



# That “First Day of School” Feeling

Inside a Newly Transitioned Condo’s Unit Owners Meeting

**T**his is the August issue, and for the kids in our communities, the first day of school will soon put an end to these summer days of carefree sun and fun. I was reminded of that first day when I recently attended a unit owners meeting for a condominium — their first one since the transition from developer control. The air inside the meeting hall had the distinct “first day of school” feel to it. And like those all-important beginnings of the school year, no student really wants to be there, but all realize the importance and show up.

This particular condominium was a small community of 30 units, built within the last two years. The executive board members were not really new to the game, and this would become apparent to me very quickly. While none had served on an executive board before, each had at least a modicum of leadership experience.

## Leadership Skills

The president seemed especially able to field questions from the audience — must have been his many years of experience as chairman of the bowling league. I am mentioning him because he had a good leadership style that bears illustrating. For instance, a unit owner raised his hand, again like back in the classroom (there was always someone who knew it all). For whatever reason, this unit owner felt that he could screen in his porch without permission from the board. The president politely validated the man’s question with words to the effect that, “Well, with these documents that are a bit vague regarding porches, I could see how you might believe that, but,

if you look at the bylaws, it specifically says that any alterations to the unit, common element, or limited common element — which your porch would be — needs approval from the board. But let’s ask our legal counsel.” All eyes were then on me and I reaffirmed the president’s response, backed him up, and added that the proposed alteration would need unit owners’ approval as well. “OK,” he said, “just wanted to check.” Although the unit owner didn’t get the answer he wanted, he wasn’t embarrassed about having asked the question.

There were many other questions, and the board members took turns fielding them, helping one another if they were stumped, or directing questions to me or the insurance representative present as well. One issue bothering all members was the reckless driving of some individuals. Clearly the board knew who the culprits were, but rather than embarrass them publicly, they chose to make their comments generally, and appealed to their natural instincts as parents, or in this case, grandparents — “a lot of us have been blessed with grandchildren — God forbid one of them gets hit” or “hey, let’s face it, most of us are too damned old to jump out of the way of your car.” That got the place rolling. The president got his point across with humor, empathy, and a small but manageable dose of fear.

The last item on the agenda was the budget. Due to the developer’s poor management of expenses, two months post-transition the association was dealing with a deficit to a degree that it warranted a fee

increase. The increase triggered a requirement for unit owner approval. The board members, knowing that this vote would be crucial, had knocked on doors to get the word out about the meeting. As a result, most unit owners were in attendance. I realize that this is a small community, and that knocking on doors may not work in larger condominiums, but here it proved to be successful. The point is that these board members were proactive from the start. There were many concerns and questions regarding the deficit, and many wondered why the fees needed to be raised at this early juncture. The president and the rest of the board patiently answered the questions and essentially said that the developer may not have represented the true cost of running the condominium — or had “low balled” the fee. They got the message across that under the circumstances, there was no sense in sending good money after bad to sue the developer and collect it from him. My takeaway: Being proactive and keeping it real proved to be a success, as the unit owners unanimously approved the budget with the increase.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the “first day of school” aroma fell silently away and was replaced by a smell of fresh coffee, pastries, and assorted Italian cold cuts for the unit owners. ☐

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