Integrated Maintenance Programs for Community Associations

Maintenance of condominiums, townhomes, and planned-unit developments is often left to the expertise of professional management. Everyone understands the need to cut the grass, landscape, pay the utility bills, etc. Excellent management teams will integrate day-to-day management with a plan for long-term care, the budgeting process, and homeowner responsibilities. The benefits of a maintenance program are well known: fewer emergency repairs, lower operating costs, extended remaining useful lives of the common elements, less disruption to homeowners, and annual budgeting made easier. Establishing a maintenance program is part of a best management practice and will identify what you’ll need to implement in an integrated maintenance program.

How do we define maintenance? Two ways to understand the health of your maintenance program is to ask whether maintenance is reactive or proactive. The old saying, “If it ain’t broke don’t fix it” characterizes reactive maintenance program. Reactive maintenance is marked by emergency repairs (frequent and untimely calls to the management team) while proactive maintenance is usually under contract, planned and systematic. If your community Association or the Board is experiencing reactive fixes to problems, there is either an issue of deferred maintenance or lack of an integrated maintenance program. The integrated maintenance program is therefore proactive.

An integrated maintenance program starts with defining the necessary activities for frequencies of maintenance. First and foremost is defining the common elements subject to maintenance. The Association’s declaration defines the common elements but usually not in a concise manner. Although a full Reserve Study, as defined by Community Associations Institute (CAI), does not require the identification of maintenance expenses, an enhanced Reserve Study will go the extra mile with solutions and procedures to identify the very activities necessary to maintain the common elements and which property elements the homeowner must maintain. A Reserve Study can provide an independent evaluation to clearly define the items requiring replacement and maintenance activities. Each Association should therefore compile a set of responsibilities for maintenance and replacement between the homeowner and Association. Thus the integrated maintenance program has a defined set of common elements.

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The management team and Board can define the specific maintenance activity for any given common element through contractors, the manufacturers, owner’s manuals, or a Reserve Study. For example, a contractor who most recently installed, replaced or conducted reactive maintenance on items like equipment, the roofs, pavement systems, landscape, etc. can create a maintenance schedule. Usually you can obtain their opinion for free. The manufacturer or materials supplier is another good source to help define a maintenance schedule. For example, a roof membrane is supplied by a manufacturer who has a lot to gain from proper maintenance. The contractor who installs the roof membrane as a system is also a potential source to identify an appropriate maintenance program. Owner’s manuals also provide valuable information on required maintenance for various items of equipment, i.e., air conditioners, furnaces, pumps and motors.

A Reserve Study often defines each item (reserve component) for future replacement. The Board and management team should identify a maintenance schedule for each reserve component. The maintenance program consists of a series of maintenance schedules for each common element or reserve component. Matching a maintenance schedule to each reserve component is a good way of deciding whether and when to replace the item. For example, a routine (proactive) maintenance inspection of a boiler may define a required repair expense. That immi-
nent expense together with the history of repair expenditures as compared to the boiler’s replacement cost might justify its replacement. Integrated maintenance programs have a maintenance policy, schedule of maintenance activities, history and a future replacement date, and costs for each common element or reserve component.

An integrated maintenance program takes the guesswork out of setting the maintenance budget. Association budget meetings take less time. An integrated maintenance program is proactive, has a defined set of common elements or components, a maintenance policy and schedule for each, and works in concert with the long-range Reserve Study.

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