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Weed complaint took months to resolve

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By Chelsea Schneider

Residents in an upscale neighborhood in Gilbert finally saw a clean-up earlier this week that they've been waiting for since October.

Weeds at a vacant house in The Grove in the Millett Ranch subdivision had become an eyesore, resident Joanna Turpin said.

An increase in foreclosures coupled with an economic downturn has caused problems for both homeowners associations and residents who live near the properties. Upkeep issues like the one Turpin experienced are being seen more often.

The original residents moved out of The Grove in May, and after the house was briefly occupied in September, the yard grew unkempt. The weeds were so bad that a neighbor mowed the yard in February before she hosted a party at her house.

"Nobody in the area has a house for sale," Turpin said, "but we were just embarrassed to have people over. Even the guy who cleans up our yard asked what was going on in the house across the street."

Notifying the right group to clean up the yard was also frustrating. She contacted her homeowners association who told her they could only levy fines. She contacted the real estate agent and was told the bank has a contractor to take care of it.

Finally, Turpin filed a complaint with the town. Adam Adams, Gilbert's code compliance inspector, said the department contacted the foreclosed property's lien holder to take care of the weed problem.

"I've got my fingers crossed that they have it on their radar," Turpin said. "I'm worried this is a one-time thing, and two months from now it will go back to looking like it did."

"Got Weeds?" is a question often asked of Johnson Ranch residents after their homeowners association began its neighborhood maintenance program last year.

HOA members spend a few weekends driving around the Santan area development to commend residents who take care of their lawns and to help those with landscaping questions.

The purpose of the program is two-fold. Debra Campbell, community association manager, said they want to show residents what happens if people take pride in their community.

And Stephanie Fee with Capital Consultants Management Corp., that manages Johnson Ranch, said the program is also an example of a community coming together to keep its neighborhood aesthetically pleasing in a slow economy.

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In Johnson Ranch, the program began well before the economic slump as a way to focus on positive aspects of a HOA.

Some associations are setting aside money to help maintain the yards of houses facing foreclosures, said Cynthia Dunham, executive director of The Leadership Centre.

"We're just beginning to see the ramifications of this," Dunham said. She said she expects Gilbert's outlying areas with newer developments to be hit the hardest with foreclosures because those often contain investor properties. Dunham said more associations also are seeing their residents fall behind on assessments because of financial hardship.

"For the most part our associations have budgeted well enough that they can at least maintain common areas," Fee said. "They are doing a considerable amount of work to try to keep things maintained for folks who are paying assessments."

Residents in The Grove were just curious to see how long the yard would remain unkempt before someone cleaned it up, Turpin said.

"With the market as bad enough as it is, you want to have the illusion that you have a nice neighborhood," Turpin said, who added people she's talked to throughout the Valley say their neighborhoods have foreclosed properties that aren't being maintained.

"What kind of recourse do we have as neighbors?" she asked. "Should it be up to us to clean it up? That doesn't seem like it should be the case."