Sometimes it is good to take a step back from our day-to-day interactions and remind ourselves of why it is we chose a career in association management. For me, a reminder that the basic function of an association is to preserve and maintain property values is always a good starting point. Getting past the budgets and enforcement and daily grind, what is it that we can do to enhance the community? To start we should define community spirit. Rebecca Furlow, president of Leland Management, explains that spirit as, “soliciting the opinions and input of residents and offering community harmony and spirit-enhancing programs that residents will enjoy. Community spirit is resident pride and involvement in the community.”
Over many years of managing associations, I have observed a very distinct pattern in communities that acknowledge the need for community spirit by actively pursuing community spirit compared to those that do not. We have all seen builders spend thousands of dollars at Grand Opening events. Knowing that builders do not part with money very easily, they must see a correlation between selling homes and community events. The same way the buffet at the Grand Opening helps them sell new homes, the community picnic improves the existing homes’ value. What better sales tool than to have a prospective buyer visit an Open House on the same day that the community is having a picnic or other event? It makes the neighborhood a community, a place that people want to be a part of.

I have found that communities where the residents interact with each other have fewer issues than those that do not interact with one another. Pride in their community is much more effective at getting a resident to keep up their property than a dozen violation letters. Seeing your neighbor on Friday night at the community dance and then again Saturday morning mowing the lawn makes the residents more likely to want to participate and cooperate. Whether it is pride or guilt that gets them out to take care of the issues, either way it gets the job done.

Board members should be encouraged to enjoy the events and not volunteer to run them. Let them have a chance to spend the days with their neighbors as a neighbor, not as a board member. It’s a good idea to post a sign that it is a community event—not a board meeting. Remember to remind everyone that these are social gatherings and not a forum for politics, religion, or divisive community issues. It is easier for communities with spirit to find volunteers for board positions. You’ll actually have people want to be involved because they enjoy what the community offers.

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Tracy Durham, manager of the Avalon Park Property Owners Association, works hard to create a sense of kinship in the community. This can sometimes be a challenge with a large community like Avalon Park that has over 3500 homes and 12,000 residents. Aside from the size of the community, Avalon faces the same issues as most communities trying to build that sense of spirit.

A major obstacle to community events is the cost. Tracy responds to this issue in stating that even though the economy is not strong and cash flow is tight, Avalon Park feels it’s very important to foster this sense of community. She states, “These events allow us to get out information and educate owners on community needs and concerns. It also promotes efforts such as the Neighborhood Watch program. Safety is our number one concern. Avalon Park has a very active Neighborhood Watch program that they continue to build by having exposure in these events. With that being said, we are always budget conscious and looking for creative ways to keep the unity of our community. If you stop and think about it, knowing your neighbors and having a sense of pride in your community is only going to positively affect the value of your property, which, for most, is their largest investment.”

With some creative efforts you will find that many events can be held without incurring extra expenses. This year Avalon Park hosted a Safety Olympics to get the word out about all aspects of safety (personal, fire, identity, home, car, etc.). The costs were offset by partnering with the YMCA—located in the community—and volunteering vendors. With a little leg work, most will find there’s a lot of free information available.

If you ask, many will provide. I’ve always been pleasantly surprised by how supportive local businesses will be. Neighborhood stores, chain retailers like Home Depot or Target, and auto dealerships are always looking for the good PR that supporting events like these can bring.

Some other ideas for easy sponsorships:

• Local libraries have bookmobiles
• The police will come out and do bike and vehicle registrations, SWAT team demos, child fingerprinting, and more
• Hospitals always have plenty of giveaways
• Local banks and realtors have a seemingly endless supply of balloons and calendars to give out
• Local restaurants offer free or greatly discounted prices just for the chance to be included

Another challenge facing communities is the need to foster harmony between renters and owners. As with any challenge, an opportunity is presented. Renters tend to have a bad reputation for not taking pride in the home they rent, let alone the community they are in. To overcome this, Avalon Park identifies renters and encourages them to be involved. Renters participating in garden clubs, security initiatives, Neighborhood Watch programs, and community events not only add to the assets for the community, but also help renters buy into the sense of community and ownership.

Education for homeowners is also a vital key in fostering goodwill. Renters are not all bad. A lot of owners sadly feel that way and discount a resident just because he/she is a renter. The goal at Avalon Park, as a community, is to work toward correcting poor renting habits. If there is a renter causing problems, they address the problem, not the fact that they are renting.

Community events also allow you to foster harmony between different age demographics and neighbors at different stations in life. Take the attitude that there’s enough
room for everyone to be involved and volunteer in your community.

According to Tracy Durham, “In Avalon Park, at quarterly Town Hall meetings, we encourage residents to get involved. We have so many clubs and volunteer opportunities that we could always use another set of hands. This includes the Avalon Park Teen Club, Senior Club, Garden Club, Women’s groups, Moms of Preschoolers groups, etc. We also have many opportunities for those to volunteer with the four schools located within our community. If there’s an area where a homeowner would like to be involved and a group or club is not already in existence—a club is born.”

The developer of Avalon Park (Avalon Park Group) also hosts four major events each year. These include street vendors, food, drinks, live entertainment, bounce houses, and fireworks. Check with the local government your association is in. Cities and counties have events that the community can promote and be involved with. These events provide a wonderful venue for residents to socialize with each other and come together as a community. Although these are not association events, by working closely with other organizers, everyone benefits. The combination of the sense of community and the pride it brings to the neighborhood always serves to increase the value of the community, not just financially but also in the quality of life.

Gary van der Laan, CMCA, AMS, PCAM is a director with Leland Management and the current president of the CAI Mid-Florida chapter. For more information, visit www.LelandManagement.com.

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