

Tips for protecting your vacant home from thieves

By Dan Howard
for TRIB TOTAL MEDIA

Imagine. You are walking up to the door of the brick house that's soon to be your dream home. The house has a history as someone else's well cared for and loved dream home. Now the house is vacant. The inspector pulls out his lockbox keypad to open the door. You are about to have some quality time in the new home. He pauses and says "Oh my". Your heart skips. The door is already open about 6". You look again, and the solid wood door is splintered apart.

You walk into the house. You are relieved that the first floor looks OK. Then you go to the basement. As you get to the bottom of the steps, you see ceiling tiles are torn from the ceiling and are littering the floor. The kitchen sink that was to be a part of your "man cave", is torn from the wall and broken into parts like a gutted Salmon on its way to lunch for an Alaskan bear. What about your new bathroom? You know, the man cave bathroom? The ceiling is spread across the floor and a single piece of copper plumbing is ripped out of the wall.

Reality and disappointment hit you square in the gut. The inspector calls the Realtor. The Realtor calls the police. Within 15 minutes they are all there with you. Because the basement was finished, it was difficult for the thieves to remove the copper buried in the ceiling and walls. Less than 30 feet of actual copper was removed. The police officer says that this happens fairly often and drugs are usually the motive. These were not skilled or intelligent thieves. They risked jail for 30 feet of scrap 1/2" copper pipe.

According to John Tomson of Tomson Scrap Metal in Brackensville PA, the total value of those

30 feet of copper is \$37.50. The thieves spent several hours of work, travel time, gas and the risk of jail in exchange for a measly \$ 37.50.

Karen Mandak of Howard Hanna Real Estate Services was the agent who rushed to the home. Just like many agents who clean up the financial and emotional mess these crimes create, she helped the sellers and buyers work through the police report, insurance claim and repairs.

The cost of the repairs was approximately \$ 6,000.00. The seller was responsible for the deductible of \$ 1,000.00. If the buyer had decided to not purchase the home, the seller would have also had the cost of the home sitting empty for however long it took to resell the home.

You may wonder why the cost of this matters to anybody other than these particular people. What matters is that this can be you when you sell your home or are away on vacation.

Scrap dealer John Tomson expressed his frustration as he calculated the value of the stolen copper. One of his own vacant rental properties had been stripped of copper. He explained that legitimate scrap dealers copy the driver's license and owner's card of customers bringing scrap into their yard. The problem is the "honest" scrap looks the same as stolen scrap metal.

The best defense to becoming a victim of home robbery is to make your home a tougher target than your neighbor's.

DO NOT ADVERTISE THAT THE HOME IS VACANT

Have the snow removed in winter and the grass cut and leaves raked in summer. Snow covered sidewalks and high grass mark vacant

homes as easy targets.

HAVE THE JUNK MAIL, FLIERS AND NEWSPAPERS PICKED UP

Nothing says "come rob me" like strew garbage or a faded and rain stained pizza flier in the front door.

MAKE THE THIEVES QUESTION IF ANYONE IS HOME

Ask a neighbor to park their car in your driveway. Thieves do not want a homeowner returning home during a robbery.

INSTALL LIGHTS ON TIMERS

Make sure that some timers are in rooms that a burglar can't look into to tell if they are really occupied.

LEAVE FURNITURE AND PERSONAL EFFECTS IN THE ROOM THAT YOU CAN SEE FROM THE DOOR

Thieves can walk up to the front door appearing to be visitors to neighbors. If the room they see looks lived in, the aspiring thieves will believe the "house must be lived in." You can cover the other windows with shades or blinds and the thieves will never know that the other rooms are empty.

TOUGHEN SECURITY INSIDE THE HOME

Install door and jamb reinforcement plates such as the ones manufactured by Armor Concepts or Rebar Security Device. These metal plates are easy to install and make it very difficult to break into a door. These are available starting at \$ 30.00, which is much less than the cost of replacing a door.

INSTALL AN ALARM SYSTEM FOR THE HOME

www.Simplisafe.com offers a wireless security system including



motion sensors, alarm, cellular monitors and electronic notification of events. The easy to install system is available for \$ 250.00 in equipment and from \$15.00 to \$ 25.00 a month for monitoring. This product does not require any contract and can be cancelled when the home sells. It can also be moved to another home. You may want to add a freeze alarm in cold weather at a cost of \$30.00.

INSTALL EXTERIOR FLOODLIGHTS ON SENSORS

Light is a criminal's enemy. If you want to make a lasting impression on a thief, use a strobe or rotating light such as on emergency vehicles instead of using a regular floodlight.

INSTALL A VIDEO CAMERA SYSTEM IN OR ON THE HOME

If you do not want the expense of a functional system, install a fake system with lights such as made by UniqueExceptional. These are available for less than \$20.00

LEAVE SOUND ON IN THE HOME

A loud source of music or television robs the thieves of the ability to tell if someone is at home in

another area of the house. That uncertainty can end a criminal attempt.

SCARE THE DAYLIGHTS OUT OF THE THIEVES

Install a motion device that sounds an obnoxious loud alarm. These are inexpensive, scary and just like the expensive systems that notify police of a robbery. Swann has one available for about \$ 20.00

CONSIDER USING PLASTIC PLUMBING MATERIALS

CPVC and PEX are two popular plastic water pipe systems. They function as well as copper plumbing and have one very significant advantage. They do not have any value as scrap material.

For additional information and links to the vendors mentioned in the story, go to: www.envirospect.info/stolenpipes

Dan Howard is the owner of EnviroSpect. For environmental consultation call 724 443-6653. For more information visit their website at www.EnviroSpect.info. Email questions to: Dan@EnviroSpectof-WesternPA.com. Like us on Facebook or connect @DanHoward251.