

BUILDING COMMUNITY

Owning a condo and residing in it is more than just an investment. It is more than just living in an extended stay vacation property. You are living in a community, and to get the most out of your residence and your investment, you should be involved in your community. Being involved in the community starts with being respectful and cordial to all members of the community. Understanding and complying with the rules and regulations of the community is also an important aspect of being part of the community, and also ties in with respecting your fellow community members.

What does community mean in the context of living in a condominium? It is unreasonable to expect everyone to be friends; however, there are many people sharing a very small space. In my opinion, community is a place where you do know some people, where everyone feels equal and welcome - as though a bit of their identity is tied to a larger collective - and where everyone can contribute towards something larger than themselves. Ultimately, being part of a condominium community is knowing that you belong - that you are known, respected and valued.¹

Being ensconced in our condos, alone or with a small group of trusted friends, is necessary for our personal needs, but does it contribute to the community of people around you? We each have our sense of personal space. You can pursue personal growth and development while increasing your social network, with all individuals sharing a common purpose: to develop the community that you collectively own.

Before you stop reading and head to the recycling bin, consider the statement in the second paragraph, *everyone can contribute towards something larger than yourself*. Was that a reason why you moved to a condo in the first place, to become part of a community? If it was, and post Covid, you're looking to renew or initiate new contacts, committees might be the vehicle you're looking for to improve your chances of meeting new people. Your degree of commitment is up to you, an hour or so a week or perhaps a few hours a month. Perhaps you prefer short bursts of involvement punctuated by periods of minimal contact. You are in the driver's seat with both hands on the wheel and your feet hovering over the gas or brake pedal.

Being involved in your community includes being involved with its governance. Once you are comfortable in the community, consider running for the Board. All owners are welcome and bring their own personal skills and experiences with them. Not quite ready for the Board? Consider getting involved with a committee looking at a specific aspect of the community.

While community involvement includes the governance aspect, committees and interactions with the other owners, clear and open lines of communication must be established and maintained. In the sections that follow, these aspects are discussed in more detail.

GOVERNANCE AND THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Being involved in your community includes being involved with its governance. As a minimum, all owners should attend the owners meetings, such as the annual general meeting (AGM), and not only attend, to come prepared to participate fully, by reading all of the materials distributed in advance of the meeting. Do you find the financial statements boring and just skim them over? Hopefully not, because your condo is probably your biggest single investment. Do you know your current Board of Directors and potential candidates? You will likely need to vote so try to get to know them. Participate fully in the meetings by asking pertinent and meaningful questions, and offering suggestions. Every condominium corporation is unique in terms of number of units, age, style, location and the declaration and bylaws specific to the corporation. This makes it difficult to have a one size fits all guide for condominiums.

All condominiums are governed by the Condominium Act, which was last amended in February of 2015.

The Condominium Act states that the corporation and therefore, the directors, shall perform the following duties:

- to manage the property of the owners and the assets of the corporation;
- to control, manage and administer the common elements;
- to enforce the declaration and bylaws; and
- to keep adequate records

The Act also provides that the Board of Directors shall hold meetings, perform functions, elect officers and carry out the above duties and any additional duties which may be established in the Declaration and By-Laws.

A good director will assist the Board in reaching consensus. To this end, a good director will understand their responsibilities, understand and enforce the requirements of The Condominium Act, Declaration and By-laws fairly, impartially and, most importantly work as a team to reach consensus and guide the affairs of the corporation.

Working as a team is key to the Board of Directors role in building community. Working as a team means including the property manager, if the corporation has a contract with a property manager.

Property managers do contribute advice to the Board as they have valuable experience and expertise. However, the Board as the governing body does make the decisions and the property manager then implements those decisions.

Effective leadership is about taking the lead and being a good role model. Leading by consensus means being open minded, not having personal agendas, listening to each other and to differing opinions. If consensus cannot be reached, votes must be taken and once a vote has been taken those who dissent must support the majority. A successful Board speaks as a united team by upholding and abiding by a majority vote.

Board members must enforce the bylaws and declaration. The "live and let live" attitude does not work and only leads to problems if the declaration and by-laws are not enforced. Being in tune with owners and communicating well means ensuring that owners are informed of decisions that are made. The Board is elected to make decisions but that does not mean seeking owner approval on issues that do not require owner approval.

A condominium Board of Directors, only needs to seek approval on decisions for:

- substantial changes, additions, alterations or improvements to common elements;
- substantial changes to the assets of the condominium corporation;
- enacting or amending the declaration and by-laws.

Budget decisions and contributions to common element fees and reserve fund contributions are at the sole discretion of the Board.

The Act states that each director and officer of the Board, in performing his or her duties and exercising powers, must act honestly and in good faith with a view to the best interests of the condominium corporation.

Owners are a valuable part of the team when building community. Successful communities are united, including being united with the Board, the property manager and other owners. Of course,

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everyone does not agree all the time, but if decisions are made in the best interest of all owners, then the condominium Boards of Directors can definitely please most of the people most of the time.

BEYOND THE BOARD - COMMITTEES

Many Condominium Corporations (CC) support committee development in their bylaws or with the direction and support of a progressive board. My CC has within its rules that the board "may from time to time facilitate the establishment of a volunteer social committee." Over the past year, residents have done just that and established a social committee. This committee emerged from informal happy hour meetings in common areas. Eventually with board and management support, the committee set about organizing themselves. After one year they had run several events for residents; a Canada Day BBQ, a Halloween candy giveaway for children and grandchildren of residents, a potluck, a Christmas-themed balcony lights contest and planned attendance at a local live play.

Another committee created a noticeable impact, the gardening committee. From humble beginnings of planting a few annuals in flower pots on a rooftop patio, this committee has grown into a force of nature by planning and planting throughout the property. This spring they purchased and planted all the annuals, perennials, and grasses, and introduced new design details to replace a plot of ugly struggling lawn. The savings this committee realised by volunteers completing the project vs paid groundskeepers were plowed into new rooftop patio furniture.

A third committee produces the CC newsletter, which is distributed to our residents about four times a year. Volunteers add photos and articles to inform residents of board decisions, good to know information or issues of interest within our area of Winnipeg. Occasionally we add articles about upcoming festivals or special events in addition to short articles about nearby *locally owned businesses* that offer services enhancing our community, such as; coffee shops, pubs/restaurants, and medical or personal services.

Collectively these three committees, all formed within the past 24 months, have over a dozen volunteer CC residents. Collectively these volunteers have planned social events, improved our property with beautiful trees, shrubs, plants, and via the newsletter, helped keep residents informed about CC committee activity, plans and other events within our larger community. These committees all started small but have successfully become larger, with the participation of our diverse residents.

Some other CC's have organized committees that sponsor yoga sessions, small lending libraries or game nights for young and old. Each CC often has within its resident body, current or retired professionals with a vast array of expertise and experience. If asked and encouraged, they might volunteer a few hours to act as an informal advisory group useful for the board and community to tackle upcoming projects. One CC I am aware of has managed to obtain the expertise of an experienced resident engineer to assist with technical aspects of an upcoming large capital improvement project.

With the assistance of a few committee volunteers, you can expect to see benefits beyond social events and property beautification. You will also see improved security and lowered repair costs caused by misuse. Once you develop relationships with your neighbors, you also begin to look out for them, especially the very young, old or those needing some assistance with everyday needs. Knowing who lives in your community is the first step to knowing who does not or should not be in your CC, another step to improve security and eliminate property damage and theft.

Building up is always harder than tearing down. Community building will not occur overnight, it takes time, patience and persistence, anything meaningful does and always has, there are no shortcuts. Your choice to buy into a condo corporation could be more than a financial investment, it could be an investment in personal growth and community building. Like compound interest, small investments of time will reap huge rewards in the years to come.

COMMUNICATION SUPPORTS IT ALL

Community starts with communication (well, at least with the first seven letters). If you want to build a community feeling at your condo property, you must recognize that the communication needs to be timely, two-way, and each message must have a sender and a receiver. The receiver in particular should be considered when composing the message, otherwise it could be misunderstood. Consider the type of information to be conveyed and the relevancy to the receiver before sending the message. Also, attempt to ensure the communication is two-way. If you find you are sending out many messages and getting no feedback, consider that the communication channel may be broken.

Besides the regular communications between the property manager and owners, via phone or email (or in-person for the resident manager case), consider other ways to keep the communication channel open. Newsletters are a common means to convey useful and relevant information to owners. The information could include contact details for the manager, upcoming maintenance or service actions, or even upcoming social events. As well, the newsletter could include reminders for owners to do the seasonal or regular maintenance in their own units (such as furnace filters, smoke detector batteries, etc.). If you do publish a newsletter, decide on a schedule and stick to it. After all, you will not have much credibility if you publish a quarterly newsletter only once or twice a year, or if the summer newsletter comes out in October.

Some condo corporations maintain their own websites to keep their owners informed. As well, many property managers have a website with an owner login area to place service requests or obtain electronic copies of their condo documents. My own condo corporation has incorporated these ideas and set up an information kiosk, in the form of an online unit owner handbook (UAB), using Google Drive (which is free). Our UAB contains copies of the condo docs, our annual budgets and audited financial statements, along with copies of past newsletters, reserve fund studies, management agreements, AGM minutes, insurance certificates plus many other documents deemed useful to our owners.

Another aspect of communication is being open and transparent on how the Board governs the corporation. To that end, our Board has developed several policies to improve our consistency, and published them for all to see in our UAB.

So in conclusion, if you want to have an effective and enjoyable community at your condo, get involved on the Board or at least interact with your Board to ensure the governance is effective and economical. Volunteer to help out on various initiatives via committees – afterall "many hands make light work". Be both a sender and receiver to ensure effective two-way communication. Think about and internalize the thought "*where everyone can contribute towards something larger than themselves*". If you are doing these things you should be well on your way to an enjoyable community life.

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condo owners 🍀

¹ <https://ccitoronto.org/condovoice/43>