

Condo Insights

#33 – Governmental Inspections for condominium associations Part 2

This column will focus on strategies Associations can employ to make the cyclical inspection process run smoothly and to avoid deficiencies and violations.

The most effective approach taken by Associations is implementing a pro-active periodic maintenance program that includes monitoring essential building systems and equipment. A regular maintenance program may include periodic checks of the building including the exterior façade, interior common areas, facilities, fixtures, and equipment by in-house or property maintenance staff. Depending on the asset or system, observation or monitoring of equipment may be performed daily, weekly, monthly, or less frequently.

Experienced maintenance staff familiar with the building that follow the “Find it – Fix it” approach to maintaining the building’s common elements and equipment will save the Association time, aggravation, and money by handling the small, easy repairs and adjustments before problems become larger, more involved and more expensive. Over time, it’s less expensive for an Association to implement a maintenance program compared to costs involved with major repairs and remediating repeated violations. In-house staff should monitor elevators, water pumps, fire alarm and suppression systems and other essential equipment for day-to-day operating consistency while the mandated testing and certifications are performed by licensed service providers.

What exactly is inspected in a condo building, by whom, and how frequently?

Fire alarm and suppression systems are tested, inspected, and certified by a licensed service contractor. The contractor will test the alarm and annunciation system components including the alarm panel, alarms, pull stations, common area detectors, annunciation devices and strobes. The suppression system testing involves the fire pump and control equipment, sprinklers, and standpipes. These inspection reports are provided to the municipality. The municipality includes these reports as part of its annual inspection process for Association buildings with interior common areas.

Elevators are inspected annually by the State. State elevator inspections include the operation compared to industry standards, condition and operation of machine room equipment, condition of the elevator cab itself along with testing the call buttons and safety systems, and even the condition of the hoist way and elevator pit. Inspections may vary depending on elevator type and number of vertical stops. Every five years the State inspection will include additional testing for load bearing capacity and safety equipment. The inspection reports are provided to the building owner along with certificates of compliance and occupancy.

Swimming pools require frequent testing and inspection. State bathing laws require that swimming pools, hot tubs, spas and bathing beaches be inspected. These inspections are usually performed by the County in which the aquatics facility is located. This inspection involves detailed documentation of all aspects of facility operation and safety to ensure the pool is compliant with State Bathing Laws. Swimming pools are also required to have water quality analysis performed every two hours daily by a certified pool operator and weekly by a licensed laboratory when in operation.

State laws also mandate that the bonding and grounding of swimming pool systems be tested every five years by a licensed electrician to be in compliance with the electrical code. The municipality will conduct an annual site inspection for pool bonding and grounding.

There are numerous other inspections that may take place at a condominium building. Boilers are inspected by a separate agency. Boiler inspections are complicated. State requirements for frequency and type of inspection vary based on boiler size and pressure type. Buildings constructed before 1978 may be inspected for lead-based paint hazards.

The age of the building may also affect what inspectors are looking for. Older buildings subject to wear and tear over a longer period of time tend to require more maintenance to remain in compliance with State and municipal codes and regulations. Older buildings constructed prior to the adoption of the current uniform construction code may be required to upgrade certain systems and equipment when major building projects are performed.

In addition to governmental inspections, insurance companies mandate periodic inspections for risk prevention and to verify property information. An insurance company will authorize an independent inspection service to perform site inspections of a condominium building to observe general conditions, to identify potential safety risks or hazards and to make recommendations with the objective to improve overall occupant safety as well as to eliminate, reduce or minimize potential hazards. Insurance companies also conduct inspections to determine if all of the property amenities are disclosed on the insurance application and provide an opinion that the amount of property insurance coverage is consistent with the estimated replacement cost in event of loss.

Government and private agencies may have legal authorization to perform site inspections at condominium buildings. The City of Wildwood includes a guide for property owners to prepare for the annual fire inspection on their website. Additional information regarding State of New Jersey multiple dwelling inspections is available at www.nj.gov/dca/divisions/codes/offices/housinginspection.html. Occupant safety is the primary reason for the majority of condominium inspections.

Jim Yost owns Elite Management and Advisory Services, LLC and is managing partner for Ocean Property Management Corporation, based in Wildwood. The firms manage numerous community, condominium and homeowner associations in southern New Jersey. He can be reached at yostopmc@comcast.net. Past columns are available online at www.oceanpropertymgmt.com.

Karim Kaspar, Esq. is Senior Counsel with Lowenstein Sandler LLP. He serves as general counsel to numerous community and condominium associations throughout New Jersey. He specializes in complex commercial litigation and real estate matters and has been active and instrumental in the firm’s pro-bono activities. He can be reached at kkaspar@lowenstein.com.