

# Real estate bust opens doors for parties at vacant houses

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By [Larry Copeland](#), USA TODAY Nov 27 2009

SANDY SPRINGS, Ga. — Some of the most elegant addresses in all of Atlanta are found in this wealthy enclave. Sprawling mansions that occupy 2- to 10-acre lots are home to some of the city's most prominent residents.

They were shocked last month when a massive Halloween party exploded in their midst. More than 1,000 people jammed the streets around the brick-and-rock mansion, paying \$20 apiece for admission and riding shuttle buses from the parking lot of a nearby [Publix](#) grocery, police say.

"It was one of those things, be careful what you wish for," says [Sandy Springs](#) police Lt. Steve Rose. "(The event promoter) got a lot more than he expected. It became a gridlock issue with traffic."

Police say the party had been heavily promoted at [Georgia State University](#) in Atlanta and at the University of West Georgia in Carrollton. Food and alcohol were being sold inside the six-bedroom mansion.

"It was unbelievable," says neighbor Kathy Battaglia, a user-support analyst for an accounting software firm. "The noise over there was so loud it may as well have been in our house. It sounded like the whole party was in the front yard and on the front porch."

The Halloween party was the latest of several in Sandy Springs in which empty mansions are rented for huge parties that draw complaints from neighbors, says City Councilwoman Karen Meinzen McEnery. "I think it's related to the economy," she says. "We have a lot more vacant property. In August 2008, there were 11 vacant properties in my district. In August 2009, there were 34 vacant properties."

The Sandy Springs party planner was charged only with disorderly conduct, a misdemeanor, because he had permission from the property manager to host a party, Meinzen McEnery says.

## Breaking the law

At least the Sandy Springs party was legal. One result of the nation's real estate bust is that police around the nation this year are dealing with people taking over foreclosed houses and throwing illegal parties.

Among them:

- In **San Diego County**, young people have taken over foreclosed houses for late-night rave parties, says Detective Jeff Lauhon of the San Diego County Sheriff's Office. Lauhon says the culprits were well-organized in some instances: A young couple would get a realtor to give them a tour of a foreclosed house — usually in a rural area on a large property. The woman would distract the realtor while the man surreptitiously left a window open or door ajar. They would then return and invite others for parties that lasted until the wee hours.

"One main consideration they had was plenty of parking," Lauhon says. "The people hosting called themselves a party crew. It turned into a business venture. They were charging admission, to cover the cost of alcohol and to make a good profit. It's just another example of being an entrepreneur. They just chose to do it in a way that's not lawful."

About a half-dozen people were arrested on charges including grand theft, burglary and vandalism, he says.

- In **Tempe, Ariz.**, after several instances of party crews holding illegal bashes in foreclosed houses, patrol officers carry a list of foreclosed homes in their patrol areas. "We encourage officers to proactively get out to those areas and conduct security checks on each patrol," says Sgt. Steve Carbajal of the Tempe Police Department. "In this unique time as far as the economy, as far as the housing market, it really calls for unique strategies."

- In **Fort Myers, Fla.**, another community awash in foreclosures, police busted an illegal party at a foreclosed house earlier this year and arrested several youths. "The host was the former resident, in their late teens or a juvenile," says Fort Myers police Sgt. [Larry King](#). "They ended up busting the place up."

## Big empty homes

Battaglia, who has lived in the Sandy Springs neighborhood for 23 years, says the house that hosted the Halloween party has been on the

market for about two years. "It's just one of those big houses that isn't selling, I'm sure because of the economy," she says.

When the police busted the party, they had to call taxis to transport guests back to their cars because the shuttle buses had gone, Rose says.

Battaglia says the soiree might have gone relatively unnoticed had it ended earlier.

"Everything wasn't completely over and I couldn't get to sleep until 3:30 a.m.," she says. "It was just exhausting."

[http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-11-22-parties-in-vacant-homes\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-11-22-parties-in-vacant-homes_N.htm)