

Condo Insights #19 – Exterior Balcony Inspections

Because of the proximity to the water, most ocean-front condominium associations are constructed with exterior building features including common walkways and large balconies, patios, and decks to take advantage of water views and warm summer weather.

In a condominium association Master Deed, walkways and balconies are most frequently defined as a Common Element or a Limited Common Element. Common elements are those items for which the Association maintains complete control and no single individual can claim sole right of usage. Limited common elements are those elements for which the Association maintains some level of control (repairs and maintenance and has authority to establish rules for use) but for which an individual unit owner may be granted sole usage. While a limited common element is repaired and replaced by the association, that individual unit owner is typically responsible for cleaning and maintenance of the limited common element for which they retain sole usage.

An Association has control over balconies to ensure that the balcony (and balcony railing) are safe and properly maintained. Most association Master Deeds include specific easement language as it relates to inspection and maintenance of common elements and limited common elements. An easement is formal right of access. As it applies in this discussion, an easement is access through an individual privately owned residential condominium unit for periodic inspections, maintenance, and repair to common and limited common elements such as balconies and balcony railings.

Why do balconies need to be inspected? Because the elements (rain, wind, and an environment close to the ocean with a high salt content in the air) can lower the expected service life and prematurely age balconies, balcony railings, the fasteners which secure railings to the balcony itself and the balcony supporting structure. Periodic inspections will identify issues with the balcony before they become problems. Signs of deterioration can indicate a number of issues, but often point to corrosion or failure of building materials.

Such inspections will also identify any weaknesses with balcony railings or problems with brackets that secure the railing to the balcony or beams that support the balcony. Make sure that welds are not bent, damaged or broken or that bolts have not loosened. Look for signs of moisture infiltration into beams that support the balcony structure.

Does it matter what the balcony is made of? No. Any balcony - concrete, wood, steel, or other materials - will deteriorate over time. Inspections detect problems and failures early, to prevent larger, more costly repairs and potential life safety issue and problems.

Age and water are factors that shorten useful lives. Through proper maintenance and inspection, the Association can take steps to prevent water (in the form of rain, dew and/or moisture) from affecting the balcony. Permanently attached materials such as tile and carpet trap moisture against the balcony surface. Such materials allow moisture infiltration into the supporting structure and lead to premature deterioration. Worse, tile and carpet can hide rust and deterioration from view. This is another reason why periodic inspections are especially important.

How often should balconies be inspected, and who should perform these inspections? To start, individual owners should inspect their balconies for cracks, rust, salt stains or discoloration, which are all signs that the concrete, metal, or wood might be compromised or deteriorating. Some associations mandate annual balcony inspections, usually done in Fall. Someone from the Association (a manager, board member, employee, or engineer) with some training and familiarity with the building should perform the inspection.

What is an expected useful life for balcony railings? It depends in large part on the material the railing is constructed from. Aluminum and steel last longer than wood. Wood may have a lower initial cost but end up costing more in maintenance. Aluminum and steel are not porous, so water rolls right off, and they are resistant to rot. However, aluminum and steel railings need to be coated or they will also deteriorate faster over time, especially at the shore. When it's time to replace railings, look into manufacturers that offer extensive information about their coatings and warranty their railings. Considering the investment, you want a guarantee that the railing system will last.

In some cases, you have to pass through individual residences to conduct the inspection. Unit owners have every right to expect that the inspectors take reasonable care to protect a unit owner's property. While putting down protective plastic may not be necessary, the inspectors have a duty and obligation to take appropriate protective steps.

Give owners adequate advance notice and the opportunity to be present. Although this is not an inspection for cleanliness, owners should be reminded to remove balcony furniture in advance of the inspection. Conduct inspections during daylight, and in good weather conditions. Observe for permanently attached materials (tile, wood, carpet or other unapproved permanently attached or applied coatings). Observe the physical condition of the balcony railings as well as the balcony supporting structure, brackets and footings. Record your observations and conditions and any broken or cracked railing components. Retain your reports for comparison in future years.

Keep records of these annual inspections. It is important to recognize any changes that occur over time. Written notes are important, as well as photographs or video-recordings. Depending on the observations and conditions, the Association board may choose to engage an engineer for a more detailed condition assessment. Such records and documentation serve both the Association and the individual unit owners and are an important part of the annual activities plan for most associations.

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