

EchoJournal

A Journal for Community Association Leaders

By Larry Mesplé

Neighborhood Awareness and **Security** Assessments

Important Steps in Improving HOA Security

OPTIMIZING NEIGHBORHOOD SECURITY IS an increasingly important issue for California common interest developments (CIDs), their HOA boards of directors, and association managers. Aging populations and communities, risk of litigation, and the large size of many California CIDs bring awareness to this issue. But it is possible to assess, plan for and improve personal and community security. Neighborhood Watch—neighbors looking out for one another—is a fundamental first step.

Silvia Floriano, the Sonoma County Sheriff Department's Community Service Officer for Sonoma and the southern Sonoma Valley, states that neighbors are a community's "first line of defense." Everyone in a CID community should be aware of who belongs on the property and who doesn't. Neighborhood watch and a welcoming committee help meet this objective. Informing neighbors when we're going to be away for a period of time, reporting to law enforcement and neighbors any unusual or suspicious activity in the community, and simply looking at what's going on outside our homes and maybe pondering the activity greatly help to detect and deter crime.

In addition to neighborhood awareness, HOA boards have a whole "toolbox" of ways to enhance neighborhood security. These include maintaining and, whenever possible, upgrading the overall appearance and upkeep of a community; close cooperation with local law enforcement; immediate removal of graffiti; educating residents to call law enforcement rather than a board director or the association manager when noticing suspicious behavior; doing everything possible so that neighbors know and recognize one another; and making sure that garage or carport and the house numbers do not match, perhaps by using letters or color coding the parking area. Each of these measures when combined and coordinated is more powerful and serves the purpose of motivating criminals to practice their trade elsewhere.

Another interesting and effective tool available to an HOA board is on-site inspection and a written assessment by a professional consultant. HOA boards have these experts available to them in prioritizing measures to improve complex-wide security. Such assessments are useful as well to CID

developers and builders during the project entitlement process.

Why is Security Increasingly Important in California?

A number of reasons account for increasing attention to CID security. Perhaps first in importance is that our population is aging. Older people often worry about their personal security. They know that they are perceived as "easy targets" by determined as well as by opportunistic criminals.

Two related elements make up a second reason. Established CID communities and their facilities are themselves aging. Living units and common facilities and grounds when built and installed may not have incorporated into their design consideration for security. Landscaping has matured and filled out. Further, we are a litigious society. When purchasing, homeowners may not have thought about features of the community that they may later see as security risks. When they recognize risk, they may want measures taken that are not practical or that the association cannot afford. At that time they may bring claims of liability and litigation to their boards.

A third reason why security is becoming more important in California CIDs is the large size of many of our communities. It has been observed that people living in CIDs—and condominiums in particular—are somewhat reclusive or, perhaps better stated, more involved with their own personal affairs than is the case of homeowners in a typical single family subdivision. Strange faces in a large condominium community may not arouse the interest and attention that they would on a typical suburban street of single family homes. While in a small CID it is possible that almost everyone recognizes many or all of the residents, this is less likely in a large one. A consequence is that large CIDs suffer more crime than smaller ones.

How Bad Can It Get?

For most of us, it is difficult to imagine the following taking place fewer than ten years ago in a large and prominent San Francisco condominium complex. It happened that one unit was to be vacant for a time during the summer because the owner-occupants had left on an extended vacation. A miscreant somehow came to have the key for the temporarily unoccupied condo unit, got past the guard at one of the street entrances and “moved in.” Not only that, this person and accomplices secured keys for the condo owners’ car, which had been left in the building’s garage. For several weeks, intruders lived in and used the owners’ home and car without anyone in the complex knowing. A retired police officer lived in the complex and knew from his earlier police service a prostitute who was among those who had “moved” into the unit. But even with his trained eye, he didn’t know that she was living in the building and that illegal drugs were being sold from the unit.

In another case in a leafy North Bay condominium complex, renters for more than a year were dealing drugs from their unit and attracting undesirable visitors into the complex. Prostitution was suspected as well. Watchful neighbors became suspicious and took their concerns to the HOA board. But it took many months working with the local law enforcement and the elderly landlords to remove the renters.

What to Do? A Security Analysis in Addition to Neighborhood Awareness

HOA boards typically become conscious of the need for professional security services only after a history of break-ins, burglaries, assaults or a continuing problem of bothersome trespassers or repeated vandalism—criminal events that can negatively impact a CID’s livability and reputation. Boards must work within the guidelines of their CC&Rs and it sometimes happens that directors forget what they are empowered to do and overreach. On the other hand, they may not respond quickly enough to reported risks or suspected criminal activities. If a problem is reported or even simply foreseeable and a board does nothing, it can possibly be held liable.

Ken Carlisle is a consultant and principal of The Carlisle Group. An MBA and a former Marine Corps officer, Mr. Carlisle has worked more than 23 years in security for individuals and property. He concurs that neighborhood awareness is critical and believes that spending money on security measures before actual dangers and needs have been identified is a waste of resources. An important early step, he says, is a thorough assessment that not only identifies potential problems but also provides realistic solutions for intelligent and effective security programs, systems, and solutions. The assessment determines if the HOA board has the will and budget to accomplish identified solutions. It also reveals whether competent management exists to implement them.

To save money, or from not knowing a cost-responsible alternative, many boards or a committee undertake on their own or ask local law enforcement for a walk-through assessment. This is a rational step and may be helpful, especially for a smaller CID. Unfortunately, typical board members—and perhaps also law enforcement officers—don’t have the time (or seasoned expertise) to do a thorough job. Such quick walk-throughs often leave some “stones unturned.” They do not provide the “turn-key” assurance of a professional consultant and a specific, customized, prioritized plan for implementation. Security programs, Mr. Carlisle states,

must be “well planned, effective, workable, affordable, and at the same time not diminish a community’s livability.”

“What is needed,” Mr. Carlisle says, “is an all-embracing professional assessment with well thought-out solutions. The solutions must consider the HOA’s budgetary constraints. It must also be sensitive to their impact on the CID’s livability.”

The Security Assessment

When a board authorizes management to contract for professional attention to its community’s security problems, the first step is an assessment including an on-site inspection of the property. A full assessment includes the following elements:

- Formal identification of vulnerabilities and exposures that already have or can lead to security problems.
- Documented and proven effective solutions, courses of action, and identified costs.
- Confirmation that the HOA has the financial means and its board of directors the will to achieve recommended solutions.
- Confirmation that association management is competent to assist in implementing proposed systems and procedures.

Basic on-site security inspections and written assessments seek answers to the following questions:

- What are the CID’s security exposures and vulnerabilities?
- Are entry doors solid core and installed with deadbolts and eye-holes?
- Are door strike plates secured with 3-inch screws to prevent being forced open?
- Are locks re-keyed and not moved to another unit or amenity building? (This is more broadly relevant to a rental community than to ownership units. But it is one that prospective owners or occupants of any residential unit should consider.)
- Are all keys for common area facilities closely controlled and accounted for?
- Are door jambs constructed with solid wood and free of any rot, breaks, cracks or other damage?

- Do all windows, including those on the second floor, close properly and are they equipped with locks?
- Are sliding door locks intact? Do they have more than one lock to prevent lifting the doors out of their tracks?
- Are the outdoors areas of the CID complex well lighted? Good illumination should be the norm at all entrances and dark areas, including open parking areas and garages.
- Are shrubs and other landscaping trimmed to remove hiding places for an intruder?
- Is there control over who enters and leaves the building or association property?
- Are fire stairs locked from the outside so that residents can exit but others cannot enter?
- Are mailboxes and public areas well lighted and equipped with good locks?
- Is the property well maintained? Are burnt-out light bulbs replaced promptly, landscaping maintained, and graffiti removed immediately?
- Are residents in the complex trustworthy neighbors who watch out for each other?
- Is there a “Neighborhood Watch Program? (If not, a proactive CID should think about starting one.)

A skilled expert will see problems that owners may not identify. He or she should inspect the grounds, common areas, and—both inside and out—at least two typical units. Interviews of a sample of owners or tenants are helpful. For a useful assessment, the consultant must, within a relatively short period of time, understand how the community functions and what its security issues are. Interviewing residents and observing daily routines—day, night, and weekends—help provide that information.

The Importance of “Getting It Down on Paper”

Before memorializing an assessment, the board should review a draft report and give it serious consideration. Review by a good attorney is also recommended before creating the final formal document, which includes the risks, vulnerabilities and recommendations of the professional. This formal

document cannot be ignored; it can be used as legal evidence in litigation.

How Much Does an Assessment Cost?

The typical cost of a complete written security assessment for a condominium complex starts at about \$1,500 and can run to \$5,000. The cost of recommendations including other services, equipment, or stationing of on-site security personnel is additional.

Other Security Services

Consultants can provide standard operating procedures customized to meet an association’s requirements and can help the board prioritize security enhancements. Implementation includes training and orientation in recommended systems. Also, when a serious crime happens and the board and residents want immediate and workable cost-responsible solutions, a security consultant must be able to respond quickly.

Other services include providing access to qualified and dependable resources and background checks of contractors, vendors and prospective association employees.

Will a Security Consultant Save the Association Money?

To this, Mr. Carlisle responds:

“Possibly. If the HOA anticipates the costs of repair and replacement due to crime, implementing security measures and preventing losses saves money, it makes sense to contract with a consultant when losses from criminal attacks exceed the costs of a planned, proposed, or budgeted security program. As an example, assume that someone breaks a window. This is the only thing that’s happened and it costs \$500 to replace the window. Should the board of directors spend \$1,000 for a security assessment? Probably not. And boards don’t spend money [on a security assessment] to deal with minor problems such as covering graffiti.”

But on the other hand, what if someone is assaulted or mugged in the garage or elsewhere in the buildings or on the grounds? Is it worthwhile to call in a security consultant? Most would agree that it is indeed good for the psychological well being of the residents to

know that measures have been taken to prevent recurrence.

Why Not Wait Until There is a Problem?

It is human nature that no one wants to pay for assistance until a problem shows up. But waiting for the problem could have horrific consequences. As noted earlier, boards and their managers need to keep in mind possible liability if nothing proactive is done. If there is a crime and it is reasonably obvious that it was foreseeable, the board may be liable. Association management may also be liable.

Inadequate security can also impact property values. A direct relationship links poor security, crime, and lowered property values. Astute real estate agents and brokers evaluate a CID’s history of crime when advising clients. Sophisticated prospects will themselves often research communities for livability and any incidence of crime before committing to buy or rent. High crime or recent crime reduces a CID unit’s sales appeal.

Security Reviews for Developers and Builders

Progressive developers, builders and investors obtain professional security assessments and include security systems and procedures in their proposed or existing real estate projects. Most know that municipalities often have at least some security requirements incorporated into their building codes.

When a developer takes a CID through the planning and entitlement process, a thorough security assessment helps prepare the developer to best answer planners’ questions. It can be useful as well in addressing neighborhood concerns. In short, a security assessment is a background document that a developer can use, if needed, with all project stakeholders.

When preparing a written security assessment for a proposed development project, a competent consultant contacts the local police or sheriff’s department for crime statistics and for their views of the neighborhood. The consultant will also talk with neighbors and take a careful, seasoned look at the physical area and site plan to spot and prevent potential dangers. Assessments

for developers in the planning stage typically start at \$2,500.

Conclusion

Security is on the long list of issues and responsibilities HOA boards of directors and association managers have on their agendas. But they also have a number of tools for addressing the challenge of optimizing security. A first step is to make every effort to encourage and facilitate community (neighborhood) awareness. Second, they take measures to show outsiders that their community is well maintained and attended to. Third, they can order an assessment by a professional consultant. An assessment provides the board with a comprehensive prioritized list of possible security risks and the costs to mitigate them. And it determines if the board has the will, funds, and management to implement reasonable security measures while operating within their CC&R guidelines. Future complexes can be designed to incorporate security enhancements at a time when they can provide the maximum benefit for the minimum cost. E]

A later article will consider security from the standpoint of board responsibilities. It will also provide some tips on how association managers can help.

Larry Mesplé serves as newsletter editor for Management 4 HOAs, a firm that manages more than 40 homeowner associations in Marin and Sonoma counties. Previously he worked in real estate development for three decades. He is a former president of the Sonoma Greens Condominium Association where he resides.