

The Owner Handbook for Seashore Condominium and Community Associations.

Every year, hundreds of condominiums change ownership. All these new owners must familiarize themselves with their new residence, their building or community, and the workings of their association.

A well-crafted handbook is the single most useful reference document for condominium owners, combining the most essential and important elements of the association Master Deed, By-Laws, rules, regulations, policies and procedures and other important information into a single concise reference document for condominium owners.

The association handbook can also serve as a valuable device for communicating association practices to potential buyers. Purchase of a seashore condo is an emotional decision. Buyers can easily become focused on the view, the condo interior, or the variety of beautiful amenities, but fail to review the important covenants (legal and binding rules) that govern and dictate permissible and prohibited behaviors and practices. For example, it's never good if a condo buyer has several large dogs yet the association in which they purchase prohibits pets.

If your association does not have a handbook, a little effort can help you compile the necessary information into one source for reference to educate and guide association members.

An association handbook should include the following information:

- 1) General description of the condominium or community property, including property definitions of common areas, limited common areas, and areas that are fall solely under the responsibility and control of the condominium unit owner.
- 2) The association's organizational structure, including information about the board of directors (or trustees) and committees.
- 3) Board members should always be accessible to association members. At the minimum, by email. Important contact information for the association, and how to communicate with board members and management is essential.
- 4) How the association is operated and managed. Is the association self-managed or is there a management company or agent that is responsible for day-to-day operations? Who takes care of the pool? How is trash collection handled? Who cleans the sidewalks? Where do owners report problems?
- 5) Condo or homeowner association fees and charges, the association fiscal year and budget, what condo fees pay for, collection and delinquency policies.
- 6) Rules and regulations of the association, with emphasis on the most important rules and practices
- 7) Maintenance responsibilities – what is the association responsible for, and what are individual unit owners responsible for.
- 8) Insurance – what the association covers, what if any insurance the unit owner must carry and when the association insurance policies renew.
- 9) Utilities – those provided by the association, and what utilities the unit owner is responsible for.
- 10) Water service – Essential for secondary homes: the location of the main water shutoff valve for the unit. Drain your water lines. The water supply should be turned off at the main shut-off valve. Open all faucets, showers, and hose bibs to drain the pipes after the main valve is shut-off. The water supply to outside showers should be turned off and lines drained.
- 11) Information about common areas and community and recreational amenities; pool rules, exterior and common area lighting, and furniture.
- 12) Parking – where to park, if parking is assigned, and if any sort of vehicle identification is necessary.
- 13) Pet guidelines
- 14) Interior improvements and modifications: those permitted without board approval; modifications requiring board approval, and any non-permitted modifications.

- 15) Decks and Patios – including what is permitted, and not permitted. Are outside balconies allowed to be used for storage during the off-season. If you are away for an extended period remove all items from the balcony.
- 16) Window & Sliding Glass Doors - Replacement specifications and protocols are especially important for oceanfront units. Do screens have to be removed from windows during the off-season.
- 17) End of season checklists – Steps to follow when the residential condominium is vacant for extended periods of time to prevent water line freezing and prevent property damage. A prior column included an end-of-season checklist.
- 18) Dispute resolution – Explain the formal procedure for communicating, addressing, and attempting to resolve disputes within the community and between owners.
- 19) Information about the municipality and neighborhood, including emergency response, police and fire departments, places of worship and governmental services.

Once the initial handbook is complete, an annual review allows for updates and revisions to ensure the handbook includes practices and policies that are current and relevant. Right after the end of the peak season is a perfect time for the association to either create a handbook or update an existing handbook.

During the busy high occupancy months, behavior by both owners and rental guests may trigger the need for clarification of some in-house rules and regulations, or implementation of new policies or procedures to ensure all association members, residents and guests have the right to quiet and peaceful enjoyment of their condominium and the association amenities and facilities.

Keep in mind that all of mankind needs only Ten Commandments. When you prepare the handbook don't go overboard with the rules.

The owner handbook is a document that is intended to be easily amended and referenced to supplement the legal documents of the Condominium Association. It is important to include the annual review and update of the handbook as an association business item during open meetings so any revisions, clarifications or edits are formally adapted as part of the association's over-arching set of governing documents.

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