

Condo Smarts

Headline: Building Community

Topic: Strata Living

Publication / Date: The Province, Oct 8, 2015

Written by: Tony Gioventu

Dear Tony: How do strata properties develop communities? Our strata is 7 years old and 91 units. We are a fairly typical community of mixed families and singles, and our building has a recreation room, swimming pool and hot tub. We have tried hosting pot luck dinners over the past 3 years, and some games nights, but it is usually the same 10 or 15 people who show up. At our AGM in August only 20 people showed up, and we have a quorum bylaw so the meeting was able to go ahead, but there is no interest in growing our community. Are there other stratas in BC who have had better success?

Karen James

Dear Karen: New strata developments often take 10-15 years to develop into thriving neighbourhoods. In many new developments there are a variety of new owners who have never lived in a strata before where this may be their first purchase, and within the first 5-7 years, many of the first purchasers will have sold their homes to move up to larger condos, townhouses or detached homes. Once a base group of owners has established, there are a number of conditions that will contribute to the community's health. Trust is the most important ingredient in developing strata communities. Building trust requires strata corporations to frequently communicate with their owners, disclose business decisions about the operations of the strata, plan for the future, comply with the law, and enforce bylaws reasonably and fairly. Strata corporations are businesses. Owners are shareholders of the business, and they are best engaged when they know what's going on. Strata councils often fail to communicate the normal business to the owners and tenants. An elevator/mail box notice board that highlights the recent council business is an excellent method to keep everyone connected. A web site that hosts strata information provides everyone with direct access. The site can also provide links to other resources available to the owners and tenants in the building.

The most common complaint I hear at strata meetings when a major expense or special levy is on the agenda, is always the surprise that a major levy is suddenly due or that this much work needs to be done. Long term planning provides owners with critical information to prepare for the financial demands of special levies or to sufficiently fund the annual budget to avoid future special levies. Take your depreciation report, identify the major expenses within the next 5-10 years in your strata, and include a planning report with your routine owner notices and your annual report. Everyone will be grateful of the long term notice and it removes surprises. Any crisis in a strata may result in conflict if your strata is not prepared. Most crisis is caused by strata corporations unable to conduct repairs and renewals because they either don't have the funds or the owners won't approve special levies.

Complying with the *Strata Property Act* and understanding the strata bylaws and how they are enforced is also a key to building trust. When strata councils enforce bylaws against some owners, and ignore others especially council members who also commit the same violations, the owners will lose confidence in the council. Strata councils often talk about problem owners who harass them and create trouble, yet when we look closely at these disputes, the conflicts are often fuelled by strata councils who are initially unwilling to comply with the Act or the strata bylaws.

We have a broad spectrum of people in our strata communities from a variety of cultures, traditions, and experiences. The successful stratas across the province all share common threads: owners and tenants committed as volunteers to their strata councils, a willingness to treat everyone fairly and comply with the law, a constant level of contact and communication with owners, tenants and occupants, and a long term plan to sustain their communities.