FINAL THOUGHT

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Imagine for a moment that you have moved into a newly developed neighborhood and invested your hard-earned money into your new home. You've lived in harmony with your neighbors for many years and have felt safe. Recently, however, you've noticed a subtle change to the neighborhood. The newness has worn off, some homes are in need of repairs and landscaping has been neglected. You've also watched many of your original neighbors move away. Some homes are vacant and for sale and some have sold to new owners whom you haven't met. You're probably asking yourself why a once vibrant and safe neighborhood has become a place where you and others may not want to live.

It has been shown that the primary component of an attractive and vibrant community is strong neighborhoods. A community cannot thrive if its neighborhoods do not.

The scenario above has repeated itself a number of times across the nation. In some cases, it's only a few neighborhoods in a city, and in other cases, the entire city has been overcome with property values declining, residents moving out or neighborhood blight and crime. Often these changes take place over decades and are hard to trace to any sin-

gle event. In other instances, identifiable events, such as the loss of a major industry, can be pointed to for an explanation.

There are signs when a neighborhood may be in decline:

• Poor yard maintenance: uncut grass or shoddy landscaping
• Abandoned cars: debris on a property
• Broken fences
• Graffiti
• Vacant homes
• Lack of homeownership pride
• People not walking in the neighborhood
• Businesses no longer invest in the community or they move out
• Public safety and crime issues occur

In the last 15 to 20 years, we have isolated ourselves in our homes and failed to stay connected with our neighbors. We drive into our garages at night and lower the garage door, thus isolating us from our neighbors and what may be happening in our community.

Few cities have linked resources to a strategy in being preemptive to protect their neighborhoods and encourage citizens to be involved in maintaining the appearance of their properties. In 2008, however, Owasso City Management and department directors, with the support of the City Council, devised a plan to be proactive in protecting our neighborhoods with the creation

of the Owasso Strong Neighborhood Initiative.

The Owasso Strong Neighborhood Initiative was created to provide residents an avenue to partner with the City to protect their investments as well as the community's economic stability and long-term prosperity. Residents have stepped up in several older neighborhoods to create volunteer neighborhood networks as an organized method to bring neighbors together to address concerns in their neighborhoods.

In other areas, residents have worked to build a sense of community pride and ownership among all neighbors. They have built an attitude of helping each other. We have even seen neighborhood groups be involved in creating an attractive entrance to their neighborhoods, adding new playground equipment to a park area and restoring the sense of caring. These efforts are making our neighborhoods stronger and safer.
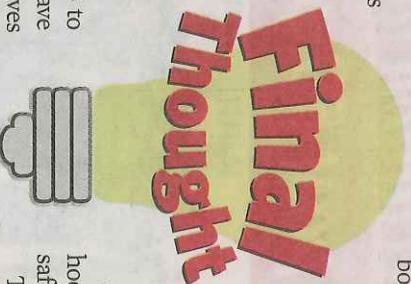
This involvement by residents and neighborhood groups in making a difference is what makes Owasso a community and not just a city. Owasso must continue our commitment to develop a sound foundation of neighborhoods. It's critical to all residents and businesses that the investment made in the city they "choose" to call home is protected and continues to hold value.

Each of us can make a positive impact in the quality of our neighborhoods by taking an active role. Residents are the key to having strong neighborhoods, which will keep Owasso as attractive community in the future as it is today.

Across the US, when neighborhoods deteriorate, it impacts their communities:

• Property values decline on existing homes
• Potential new residents don't buy homes in the community

Final Thought