

# Handling thankless job of a board member

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Sitting on the board at your community association can be a pleasure or a pain. Or both. The experience is rewarding when the property looks great and runs well, and you know you played a part in that. But it's frustrating when criticism pours in, which it does.

Perhaps you're a new board member or thinking about throwing your hat into the ring in the next election. To get you off and running, several industry pros offered these insights:

**You can't please everyone.** It's easy to become discouraged by residents who are never happy, no matter what the board does, said Craig Finck, president of Lakewood Falls Community Association, a 2,339-unit association in Plainfield.

"Focusing on the mission of doing what's best for the community at large will help you avoid letting any individual's complaints get you down," he said.

**Get educated.** Many management companies offer training classes for their client board members. You also can learn a lot on your own.

Jane McClelland, a real estate broker with Re/Max in the village in Oak Park, recommends reading the minutes of board meetings from the last two years. You'll get a sense of how a board functions and the challenges it is facing.

Familiarize yourself with the association's governing documents as well as the Illinois Condominium Property Act or the Common Interest Community Association Act, whichever applies to your property, said attorney David Bendoff of Kovitz Shifrin Nesbit in Buffalo Grove and Chicago.

He also recommends attending educational seminars put on by trade groups such as the Community Associations Institute or the Association of Condominium, Townhouse and Homeowners Associations.

**Read the fine print.** Study all the current contracts, including the manager's, to learn exactly what goods and services are to be provided to the association. You'll be in a better position to judge how well contractors are meeting their obligations.

"A lack of understanding can cause a board member to raise expectations and become unfairly dissatisfied with someone's performance," said project manager Shirley Feldmann of Association



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New or potential board members should become familiar with an association's governing documents and applicable state laws, and also should know they can't please everyone.

Advocates Inc. in Park Ridge and Chicago.

**You're on a team.** Make time to attend board meetings and come prepared to participate in discussions and decisions, said association consultant Angela Falzone of Association Advocates.

"It is important for all board members to be on the same page in order to work the most efficiently together," she said.

Seek guidance from professionals such as consultants and engineers, but remember that decisions ultimately lie with the board, said Finck.

Be cooperative and try to encourage positive community spirit among the board, residents and management, said Feldmann.

**Beware of the vocal minority.** Every association has a resident or several who are adamant about sharing their opinions, wants and demands. Don't automatically assume they are speaking for everyone, said Christine Lutz of Garrison Partners, the sales and marketing arm of Van Buren Lofts in the West Loop.

Seasoned board members know to draw out quieter residents when soliciting input, but novices can be swayed

by the loud ones, she said.

"Internet surveys are an easy way to invite people to express themselves," she said. "They're also quantifiable, so you've got ammunition. If the vocal minority doesn't like something, you can say, 'But 68 percent of your neighbors don't agree with you.'"

**Board decisions impact property values.** How you deal with issues such as assessments, delinquencies and renters can make your property more or less attractive to prospective buyers and their lenders, said McClelland.

For example, many lenders prefer to see a higher monthly assessment than a special assessment, she said.

**Do it for love.** Despite your best intentions and the sometimes long hours, few residents will show appreciation for your board service. Don't expect any pats on the back, or you'll be disappointed, said Lutz.

"The people who make the best board members are the ones who are interested in protecting their investment and having an active role in running the building," she said.

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