

## COMMUNITY LIVING

# Better training of board can bolster associations

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SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Patrick Hohman was president of his aging brick condominium community in Louisville, Ky., when he realized the property needed serious renovation. Winter utility costs were up 250 percent over a four-year period, but monthly assessments stayed the same. The buildings, which date to the 1940s and 1950s, were due for pricey window replacements and attic insulation. That was just the start. A long-range plan was needed as well.

At first Hohman's fellow board members resisted his ideas. They didn't see the need. But Hohman, a technical writer, issued a series of illustrated memos to explain such concepts as how reserve funding saves money in the long run and how building components work. Eventually the board came around. The initial improvements were made, and the association is now following a 30-year reserve study.

Hohman expanded his memos

and recently published a colorful 264-page board training manual, "Condos, Townhomes and Home Owner Associations: How to Make Your Investment Safer" (Amazon, \$39.95). The book details how to create a financially strong community and includes sample budgets, reserve studies and maintenance checklists for various building types. Hohman's Web site, CondoHOAinfo.com, offers 19 free mini-training videos.

"Association living won't go away on this crowded and aging planet," said Hohman. "There will be more associations and more board members who need to be trained about how to operate their properties. Good financial stewardship is the only way they'll survive economically."

About 2 million association volunteers serve on their boards, according to estimates of the Community Associations Institute. The type and intensity of training they receive varies from association to association. Hohman's manual is one approach, but there are others, both formal

and informal.

As an attorney, Nick Richardson figured he was well-qualified to serve on the board at his Schaumburg townhome association. He wasn't wrong, but soon after being elected he realized he had many questions.

"I didn't understand how meetings worked or how decisions were made," he said. "I didn't know the difference between resurfacing the street and completely repaving it. I had no idea that resurfacing is for aesthetic purposes only. There's no reconstruction of the street. I wondered what I was getting myself into."

After the first meeting, the president met with him to answer questions and explain some of the goings-on of the association. That helped him feel more comfortable.

At White Eagle Club in Naperville, president Mike Reilly also spends time with newly elected board members and figures out what information they might need. He distributes copies of minutes from several previous meetings so they can see what the

recent issues have been. The association's management company offers periodic training sessions.

"For sitting board members, the sooner a new board member is comfortable and up to speed from an issue standpoint, the better it is for all of us," said Reilly. "We can focus on problems rather than rehash stuff. For the new board member, if everyone knows the skinny and he doesn't, it can be discouraging."

When Denise Marynowski joined the board at the Lago Vista master homeowners association in Lockport, the manager suggested they look into educational programs sponsored by the Association of Condominium, Townhouse and Homeowners Associations and the Community Associations Institute.

"We received information on various seminars, some free and some for a fee, but they were extremely helpful in educating us on our duties and some of the problems we were likely to encounter," she said.

Marynowski has become a

strong advocate for board training and would like legislators to make it mandatory.

"The lack of recourse for mismanagement by board members is non-existent unless you can afford an attorney," she said.

Association Advocates Inc., a Chicago association consulting firm, offers several types of training: an annual update that covers changes in law and newest practices, orientation for new board members, and a transition session for incoming and outgoing board members to discuss the status of pending projects and future strategies. Costs vary.

Association Advocates also sells a 300-page manual, "Simplified Self-Management: A Practical Guide With How-Tos and Forms." The price, which includes tiers of telephone and e-mail support, starts at \$800.

Now that Richardson is a veteran, he's got some advice for new board members: "Be patient. Seek people out. Ask lots of questions. There's no such thing as a stupid question."