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CAI PERSPECTIVE



Beyond the Buildings

On my plane flight to CAI's conference in Denver in May, I read an article about community associations that disturbed me and at the same time validated CAI's new strategic initiative—helping community associations build community spirit. The gist of this well-written article was that community associations face imminent failure because owners will stop paying assessments to rebuild the physical plant in their communities. When revenue stops flowing in, the association values will decrease and owners essentially will abandon their homes.

That doesn't have to be. I'd like to share an actual story that I believe expresses what building community in an existing association really means. In the communities that my firm manages, the owners of single-family dwellings and townhouses are responsible for maintaining their homes in a manner consistent with the declaration, bylaws, and standards set by their board of directors or architectural committee. We enforce maintenance by conducting an inspection and sending a first formal notice, followed up by reinspection and possibly a hearing before the board. Owner compliance with the maintenance provision was achieved in prior years, but usually not without a large part of the community feeling the association had badgered them into doing the work.

The best enforcement is self-policing. This year, the boards in 12 of our communities allowed us to send two postcard notices—one with a home diagram identifying house parts—telling owners when the spring inspection would be performed and what maintenance problems we would be inspecting for. These postcards, along with newsletter articles and moveable signboards, provided owners non-threatening notice. Names of contractors who could complete repairs for an owner were circulated in a few communities.

I was surprised by the results. About 40 percent fewer homes received a preliminary citation than in prior years. More importantly, the overwhelming response from the owners was not one of indignation for being cited, but one of apology for not completing the work faster. There is no doubt that a small group of owners won't complete the work, but the number will be no different than in past inspections. The real key is that the large majority of owners are part of the process.

Community associations are *people*, not buildings. These people live in and utilize these buildings. When the community believes in itself, maintaining the buildings—or "physical plant," as that pessimistic article called them—won't be an issue or a problem. CAI must succeed in delivering its message. And each of us has a part to play.

Steve Bupp
Stephen R. Bupp, CMCA, AMS, PCAM
Chair