



Protect the Condo

Keep Your Community Safe

[by Jack Carr, P.E., R.S., LEED-AP]

Condo safety and security are important in all corners of the nation but here in Maine, due to lower crime statistics, the focus of most condo safety committees is accident prevention and property protection. This is even truer in rural Maine, where unlocked front doors are as common as pickup trucks.

DEMOGRAPHICS DRIVE SAFETY CONCERNS

With the boomers aging and moving out of the big family homes to

downsize into the condo world, over-55-type communities are growing rapidly, and with that, the need for protecting our aging population becomes paramount. Many communities are requiring “Knox box”-types of devices to provide access keys to first responders when the need arises. These boxes allow a non-destructive means of emergency access to residential units, as well as controls for gates, fire protection systems, elevators, and other critical equipment.

SPEAKING OF ALARMS

Safety committees should recommend units have hard-wired smoke detectors in every bedroom. Carbon monoxide detectors should be located on every level while condo buildings with hallways should investigate the need for self-closing and fire-rated doors where required. Hall doors should have proper weather stripping and sweeps to prevent gaps allowing both smoke migration and fresh air from fueling a fire. Sprinkler systems should be inspected quarterly.

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Many communities would benefit from a training program for the unit owners to remind them where the fire alarms are located and how to use them. Fire emergency egress pathways should be well understood and posted. It may even be useful to arrange an outside location where everyone gathers following an emergency clearing of the building to ensure all are accounted.

WATER SAFETY

Many rural condos source their domestic water from drilled wells. It might be surprising to some that well water conditions can change with time. Nearby agricultural, industrial, or construction activities can adversely affect water sources outside their boundaries. Do not rely on water tests in the distant past. Drinking water should be tested every two years or more in some locations. These tests are inexpensive and report on biological, chemical, and poison contamination. New tests have been added to the typical menu, including uranium and radon. You should check with your local municipal department monitoring local aquifers and water sources for advice for your locale.

MORE HAZARDS

Safety and security do not stop at the front door. All sorts of safety issues lurk outside. Just ask any lawyer who has experience with trip-and-fall cases. The parking lot's low spots may be just an annoyance in the dry seasons, but potholes and depressions in either the sidewalks or driveways can create frozen ponds waiting for the unwary. In addition to ponding water causing slipping hazards, they can also reflect light from poorly placed outdoor fixtures resulting in driving blind spots.

Many may be surprised to learn that increasing the brightness of parking or pathway light fixtures does not create a sense of security, but just the opposite. Extremely bright fixtures can cast shadows, reflections, and light boundaries creating both a sense of unease, as well as poor visibility. The mind is funny that way. Experts say it is much better for outside illumination to show pathways of escape to provide a sense of security. For this reason, I always recommend condo committees tasked with improving exterior lighting to first talk with a specialist to avoid mistakes.

Finally, these suggestions are from your friendly engineer, not your law-

yer. My lawyer friends advise me that taking well-meaning safety measures can have unintentional consequences including increasing liability for an association. Associations are not typically responsible for 24/7 security for its unit owners. However, installing security cameras or hiring garage attendants could produce the appearance of the association taking on security responsibilities not wanted. If this is a concern, you may want to discuss with your condo attorney the modification of your declaration documents to provide a "no security" provision to remind unit owners the association has no duty to provide security. Yes, the world is becoming more complicated, but safety starts at home.



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