

## BUILDING COMMUNITY BASICS

**Community association events and activities are great in theory, but how do you really get residents involved? Follow these tips:**

**WELCOME RESIDENTS WHEN THEY MOVE IN.** When new owners move in, have a committee of neighbors personally welcome them. Find out a little about the new residents and their interests. Let them know about the community and how it works. Follow up with a phone call a few weeks later to see if they have any questions. This is also a great time to have them fill out a questionnaire to find out the activities in which they would like to participate. Ask those who give you new and exciting ideas if they want to help organize the activity.

**SEND THANK YOU NOTES.** When someone volunteers, ensure that they are thanked, whether in person, by email, or a written note, preferably from a board member. Knowing that the board or manager appreciates their involvement encourages participation.

**CREATE ACTIVITIES FOR NEW RESIDENTS.** Establish a “newcomers club” where new residents mingle each month with each other. Provide information at each monthly meeting, with rotating subjects, to help familiarize members with the area. Try to integrate the newcomers into broader community activities.

**GIVE AWAY FREEBIES.** Everyone likes to get something for nothing. Solicit a donation of goods or services as giveaways for your next event. The sponsor will gain visibility within your community, and you’ll draw more people to the activity. When residents attend the activity, they can mingle and learn more about the association and its benefits.

**BOARD OFFICE HOURS.** One or more members of the board could consider being available at least once every month to address residents’ concerns or questions. The office hours and location should be published and well-known. The association’s governing documents, resolutions, and meeting minutes should be available just in case residents want to see them. This interaction will show residents that the board cares about the community and that it is open to new ideas.

**HOLD QUARTERLY TOWN HALL MEETINGS.** Community associations can hold these meetings to share information. Board members ought to present an agenda of current issues and conduct a question-and-answer forum. Town hall meetings are often very well attended.

**SPONSOR ASSOCIATION PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY-WIDE EVENTS.** Don’t limit involvement to the boundaries of your association. Encourage resident participation in local organizations, such as the Boys and Girls Club, the YMCA, or Rotary Club. Send your association’s newsletter and upcoming programs to local officials and organizations so that they know about your association—and that your residents are ready to participate in their events.

**SUPPORT COMMUNITY AWARENESS IN LOCAL POLITICS.** Use your community clubhouse or designated meeting space to host a “candidates night” during a local election. Allow an insert in your community newsletter, paid by the candidates, in a standardized format that includes a picture along with the candidate’s short bio and campaign focus points. Appoint a group of volunteers who are willing to rotate attendance at each local government meeting as liaisons for the association. The liaisons demonstrate your community’s interest in governmental affairs and report back to the board.

**ESTABLISH STANDING COMMITTEES WITH MEANINGFUL RESPONSIBILITIES AND CLEAR CHARTERS.** If residents have defined roles and responsibilities with clear goals, they’re more likely to participate. Also, hold your social events at locations where people are already gathered. Have a pool party or a volleyball contest during operating hours. People who weren’t originally planning on attending might get involved.

**LOOK FOR A REASON TO CELEBRATE.** Celebrate your association’s successes. Celebrate holidays—big and small, traditional and quirky. It’s a great way to meet neighbors and get people enthusiastic about the community.



## THE NEW NEIGHBORS

Forced to spend more time at home during the covid-19 pandemic, some community association residents have been finding more friends, support, and empathy next door.

By Pamela Babcock

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THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC has brought unique challenges and pressures to community associations. It also has created an opportunity for residents to support one another and to make an effort to know—and even become friends with—their neighbors.

As the darkest days of the pandemic wind down and more restrictions are lifted, community association managers and board members say they've been heartened by the acts of kindness they've seen. Pools and clubhouses may have been closed and common area furniture carted to the closet, but countless volunteers have stepped up to help their neighbors during this uncertain time.

Communities have worked to foster a sense of togetherness while rethinking popular in-person events. For example, a much-anticipated Veterans Day potluck became a touching display that commemorates veterans, the pool party turned into a food truck corral, and elaborate plans were developed to ensure that end-of-the-year holiday ornaments weren't cross-contaminated when decorating common areas.

No one's saying the pandemic is making everyone "besties" for life. But a recent study suggests that people living in the U.S. actually could be growing more friendly with their neighbors and increasingly grateful for those relationships, particularly since so many were unable to visit family and friends.

Nearly 70 percent said they now know their neighbors better, and 65 percent reported that they've tried to be more friendly. Meanwhile, nearly 7 in 10 said they appreciate their neighbors more than ever, according to a poll of 2,500 people by Improvenet, an online home remodeling resource.

Scot Joseph Eastwood, CMCA, AMS, community manager at Dos Santos Homeowners Association in Santa Fe, N.M., says he thinks neighborliness has improved. He says older residents seem more supportive of one another and some "who formerly were non-communicative" have become far more friendly and have even put disputes behind them. Although younger residents seem a little less tolerant of each other given the stress of working remotely amongst plenty of noise and distractions, Eastwood is encouraged.

"All in all, considering the State of New Mexico's tight COVID restrictions, our community tolerated a full year of major disruptions to their lifestyles extremely well," Eastwood says.

### UNDERSTANDING GOES BOTH WAYS

Marcy Nicholas, a certified account manager with Foster Management in Longmont, Colo., says her company has worked to be more "empathetic to others' shortfalls" when it comes to late payments, delayed homeowner responses, and short notice on project requests.

Board members understanding that many have been challenged—through the death of an elderly parent or relative, a job loss, or having stir-crazy children struggling with remote learning—has made a big difference. Nicholas says she hopes that if anything positive can come out of the past year, it will be that boards and owners have a heightened understanding that both play a key role in making their community better and that "it isn't one against the other."



Jared McNabb, CMCA, PCAM, general manager at Brook House Condominium Trust in Brookline, Mass., says residents have expressed “a tremendous amount of appreciation” for its 25-member staff—particularly those on the building’s frontlines, such as security and maintenance staff who helped maintain some sense of normalcy.

McNabb isn’t sure if people are friendlier in the 800-unit condominium, but he senses a stronger sense of community. “That phrase that we’re all in this together is definitely true,” McNabb says. “I see a lot more people during the day when I do my building rounds, and I’m learning a lot more people’s names. It’s been nice.”

### GOOD DEEDS

Random acts of kindness appeared at the beginning of the lockdown. At Quail Crossing Homeowners Association in Longmont, Colo., a resident “snow fairy” began snow-blowing the entire block rather than just the sidewalk in front of his house, Nicholas says.

Concerned about struggling families, Briarwood Homeowners Association in Charlottesville, Va., converted its Little Free Library into a food pantry stocked with donated nonperishable foods in the community of 202 single-family homes.

To help boost spirits, Clover Creek Homeowners Association in Longmont got local food trucks to come on a regular basis. The move gave cooped up residents the opportunity to “go out” for dinner, in a sense, and to engage with masked neighbors while maintaining distancing.

“There was a positive sense of community that we don’t typically see—neighbors wanting to help each other out,” Nicholas says. “We certainly hope this continues.”

Meanwhile, residents of community associations around the country signed up to help neighbors, particularly those who feared leaving their homes and catching the virus or those who were quarantined.

The Representative Condominium, a 206-unit building in Arlington, Va., compiled a roster of floor captains who agreed to check on older residents, coordinate a volunteer to make pharmacy runs, and provide tech support so they could have video chats with children and grandchildren, says Paul Gerton, board president of the association.

At Crown Colony Club in Ocean Ridge, Fla., recently retired residents Dan and Gloria Somerville have been “a major force” working the phones and scouring websites to help older residents get vaccination appointments and make carpool arrangements for them, says Tana Callahan, CMCA, president of Howe Inc. in Boynton Beach, Fla.

Brook House set up Neighbors Helping Neighbors, a program where management connects volunteers with residents in need of help. It also was used for people who had tested positive for COVID-19 and had told the association that they were quarantining.

“We obviously wanted to limit them coming into the common areas of the community,” McNabb says. Nearly 35 people stepped up to volunteer. “We had more calls for volunteers than we did for people actually needing the assistance,” he adds.

### RETHINKING ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS

For most, the pandemic meant locking up amenities such as the pool, spa, and fitness centers, which only added to owner stress. Communities shifted trivia night to virtual platforms, moved exercise and line dancing classes from the gym to the parking lot, and even hauled exercise equipment such as rowing machines outside.

With Halloween trick-or-treating nixed, The Greens at Ute Creek in Longmont, Colo., delivered goody bags with candy, popcorn, and masks to doorsteps in the patio home community of mostly senior citizens.





"They are used to having kiddos come into their neighborhood decked out in their costumes. It was their highlight," Nicholas says.

Instead of the Veterans Day potluck where residents bring liquor to share, the Representative Condominium went with a Veterans Day commemorative display in the lobby. Residents were encouraged to place pictures and books related to their service on a table at their convenience so neighbors could come later to view the display. "Not the same as a party, but it was well-received," Gerton notes.

Likewise, each year for the holidays, volunteers at the Representative typically spend a weekend afternoon decorating the lobby with trees, wreaths, and more. A table with wine made it even more fun. It was "a really big deal," Gerton admits.

This year, the project boiled down to a volunteer asking who was still willing to help, then setting up a schedule, assigning tasks, and detailing exactly which tree the person was to decorate. To avoid cross-contamination, the volunteer divided ornaments into bags and put each volunteer's name on the bag so people decorating knew what to touch and what to avoid. Each person or couple was assigned a time window to work when no one else was there. And yes, of course, masks were required.

homes sold within the community," notes Dave Whelan, Westlake's treasurer.

### YES, THERE WERE CHALLENGES

In a year when so many people's routines have been upended, it's no surprise many have seen an uptick in nuisance complaints as well as rules enforcement issues.

"I think there's a heightened sensitivity to noise," McNabb says, adding that's particularly the case if children doing remote learning have gym class and are doing jumping jacks and running in place for 45 minutes three days a week while a resident in the unit below is having virtual meeting calls with colleagues. "It's distracting and upsetting."

Food smells have been another gripe. Some days when he walks the halls at lunch, McNabb says he feels he's in a food court: "We have a diverse community, and it makes me hungry. There are a lot of good cooks here." But, he admits, "Some foods are more odiferous than others and that can be offensive to some people."

Construction noise has been another peeve, but infrastructure needs of a 50-year-old building can't always be halted. McNabb says communicating with residents when to expect noise has been necessary. Last year, Brook House Condominium Trust suspended more than \$1 million in planned work to its brick façade. "It was going to be far too disruptive," McNabb says.

Owners' maintenance requests are up since someone who may have had a leaking toilet, dripping faucet, or crack in the wall for years suddenly is home and wants it fixed.

Nicholas says her company initially received a barrage of requests but often discovered the issue was the owner's responsibility. Owners in multifamily communities often wanted their windows, front door, or garage replaced while those at single-family properties would complain the sidewalk in front of their home should be fixed, although in most cases, that is the owner's responsibility and not the city's or the association's.

"I found there was a huge learning curve for many residents as they suddenly had more time in the community to be observant," Nicholas says, adding that Foster Management encourages residents to review their community website and governing documents.

In Florida, Callahan says challenges have arisen when financially strapped children move in with their



parents or grandparents. Older residents who notice that their next-door neighbor suddenly has their 40- or 50-year-old son or daughter living with them give rise to plenty of questions for the association about where the new person has been, whether they're going to be in the communal laundry room or elevator, and more. "We do our best to allay concerned residents' fears," Callahan says.

The Representative Condominium hasn't seen a jump in complaints but has received calls about residents not wearing masks. "Management has issued violators a (warning) letter, but that's about it," Gerton says.

### LOOK TO THE FUTURE

No one knows what the pandemic's long-term impact will be on community associations and neighborliness. But most agree that some steps—such as setting up a volunteer network for those in need—could be used again in the future.

Meanwhile, some communities are looking to possibly re-envision areas where residents carved out

their own place to connect. For example, last summer at High Point of Delray West Condominium Association in Delray Beach, Fla., a rarely used shuffleboard court became a popular spot for residents to gather at a safe distance on folding chairs to discuss the latest book or current events.

"For many people who did not know their neighbors before, the pandemic has offered them an opportunity to actually get to know the person who lives next door to them," Callahan says. "Most of us are very social creatures and when community activities ceased and social structures broke down, I think neighbors who may not have talked to each other before found friends in each other."

Adds McNabb: "We've certainly seen how the pandemic has impacted us on a global scale, but I think it also showed us that we are very close and that communities are important in so many ways. And I think people began to look more toward their community and what it means to be part of one."

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## THAT'S THE SPIRIT!

By Steve Bates

Engaging residents through events, activities and volunteerism turns a collection of homes into a community. Find your formula, and you'll be well on your way to boosting pride and promoting harmony.

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AT FIRST GLANCE, Eastman and Riverwoods Plantation might appear to have little in common. The former is nestled in the wooded hills near Dartmouth College in Grantham, N.H.; the latter is located in sandy Estero, Fla., just a short sail from the Gulf Coast. But each is rich in the kind of spirit that ties neighbor to neighbor in many disparate ways.

They boast an enthusiasm for their communities that makes people proud to live there, provides a

firm foundation for property values and makes governing their associations less of a challenge than it might be otherwise.

Developers, managers, association volunteers, residents and real estate agents all across the country strive to build, nurture and promote the harmony and togetherness that turn a collection of homes into a community, but it's not easy. Successful community building takes time and effort, and it has to be based

on a shared vision that varies from one association to the next.

“You don’t build a sense of community overnight,” says Joe Winkler, CMCA, vice president of marketing with Keystone Pacific Property Management in Irvine, Calif.

Community can wither if not nurtured. And according to some, spirit and togetherness are getting harder to maintain in today’s divisive world. “It’s deteriorating across the nation,” observes Rachel Miller, manager of Riverwoods Plantation RV Condominium Association.

But when community-building efforts work, the end result can be highly rewarding, though occasionally difficult to define.

“It’s almost a feeling,” says Leslie Moses, chief community living officer of Eastman Community Association.

Eastman, which is celebrating its 45th anniversary in 2016, consists of about 1,500 single-family homes and condominiums on about 3,600 acres encompassing three small towns. A lake is the focus of recreational activities during warm months. But at Eastman’s spiritual center is a set of core values: collaboration, cooperation, integrity, respect, responsibility, shared commitment and sustainability. Leaders and residents embrace diversity of interests and opinions, foster volunteerism, partner with local governments and work hard to protect the property for future generations.

Having nice amenities, such as a community center and athletic facilities, helps any association build a sense of belonging and pride. Yet a network of dedicated volunteers who share core values is what makes Eastman and many other communities tick, says Moses. Because residents feel so strongly about Eastman, the association usually doesn’t have to beg them to get involved. “You’ll often see them come forward on their own if they feel passionate about something,” she says.

“It’s the way the community has always been,” says Christie Cecchetti, co-chair of the association’s recreation committee and a resident for more than 20 years.

She says having many generations represented in Eastman helps foster spirit, even though that diversity creates a need for a wide offering of programs and amenities. Teenagers run a snack shack during the summer; older residents help raise funds for charity; and families flock to a campout night. All of the efforts were recognized in 2016, when the association was named a MetLife Foundation Best Intergenerational Communities Award winner.

Cecchetti says residents who wish to volunteer even one hour a week—or just help out on a one-time basis—are always welcome. “It’s very easy to get involved at Eastman.”





## BOUND TOGETHER

That's also the case at Riverwoods Plantation, a 55-plus community where 640 manufactured, mobile and motor homes occupy about 60 of the 78 acres. The remaining land includes recreational areas, boat docks and a boat storage area. Civic involvement and volunteering are the two main activities that bind residents to one another and to the association, says Miller.

Many residents attend local government meetings. Recently, when Estero was incorporated as a village with locally elected officials, Riverwoods Plantation residents began speaking out in favor of more bike paths and other amenities that would benefit the wider community.

In addition, the community sponsors an Olympics-styled competition for seniors in the region; proceeds fund a scholarship for a local high school student. Hospitals, blood banks, food banks and a shelter for abused women are among other worthy causes supported by residents. In 2010, Riverwoods Plantation was named a CAI "Humanitarian Community of the Year" for its service to the broader community.

"We really are family," states Miller.

Perhaps Riverwoods Plantation's most unique volunteer program is its Half Bubble team, which supplements the work of the association's

maintenance staff and saves the community uncounted thousands of dollars annually. Named after the level and how bubbles help contractors determine whether things lie on the same plane, the group's volunteers gather every Wednesday morning to build or repair vital facilities in the community. They've fixed retaining walls, pilings, piers, walkways and a ramp at the riverfront; installed a geothermal heating system for a pool; dug irrigation lines and installed sprinklers throughout the community; and built a pavilion with sinks, restrooms and a patio for barbecues.

Bob Fumanti has been pitching in for Half Bubble for three years. A former teacher, he looks forward to straining muscles with fellow volunteers each week.

"I don't do tennis. I don't do volleyball," he states. But he knows a thing or two about masonry work and has learned other skills. "These people are very, very committed to what they do."

And the team takes great pride when a project is completed.

Half Bubble was formed in 1987 by nine residents who had significant construction experience. At times, the group has comprised more than 100 volunteers with just about every contractors' trade represented. The volunteers who aren't trained professionals learn on the job. Riverwoods Plantation budgets for materials.



## ENGAGING EFFORTS

There are many ways to build and maintain community spirit. Smart association leaders are willing to try new things and abandon programs that don't work.

Jane Dembner joined the nearly 50-year-old Columbia Association—situated between Baltimore, Md., and Washington, D.C.—as its director of planning and community affairs in 2010. Dembner says she was inspired by the community's adherence to its founder's ideals, which include a steadfast commitment to all forms of diversity. That's why she introduced a community-building speaker series.

The program is designed to engender dialogue on thought-provoking topics. Recently, the president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, tackled the topic of racial and economic diversity in the community. Another time, Dembner brought in an expert on the retail industry to explain why it wasn't economically viable to replace a grocery store that closed in the community.

Dembner suggests board members and managers focus on programs that highlight an association's unique aspects; doing so can help kindle or brighten the flame of community pride. For example, to showcase Columbia's open spaces, the association has worked to make local roads more bike friendly and has organized walking tours with a naturalist.

Occasionally, adversity can heighten and

illuminate community spirit. East Lake Village Community Association in Yorba Linda, Calif., has had an active and engaged base of residents for many years. But in November 2008, when a massive fire destroyed more than 300 homes in the area, that spirit shifted into high gear. Public officials asked East Lake Village for volunteers to work at an emergency relief center.

"Within 24 hours, I had all of the shifts filled for a week," recalls association General Manager Susan Janowicz, CMCA. "When disaster strikes close to home, everybody wants to get involved."

## PLANNING FOR CHANGES

Board members and managers also need to keep an eye on changes in demographics and their ears close to the ground to discern what people want—and what they don't.

"We used to do a casino night. It was hugely popular," says Janowicz. "Then it started dying off. We weren't getting the attendance that we used to get."

The board asked why money was being spent on the event, and it was dropped. The community only funds programs that break even. "Demographics change. You've got to keep that in mind," she says.

Moses, Eastman's community living officer, says associations just need to listen. "People will tell you what they want," she says.





Once a community figures that out, it needs a plan for capitalizing on its residents' desires. Then it needs to communicate that plan and stick with it.

"Communities that do it well have an overall vision," says Winkler, the California management company executive.

Lynda Ellis, owner of Capitol Concierge, a catering and event planning firm based in Rockville, Md., says communities need to market their identity or brand to residents.

"You've got to get into the 21st century. A lot of associations aren't," she says. "You need to text residents. You need a Facebook page. Social media is really important."

### HELP WANTED

Recruiting volunteers is essential and so is thanking them. It costs little, keeps existing volunteers motivated and encourages other residents to get involved.

Communities having trouble getting residents to volunteer should start by asking them to do something small, says Moses. For example, ask a neighbor if he or she can hand out water to runners at a triathlon.

How you ask for help matters too. Advises Moses: "Don't say: 'Can you join a committee and meet every month for two hours?' Instead, say: 'Can you help us for a day?'"

Riverwoods Plantation sets expectations for residents before they even commit to the community. When people are considering buying a home in the Southwest Florida association, the vice president of the board sits down with the prospective buyer and explains the community's spirit and commitment to volunteerism. The message: "You're not just buying a piece of property and a unit," says Miller.

Fumanti, who builds and repairs community infrastructure as part of Riverwoods' Half Bubble team, notes that he has been all over the world during his life. He has a yacht near Baltimore and another house in the Poconos. But never has he seen a community with the kind of spirit that is evident at Riverwoods.

"Of all the places I have ever resided, this is the place I like best."

*Steve Bates is a freelance writer in the Washington, D.C., area.*

### SPIRIT ON A BUDGET

GREAT AMENITIES can help bring people together and facilitate community spirit, but expensive construction projects and elaborate shindigs aren't essential. There are many ways to build camaraderie on a tight budget.

For many events at Eastman Community Association in Grantham, N.H., volunteers lend their time and talents. "We invite an artist who teaches in a barn. We have woodcrafters working with kids to build a kayak," says Christine Cecchetti, co-chair of the recreation committee. The association's family campout night and barbecue challenge don't require much capital either.

Meanwhile, Eastman also counts on fundraising for local charities to provide a shared sense of purpose and satisfaction in helping others in need, which fits in nicely with the community's values. Not only do the efforts get people off their couches and into common areas to see their neighbors face to face, but they're doing some good for the broader community too.

Joe Winkler, CMCA, vice president of Keystone Pacific Property Management in Irvine, Calif., suggests potluck events. The association can provide the facility; volunteers can bring the food and supplies. "It makes people feel connected and motivated," he says.

Lynda Ellis, owner of Capitol Concierge, a catering and event planning firm based in Rockville, Md., agrees that casual events that cost the association little or nothing can be just as effective as expensive, highly orchestrated activities. Poker nights, movies with popcorn and pool parties with frozen treats can bring out people in big numbers. Trips to wineries and theaters also cost the association little.

When inexpensive events catch on over time, they can become traditions. For more than a decade, the Columbia Association in Maryland has sponsored a family bike ride that attracts hundreds of residents each year. Along the bike path, signs inform riders about features they are passing, which helps reinforce the value of living in the community.

Jane Dembner, the association's director of planning and community affairs, says it's a simple and cheap event to organize, but it's something that's really valued. —S.B.