

Community Living

Volunteering for a Second Job

Longtime House Speaker Tip O'Neil once said, "All politics is local." There is nothing more local than the democracy practiced in a homeowners association, where leaders are elected by their neighbors. More than 60 million Americans live in an estimated 300,000 homeowner and condominium associations, cooperatives and other planned communities. More than two million of them serve on governing boards composed of volunteers who are elected by their neighbors to preserve neighborhoods and protect property values. It can be the equivalent of a second full-time job, especially for the president of the association. The issues, challenges and opportunities are many, varied and often controversial. The job can be both rewarding and thankless.

A man's home is his castle. Yes, but...community association governance often involves striking a balance between the preferences of an individual homeowner and the best interests of the community as a whole. The typical community association, has well-established rules and restrictions, codes that homeowners agree to abide by when they purchase their homes. These codes can involve exterior paint colors, fences, sheds, pets, portable basketball hoops, flagpoles, vehicles, satellite dishes, landscaping, even smoking. Issues can arise when homeowners either aren't aware of the rules or choose to ignore them. In a nation focused on individual freedom, it may be natural to empathize with an individual homeowner who runs afoul of the community association. But rules are created to preserve the character of the community, protect property values and meet the established expectations of all residents. While some rules may at times seem arbitrary or arcane, it is necessary to think in the big picture: What if every resident did the same thing?

Some people question why they must pay what is commonly known as member "dues." While dues may be the technically correct term, the fact is these assessments are actually property maintenance fees. And when the collective buying power of the entire association is factored in, they prove to be a real bargain for individual homeowners. These fees can cover exterior maintenance, snow removal, landscaping, trash pick-up and sometimes utilities, security, recreation facilities and more.

A lot of what the general public thinks about homeowner associations is wrong. For example, many disputes over the American flag have nothing at all to do with the flag itself. Rather, the issue usually involves the placement of permanent flagpoles. Another example: Many people think that community association governing boards have unbridled power in perpetuity. In fact, association board members are elected by the neighbors and, therefore, can be voted out of office.

Still another myth: Many people may assume the community association industry strives to perpetuate itself. In reality, community associations exist largely because cash-strapped local municipalities require new developments to take responsibility for many of the services once provided by government – street lighting, garbage pickup, snow removal, road maintenance and so on. Making builders and developers and ultimately communities – responsible for common elements requires the establishment of an entity to manage these services. That entity is the community association.