



Working Together in a Disaster

How a board and its manager can effectively work through most anything

Storms, natural disasters, pandemics, there is no end to the number of issues that can arise and throw an association board into a bit of a panic. Planning for every contingency is an admirable undertaking, but hardly realistic. So, where does a board begin when making a disaster plan? How far should the association go in the planning preparations, and what does it do once a plan is in place?



First, why does an association need a plan?

The association is responsible for the preservation of the association's value, as well as enhancement of that value. What is meant by value? That is the cost of running the association while at the same time balancing the quality of using and enjoying the association. Let us examine an example of a community pool. A plan that places all the pool furniture inside a building before a major storm *preserves value* by preventing damage to that furniture and *enhances value* by reducing liability risks that might occur from damage due to flying furniture. Value isn't just about making upgrades- it's also about keeping the association costs down by taking precautions.

To that end, a well-devised plan will accomplish these two basic tenets and apply to a wide range of scenarios. Without a solid plan in place for handling an emergency, a board may react chaotically. Mixed messages going out to members can result in unnecessary liability and further issues for a board. Worse, a *reactive* response, as opposed to a *proactive* response, may very well put people in harm's way. A plan is the marching orders that allow an association to come out of a calamity relatively unscathed. A plan safeguards the association's assets and prevents extra costs that could otherwise have been avoided.

Your board decides to draft a preparedness plan. Now what?

A board will want to draft a preparedness plan that can be applied to a multitude of emergencies, and a plan that does not overstep the boundaries of responsibility. Most importantly is how the plan will be communicated between the board, the manager, and the homeowners. Even the best thought-out plan will be rendered ineffective *if no one else knows about the plan!*

Well before any disaster strikes, a board should convene to draft an emergency preparedness plan which considers the use (or closure) of association amenities, such as pools, private streets and alleys, and even Wi-Fi, if that is provided by the association. The association property should be the focus—specifically its safe usage and protection. The drafted plan should contemplate each aspect of the common areas. In our example of the community pool, a plan would contemplate under what conditions the pool will be closed, and when; what measures will be taken, and when; and how members are notified, and when.

The following is an example, phrased simply: *‘As determined by two or more board members, the pool shall be closed 48 hours prior to any hurricane making landfall within 200 miles of the association. The manager will issue notice to all residents via email blast and via the community website. The pool gates will be locked, and the furniture placed inside the clubhouse by the maintenance team. The pool pumps will be turned off and the water level reduced to 3” below the overflow grates. The pool will be reopened 48 hours after the storm has safely passed, pending any need for repairs due to damages, and after the pool water quality has been made suitable for use. The manager shall notify residents at least 24 hours prior to reopening.’*

In this example the concerns of what needs to be done, who performs each task, when performance is necessary, and how notifications will be distributed are all addressed. Simple and effective!

A note about planning: with the two tenets in mind—preserving and enhancing the association value—the board should refrain from overstepping the bounds of responsibility. In one instance, an association sent a strongly worded suggestion to members right before an approaching hurricane that homeowners should board-up the windows on their homes. With 4000+ homes in the community, not only did this incite unnecessary chaos and expense to the owners (the hurricane turned away from the area) but left the association to deal with the aftermath of all that plywood not being picked up by the trash service. The unintended consequence was the materials were left along the roads, killing large patches of association grass, and dumped on association grounds, costing the association fees to clean up. Some homeowners left up their window boards, since the association had no rule about how long windows could be boarded. The lack of clarity meant that no violations could be issued, causing more issues and eyesores for residents. Did the association *need* to assume that responsibility? Not at all; the homes are private property. In the end, one good intention, poorly thought out, cost the association thousands of dollars. The point is, the message conveyed is responsible to the association and owners and considers the tenets of value.

OK, we have the drafted plan in hand. Let’s get going!

The board should approve the plan just like any other policy or set of rules and regulations and put it on the agenda for the upcoming meeting to adopt as policy. It’s also good to periodically review the plans and update them regularly. Once approved, put it on the website, in the newsletter, send it out by email, by whatever means the association has chosen as its formal communication channel with residents. Please make sure the manager and management team have it as well.

The key for a successful plan is to communicate. Managers, owners, vendors and board members all need to be on the same page. If the plan is well thought out, even a power outage will be just a small hiccup in its execution. When everyone is on task together, the results prove the plan’s worthiness. Don’t be afraid to tweak the plan if necessary if something was overlooked.

Ready to get started with your plans? Ask your manager to be involved and remember that the responsibility falls to the board to prepare and approve the plan. Ask your vendors for advice, they have probably done this with other associations. Have your legal counsel review the plan if needed. But by all means, have a plan! Keep in mind the old adage of “Failing to Plan, is Planning to Fail”.

Sentry is here to help. For more information, please reach out to your community manager or to training@sentrymgt.com.

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