

Reasonable Resident Expectations

By Sharon Cranford

Residents of homeowners associations and condominiums, whether they have lived in the community for years or have just arrived on the scene, most likely have some ideas about how they would like to see the board run their association. Here are four of the most obvious expectations. See how your board measures up!

1. Transparency in governance



Open meetings foster trust that decisions are being made in the best interests of the community. Meetings should be held in a neutral place, not someone's home or office, and accessible to every resident. Good places to hold meetings include a community center, a meeting room at a public library or at a public school. The idea is to make everyone comfortable and to keep the meeting on a professional level. After all, the board is conducting the business of the association.

Executive or closed sessions should be rare, involving only personnel or legal matters. In my own community, we used to have the delinquency report done in executive session. Now it is part of the Treasurer's Report and includes the number, although not the names, of delinquent residents and the aggregate amount in arrears. We do this in the open because we believe our residents have the right to know our financial status, for good or ill.

Meetings should be advertised to the community by posting advance notice in public. Ways to do this include through the community newsletter, on signs at the entrances to the community, on the community's Website, or via the community listserv. Ideally, meetings should be regularly scheduled, as in the first Tuesday of the month at 7 p.m. in the media room at the elementary school.

If a listserv is available, then the agenda can be sent out a week or so before the regularly scheduled meeting to let everyone know what's going on. The agenda can also be posted in such prominent public places as a bulletin board at the community entrance or by the mailboxes. A paper copy of the agenda and the financial statement should also be available at every board meeting.

A residents' time should be regularly scheduled at the start of each meeting so that the board can hear the views of residents. A sign-in sheet requesting name, address and phone number and/or e-mail address can help the board by ordering the speakers at residents' time and by providing information so that the community manager or a board member can follow up.

2. Regular Communication with Residents



It is not enough to simply hold open meetings or to provide a residents' time at each meeting. Every effort must be made to provide information to the residents who rarely or never attend a meeting. This can be done through a monthly newsletter, by listserv or a Web site, or a combination of all three. The important thing is to let all residents know what the board is doing on their behalf. It helps residents feel part of the community if, for example, they know that tree pruning is taking place in one part of the neighborhood as part of a regular maintenance program or that paving will take place soon in another area.

3. Open Book on Finances



Residents expect a clear explanation of the financial status of their association. It is an invaluable means of determining that their assessments are being appropriately utilized. That means having a financial statement available at each regularly scheduled board meeting that it is complete and easy to comprehend. It helps if the information – in more detail -- is also posted on the Website and/or printed in the community newsletter. One board member I know likes to write an annual end of year “So, What Did I Get for My Assessment Dollars?” article to summarize expenditures.

Board decisions – most of which involve financial matters -- must be communicated accurately and regularly to members. No secret handshakes. No sly evasion of answers. The residents have the right to know the status of income, expenses and most importantly, the reserves. Was there a shortfall in income? Are there variances in certain accounts and why? There may be a completely reasonable explanation (a heavy snowstorm that busted the budget) but the residents have the right to know.

4. A Welcoming Environment



Finally, a warm, cordial community environment is something we, as board members, should all aspire to achieve. As leaders of the community, board members set the tone. Warm and welcoming or cold and distant? Friendly or hostile? Which community would you like to live in? Residents, whether original owners or twenty-something newcomers, should be welcomed to the board and committee meetings. Their views should be enthusiastically solicited. They are part of the community – in fact, the reason the community exists at all! A community in Northern Virginia has adopted the slogan: Where houses are homes and neighbors are friends. Sounds like a very reasonable resident expectation to me!

About the author: Sharon Cranford is a member of the Board of Directors, Whetstone Homes Corporation, Montgomery Village, Maryland and has served on HOA boards for more than 20 years. She is a member of WMCCAI.