 2005 and July 2006, compared with 55 in the same period between 2000 and 2001. Peterson said the figures go back to 1997-98, during which time there were just 21 foreclosures.

Olympia Fields has about 4,800 residents and sends water bills to 2,008 homes, he said. Peterson estimated that 200 homes have been built since 1997. Village officials say average annual household income there is more than \$121,000.

Residents and officials attribute the foreclosures to a preponderance of flexible mortgages that got some families in over their heads.

"I have some residents who move into the community with these crazy mortgage programs with no money down," Jones said. "They buy these huge homes, and then something happens to them financially and they can't afford the mortgage note."

He suspects his is not the only town to grapple with the issue.

Statistics provided by the Illinois Foreclosure Listing Service show, for example, that foreclosures in Oak Lawn have nearly doubled, with 62 in 1997 and 110 eight years later. Elmhurst had 27 foreclosures in 1997 and 60 in 2005, though the numbers fluctuated during the period in both towns.

National statistics from the Mortgage Bankers Association, a Washington, D.C.-based group, show that foreclosures spiked in 2001-02 and largely have been on the decline since.

Not all of the unkempt properties in Olympia Fields are in foreclosure, Jones said. Some owners moved into new homes and neglected upkeep of the old property while trying to sell it.

Elvis Thomas, an airline pilot who has lived in a Georgian on Attica Road for 10 years, said he sees the deterioration. He said he's going to put his house on the market.

One of his biggest concerns is a house in the 3400 block of Ionia Avenue that has covered windows and plywood in the back yard. Neighbors long have complained about the eyesore and called on officials to step in.

Jones said that he's met with the family and that they're making repairs. "Sometimes you have to be patient with residents, as long as they're trying to comply, doing the repairs that need to be done," he said.

Resident Gerald Kinnard said he's sad to see some homes abandoned or get sold over and over within a few years. He lives close to R. Kelly, and across the street, there is a problem home.

"Either tear it down or do something with it," he said.

Randy Alexander, a resident for 11 years, doesn't like the high turnover of homes either but still plans to stay. "I can't think of anywhere else I'd like to live," he said.