

COMMON FOUNDATIONS

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Red Flags that Signal Structural Defects

Although the housing market has slowed, approximately 80 percent of new construction is still being built as a community association. The recent boom in the housing market has led more people to purchase condominiums and townhouses on impulse, without the benefit of several walk-throughs or an inspection by a Professional Engineer. More than likely, this has happened in your community as well. But what does it mean for the association and its residents?

It's expected that all homes, both new and "used", will require some kind of improvement or repair – but it's important to be informed on how to distinguish between normal wear/aging and expensive defects. Since each home may not have an inspection every time it's sold (and in condominiums, this can include an overall structural assessment), the responsibility for regular evaluations falls to the Board or manager. Ensure your association is on stable ground by examining the following:

The substructure. Your community's homes rest on their foundations, and defects here may easily affect the entire complex. When entering the basement or viewing the concrete slab, check for anything larger than hairline cracks. A few small hairline cracks may be normal and reflect the usual shrinkage. Narrow cracks in concrete floors are probably not a sign of structural damage.

A crack larger than 1/8 inch wide could be a sign of uneven settlement;

a local Engineer should inspect the foundation further to gauge the cause and potential for repair.

Basements are also the most common area for moisture and water infiltration. If the buildings have a common basement, check for large spots of water damage or standing pools of water; also, the moisture level shouldn't be that much higher than the ground floors.

The frame of your community's homes should be sturdy and have straight, strong beams and joists with few, if any, holes. When in the attic or the basement, look closely at the framing members for cracks, splits, and holes or cuts made for plumbing and wiring. Any sign of insect infestation (piles of dust, droppings, or holes) is cause for concern. Not all states require a pre-purchase termite inspection, so it's necessary for the association to take the steps to check for a possible infestation. The first signs of water infiltration can sometimes be found in the frame as well; search out mold or rot, even in the darkest corners.

Your frame inspection should also cover windows and doors. It's a good idea to inspect the homes of the Board members (who will be more willing to allow this type of inspection). Close the door behind you and take a step back. If you can see a border of outside light or feel a draft, or if it doesn't seem to swing smoothly on its hinges, the door frames may be misaligned from structural movement. Windows should also open and close



easily. Windows may also have diagonal cracks originating from the corners of the frame – an engineer will gauge the caliber and source of the cracks.

The exterior of the residences can show the first telltale signs of poor construction or upkeep. Cross the street and look at the overall big picture – signs of excessive and problematic movement include a sagging roof, a slight leaning effect to the homes or residences, and cracked or damaged siding. These types of cracks can be very costly to repair.

Although homebuyers are responsible for their own due diligence, it often falls to the association to fill in the gaps with regular inspections by the Board of Directors. No community is perfect, but your thorough examination of the residences in your association will help everyone avoid expensive surprises.

Facts and Myths about Household Mold

Without question, mold is one of the most misunderstood threats to homes. Lawsuits related to mold have been brought against developers or even association boards over health issues and construction problems in communities. These incidents have brought to focus the confusion over mold – what is it exactly, and how much is too much? Mold can almost always be found in the air that we breathe and the buildings we live in. But if mold is as old as the earth, why all the concern now?

Mold has come into the spotlight due to several factors, one of the most prominent being the increasingly modern lifestyle that associations and their residents lead. The latest luxuries and conveniences such as indoor swimming pools and central A/C can place additional sources of moisture in the residences and clubhouses – which is the number one reason for indoor mold. There is no way to eliminate all molds and mold spores; the only way to control indoor mold is to control moisture.

To restore some sanity to the discussion, let's bust the two biggest myths about mold.

MYTH: It is possible to live in a community completely free of mold.

Fact: Every building and thereby every community has some amount of measurable mold – no matter how small. Mold is everywhere, both in and outside your homes. The number one step that associations can take to reduce the levels of problematic mold is by using the building's ventilation systems, or installing proper ones to get rid of excess moisture.

Venting homeowner's bathrooms and dryers to the out-

side of the building, using air conditioners in the summer, and immediately fixing any signs and the source of a water leak will go a long way in preventing mold growth. Mold may always be present, but it doesn't always have to be harmful. Since HVAC systems and/or the building frames are often a common element in garden-style condominiums, these communities can take an active step in to control moisture.

MYTH: There are national standards in place on how to test for mold, and how much mold is "allowed" inside a home.

Fact: There are no national standards or protocols on how to test for mold or analyze its impact. However, when a problem is suspected, an industrial hygienist should investigate the property and give a professional assessment of the mold levels. The only way they can really perform this assessment is by testing the outside level of mold and comparing it to the inside level.

Be wary of any 'mold inspectors' who require you to pay high fees for a test and then when mold is found, as it will be, recommend very drastic and expensive measures to get rid of it. There are a few extreme situations where this remediation may be necessary, but these cases generally involve large sections of the building with discoloration, damp walls and floors, and a strong musty smell.

There could be hidden mold in your community's homes, and since some types of mold are more hazardous than others, it's wise to investigate if you suspect a problem. Mold remediation can often be a simple process, as long as you stay vigilant and aware of the interior moisture levels. The trick is to catch mold before it eats away at your community's homes—and wallet.

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