

The article below is written by two well known authorities of HOA and condominium Living and Law. This provides clear information about security in a shared ownership communities.

Saturday, August 18, 2012

The Daytona Beach News-Journal

Greeters and gatehouses: A close look at 'security'

This week we wanted to talk a bit about security in shared ownership communities. In many of the larger SOCs throughout Florida, some type of "security" contract is a necessity. But what exactly does such security entail?

And is it really "security," at least the way most of us view the word? Security guard companies provide attendants to control access in gatehouses for HOAs, and they provide both front desk officers and rovers for condominiums. Some large communities have an entire team of officers, with multiple guards on staff at any given moment, to patrol what are, essentially, small cities. Some even have community watches that patrol in vehicles owned by the community, operating like a private police department.

However, we think it's very important for board members and residents to be realistic about security companies and the services they offer, and to understand the purpose of having guards on the property.

Assuming that you are in the majority of communities who hire unarmed guards, you can't expect those guards to be true first responders when a crime is being committed. It's extremely dangerous for the guard, and not fair to put them in that type of position. Instead, the guard is really there to be an extra set of eyes; one who has very specific instructions about how to handle emergencies, whether they be crimes, fires, floods or health emergencies (which are particularly common in condominiums). But they're not really "guards" in the way that you would think of the people who protect banks and jewelry stores.

Now, consider the majority of gated HOAs. These communities typically have a "guard" who will sit in their gatehouse and greet visitors, ask for identification, notify owners that they have a guest and possibly record the visitor's personal information. But again, none of these tasks have the end result of preventing crime from happening in a community. Experience proves time and time again that gated communities suffer from crimes just like ungated communities, including robberies and other violent crimes. It's just not possible for a single guard sitting in a gatehouse to serve as a failproof valve against violent acts by uninvited guests.

Our point in providing this illustration is not to suggest that security is unneeded, but rather to suggest that board members and owners should rethink what they are looking for out of their security staff, and to create realistic expectations of the results they can expect. Because if you live in a gated HOA and believe that you are immune from crime, you have unrealistic expectations about what a single gatehouse attendant can do for your community.

First, in HOAs, gate attendants should really be viewed as greeters, hospitality employees, who provide a limited but useful amount of access control. They present a friendly face for visitors, can scare away casual criminals by checking identification and make sure that owners know when they are receiving a guest. They record information so that, if something bad should happen in the community, the police can have some record of possible suspects. But they don't prevent crime. They work hand-in-hand with solid and strict access policies and a well-designed camera system to help deter and identify unwanted visitors. They're great at providing that function, but poor at providing the type of "security" that some people believe they are buying when they purchase a home in an HOA.

In a condominium, front desk staff members provide a very similar function — it's access control, but not crime prevention. A roaming guard can be effective in helping to deter crime if they're visible enough, but more often than not a single guard is left to patrol a large property alone, and they rarely hit all corners more than once every hour or so. That leaves plenty of time for a wrongdoer to find an opening into the property. Again, a quality security and camera system goes a long way to helping to shore up access control in most properties and provide the guards with advance notice of breaches in security.

Even more important, perhaps, is that roving guards in condominiums are usually the first line of defense against disasters, such as fires and floods. The first person to notice water dripping from a hallway ceiling is often the security personnel, and they will generally be the staff members to respond to fire alarms and check other security concerns. What they should not do, especially if they are unarmed, is to walk into potentially dangerous situations without calling proper authorities.

Security guards at HOAs and condos are not police officers. They're not hired to be heroes they're hired to be visible, roaming deterrents. But if a crime is actually occurring, or if a fire alarm proves to be a real emergency, their first reaction should be to call the police or fire departments, not to rush in to battle in a heroic frenzy.

If you view your security guards and gatehouse guards for what they really are hospitality greeters, access control assistants and extra eyes on the ground you'll be much better prepared to analyze their performance accurately and create reasonable expectations for owners and residents.

Gary A. Poliakoff and Ryan —Poliakoff are co-authors of "New Neighborhoods — The Consumer's Guide to Condominium, Co-Op and HOA Living." Gary Poliakoff is a founding principal of Becker & Poliakoff, P.A., and Ryan Poliakoff is the Vice President of Management at AKAM On-Site. Email questions to condocolumn@beckerpoliakoff.com. Be sure to include your hometown.