

IS APATHY A PROBLEM IN YOUR ASSOCIATION

By: Sara E. Barry, CAM, CMCA, PCAM
Director or Operations of Wolf, Rifkin, Shapiro & Schulman, LLP

Having served in the Community Association industry for over 27 years, I had originally thought that MOST communities, which are run reasonable well, have apathetic owners because there is nothing to complain about. I have, however, come to understand that this is not necessarily the case.

Some associations have board meetings cancelled continually due to a lack of a quorum; the delinquency rates prevent the association from paying the bills; the association's property values have dropped because the grounds appear run down; and members of the board stay on simply because there is no one to fill their spots. The owners ignore the bulletin boards or notices and no one attends the community social events. If your association has experienced any of the above warning signs, it is worth considering the cause.

A thriving association is marked by members who show concern for the association and by a board that promotes member awareness and responds to member concerns. They recognize that they have more responsibilities other "keeping the assessments down", which can be very destructive to any association. Competent managers have learned to reflect the attitude of both owners and the board.

Since both the board and management derive their authority from the association owners, the owners must ultimately bear the responsibility for adverse effects of apathy. In-attention or lack of interest on the part of property owners creates a climate, which opens the door to neglect or pursuit of self-interest by those who have previously had the proxy of the members (board/managers/committee).

A certain amount of apathy is common in community association and must be expected as not all owners will become actively involved in the day-to-day operation of the association. People move into the association for a number of reasons. Many because they seek carefree, maintenance-free living where the community handles everything for them or they are seeking controlled environment, security, affordability, or some other objective.

The board of directors holds the key to the continued healthy functioning of the community as their decisions determine the quality of life within each development. An effect board develops goals, organizes programs and follows through to promote a healthy community.

It is possible for one or two concerned board members (or owners if necessary) to turn an apathetic community around.

First, an assessment of the status of the community is necessary by answering the following questions:

1. Are the members happy?
2. Is the association financially sound?
3. Are the members informed?
4. Are there any adverse trends?

5. How well are the property values increasing?
6. What is the physical condition of the property?
7. Are any changes that are occurring in the neighborhood of concern?
8. Are the owners willing to adhere to a reasonable set of rules (There will always be a couple of owners or tenants who challenge the rules.)
9. Are there plans for the future?
10. Are there adequate reserves?

Based on the answer to the above questions positive goals must be set as goals are essential to focus the community. These goals must be linked to vital concerns raised in answering the above questions. The Board should focus on short-term goals as nothing succeeds like success. Seeing the baby steps taken will encourage owners and the Board to continue in the positive direction towards bigger goals.

The planning process needs to determine what needs to be accomplished, how to do it and who is to do it. It is important to not only determine what will be done, but how success will be measured.

The plan should be put in writing and conveyed to the owners as it is critical to have owner support in the goals, which convey the following:

- 1) Have a clear message. Complicated messages can be distracting and disturbing.
- 2) Be repeatedly present to the association owners to create a strong awareness of the message.
- 3) Contain attention getters that are timed to create the greatest response.
- 4) Be specifically tailored to the association's owners.

Effective communication should not be translated as more and louder of the same. As you know when someone asks you to repeat something you have previously stated, you have to reword it to help them understand. Saying the same thing over and over doesn't get their understanding or cooperation.

Feedback is essential. Without it there is no two-way communications. Residents need to be approached for their opinions and ideas with the intent of seeking volunteers to reach the association's goals in the back of everyone's mind. Wherever possible, personal contact should be sought at the pool, the mailboxes or over the back fence. Questionnaires and surveys can also be useful tools. Residents must be encouraged to share their views on how to solve the association's challenges.

It is essential to seek volunteers to help with the plans and goals. The most important volunteer group is the board itself. The board establishes a climate of responsiveness to the members' appeals for help or expressions of concern. The reasons for volunteering are varied. Some want to gain recognition, accomplish something they feel is important or exercise power. Some may simply be concerned with safety or security while others want to get back at the board or manager for what they perceive to be a prior personal attack on their castle.

A source of volunteers, which should be targeted, is the new residents. Since interest, and therefore inclination, to participate is likely to be highest when residents first move into a community. The involvement of these new members can be effectively started by well-planned and frequent orientation meetings orchestrated by welcoming committees and through welcome socials.

One successful method of recruiting is by linking what each individual has to offer (time and talent wise) to association programs. It is important, however, to act on committee recommendations as nothing dampens committee or volunteers enthusiasm faster than the lack of response to or action on their recommendations.

Once a board acknowledges the need for revitalization within their community and commits to the task, goals must be set, strategies developed, plans put into action and, most importantly, the membership must be sold on the program.