

## How to protect your vacant property

In this day and age it's unfortunate but there is the potential for a vacant property to be vandalised or fall prey to squatters.

We urge that in the instance of suspected squatters the first call is to the police as it is a criminal matter.

But there are some basic strategies and safeguards that property owners can implement if they know their property is going to be vacant, that could help them limit risks.

- **Mail and lawn maintenance:** Two key indicators that quickly let people know a property is vacant is if the gardens, lawns and mail are neglected. Nothing screams "empty property" more than an overflowing letterbox, with junk mail spilling out and tall grass in the front yard. Hire someone to maintain your gardens and ask a friend or relative if they can collect your mail. Alternatively, ask a neighbour to collect the mail while the property is vacant.
- **In the dark:** If your house doesn't have any lights on when dusk sets in and through the early evening, it's a clear sign nobody is home. A casual observer who walks past your property regularly may observe a darkened home, without lights on, night after night. This is an advertisement that the property is vacant. Consider installing a timer so that the lights are turned on in the early evening. Also make sure your blinds and curtains are drawn, to prevent prying eyes seeing in. You could also consider getting a house sitter or letting a relative pop in from time to time to turn on the lights for an hour or two, open and close the curtains and bring the bins in and out. This is a good way to create an 'occupied' impression.
- **Connect with neighbours:** If there is a Neighbourhood Watch operating in your area, make contact with the organisers and let them know your property will be vacant for an extended period. Your local police station will let you know if Neighbourhood Watch is operating in your street or suburb. If you provide them with your contact details and check in with them regularly you will have some peace of mind that watchful eyes are monitoring the situation. At the very least, let your local police station know that your property is going to be vacant. If anything happens they will be able to contact you immediately.
- **Rent it and get an income!** If your property is going to be vacant for any length of time, there is an opportunity to rent it out and get an income stream! By appointing a property manager you can ensure that the property is well looked after and at the same time you are adding to your income – win win! In areas where rental yields are soft, remember the goal is to just cover the property management fees and other property-related expenses, so even if the property is neutrally or negatively geared, there are benefits to renting it out, even just for three or six months.

Many people are aware that squatters have rights, but it only kicks in after the squatter has occupied the premises continuously for 12 years in Queensland.

The REIQ always urges safety first and if you suspect a squatter is living in your property the appropriate course of action is to call the police and ask them to evict the squatter. Do not attempt to approach the squatter yourself.

**-ENDS-**