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## Cultivating HOA Volunteers

*by Richard Thompson*

A common homeowner association board question is: "How do we get better participation from our members with board and committee work?" Many HOAs experience a large degree of apathy from the membership when it comes to volunteering. On the one hand, one of the reasons people buy into HOAs is to reduce personal responsibility, like for exterior maintenance. On the other hand, there are many willing and talented members that could and would participate if given the right set of circumstances.

There is an art to recruiting volunteers. Posting a notice is not the right approach. You must woo them on many levels and over time. Here are a couple of proven methods:

- **Communicate Regularly.** A frequent complaint of members is not being kept informed. To draw out volunteers, it's critical that they know there is an ongoing need. Also, some members develop a suspicious nature about board motives when kept in the dark and use it as an excuse not to be involved. Let them know what you're up to early and often! Repeated pleas for help will have their effect. A newsletter and flyer distribution box (the kind used by real estate agents) is an inexpensive and convenient way to get the word out.
- **Give credit where credit is due.** People love recognition. Make sure that directors, committee members and other volunteers are given formal recognition for their efforts by way of meetings, minutes and newsletters. Use every opportunity where there is an audience. Be specific in your praise. For example, point out members that show superior landscaping abilities. (They are obvious candidates for the Landscape Committee). Award Certificates of Achievement at the annual meeting. Remember to recognize faithful volunteers doing more mundane day to day tasks like light bulb replacement or trash pick up. It is a wise board that makes a point of recognizing mere effort for its own merits.
- **Socialize the Membership.** People tend to want to help those that they know personally. However, many are shy and don't make friends easily. The HOA can promote several socials annually to facilitate the process. Consider a spring clean-up party, pool party or just plain potluck. It will help create a real "community."
- **Assign real jobs to do.** It's been said, "A committee takes minutes and wastes hours." There is nothing more futile and frustrating than a job with no job description or substance. There is real work to do at each homeowner association. Directors and committee members should have clear "marching orders" detailing exactly what the objectives are, the time frame and the money available to help get the task done.
- **Be an encourager.** It is incumbent on the board to take the lead in cultivating volunteers. The successful leader motivates by persuasion and not authority. Remember, "A servant does not lower himself but elevates others."

- **The Ask.** This is a little used technique. Many folks don't think they're needed or talented enough. A personal request can go a long way in getting these folks to step up. Something as simple as, "You know, you would be really good at fill in the blank." You will be surprised how many will respond.
- **Respect their time.** Part of what keeps volunteers away is fear of over commitment. The board should be very sensitive to time demands on volunteers. Board meetings should be few and action packed. With proper scheduling and timed agendas, HOA business can get done with a minimum of time and fuss. When wooing volunteers, make sure to explain the time requirements for the job. The properly managed HOA should demand hours, not days or weeks of volunteer time each year. If you've achieved this, let potential volunteers know.
- **Demystify the job.** While having special training or talent can be a bonus to a board or committee position, it isn't required. Encourage those that simply want to serve because they have the time and interest. These traits are more valuable in the long term than special training.
- **Aim high.** Look for ways to pique interest of achievers. If you aim too low, folks don't think you need them. Identify several projects that take real thought, planning and work but demonstrate visible results. Assign those special projects to members that like to "git'er done."
- **24/7 recruiting.** The month prior to the annual meeting is not the only time to look for board candidates and volunteers. New members often have an interest in getting plugged in and are ripe for the picking at move in. Whenever a special project or event materializes, look outside the board for someone to do it.
- **One trick pony.** Provide options for "one project" volunteers. Some folks like the idea of a short term commitment to get one thing done. One project volunteers are the training ground for long term volunteers.

Getting the ball rolling to increase participation is one of the most rewarding efforts a board can achieve. In a motivated homeowner association, a synergy develops with a result that far exceeds the sum of the parts. Get out your hoe and start cultivating.

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