

The Dangers of Deferred Maintenance at Your Community Association

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Putting off maintenance will always cost your HOA or COA more in the long run. You're only prolonging the inevitable and it will certainly have a negative impact on your community. Not only that, but it can also be dangerous in the present. It could be as simple as a crack in the sidewalk posing a tripping hazard or it could be as deadly serious as the July 2021 Surfside condo collapse.

Why Associations Fail to Keep Up with Maintenance

Some HOAs or COAs fail at maintenance because of budgets. Perhaps they haven't updated their budget to reflect present-day costs and thus haven't raised assessment fees accordingly. Maybe they are struggling to get homeowner approval for a large, costly project. Or maybe the board has mismanaged funds, spending too much on a less crucial project and failing to save for crucial repairs.

Some fail because no one schedules preventative maintenance and no one is checking to make sure everything is operational, so the property slowly falls into disrepair. Problems don't get addressed early because no one notices that there's a problem until it has evolved into something bigger, more expensive, and/or more dangerous to residents.

No matter the reason for failure, it generally comes down to a lack of timely response. In the case of the recent Surfside condo collapse, it has become apparent that the association **failed to take responsibility for known structural issues** with the building.

The condo association only had a small fraction of the reserves that it needed to complete the repairs and they knew that the building was at high risk. They had been declined loans because of a lack of maintenance fees and reserve funds. They were told by a professional structural engineer in 2018 that the building had "zero useful remaining life" and that major structural damage was present. It is also possible that the homeowners were a barrier to collecting the needed funds. It all resulted in a tragic loss of life that should have been preventable.

With the right planning, budgeting, cooperation from homeowners, and response from the board, your association can avoid the dangers of deferred maintenance and keep everyone safe.

How to Take Responsibility and Ensure Timely Upkeep

Deferring maintenance can be costly and dangerous. Failing to anticipate and budget for maintenance can have incredibly serious consequences for your association. You should always:

- Complete a reserve study regularly and update your maintenance budget accordingly.
- Have a plan in place and follow a schedule for when everything needs preventative maintenance, inspection by a contractor, repairs, or replacement.
- Monitor everything to ensure it is well maintained and safe for residents.
- If residents resist raising fees, consult with an attorney to help navigate the situation and raise the needed funds. Work to educate homeowners on the necessity of maintenance for the health and safety of themselves, their families, and their property values.

If it has been more than 3 years since your HOA or COA's last reserve study, you should schedule one right now. This will help you develop an appropriate maintenance budget that is updated to account for current costs. It'll ensure you have the necessary operating funds and reserve funds to take care of maintenance, repairs, and replacements in a timely manner and keep your common areas in top condition.

What Types of Maintenance Do Associations Need to Consider?

You need to make preventative maintenance a high priority, ensuring that all your association's buildings, equipment, and surfaces are being properly maintained regularly. This can extend the life of your property and cut down on costly, inconvenient unexpected repairs.

But even with the best preventative maintenance, you will need to have plenty of funds in your reserve account to ensure that your association can afford repairs and replacements when necessary.

Again, you will want to have a professional, comprehensive reserve study conducted to consider every aspect of your COA or HOA's common areas. It should include everything that your association is responsible for, which may include any of the following:

- Painting buildings, trim, signage, etc.
- Rust prevention on metal surfaces
- Rain gutter cleaning
- Pool maintenance
- Concrete/asphalt maintenance
- Roof maintenance
- Playground/recreational area maintenance
- Light fixture maintenance
- Fence maintenance
- Structural evaluation and inspection of buildings

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list and your association may have other things that need to be considered.

Is It Ever OK to Put Off Maintenance?

Intentionally deferring maintenance to save money can be OK at times, but it can easily become a bad thing. Sometimes, a project might need to wait a bit if you don't have the cash on hand. However, this is only OK if the project isn't posing an immediate danger to the people who use your common area.

For example, if a building needs a new coat of paint, it might not look sharp in the meantime, but it isn't likely to cause harm to anyone if you postpone it for a bit. But if you intentionally put off maintaining your playground equipment and a child is injured as a result, that's not acceptable.

Your board should be careful about the types of maintenance that it chooses to put off. Take safety measures in the meantime, such as blocking off areas that may be unsafe until they are repaired. Just know that this is only a temporary measure and it needs to be addressed soon in the proper way to keep everyone safe and to protect the long-term value of the property.