

Condo Insights #20 –Window & door replacement responsibilities

Members of a condominium association are governed under documents known as the Master Deed and By-Laws. One important aspect of the Master Deed is that it delineates responsibility between the association and individual unit owners for maintenance and repairs to the units and common elements.

The Master Deed defines the physical boundaries of the unit, a description of the unit and items included in the unit. In most condominium associations, windows and exterior doors (unit entry doors, sliding balcony or patio doors, overhead garage doors and even skylights) are defined as and included in the unit description. The Master Deed may stipulate the exterior color and style of windows to ensure consistent exterior appearance, but otherwise the windows and doors belong to the owners.

Even though the unit owner owns the windows and doors, the Association is responsible for the opening in which these windows and doors are to be installed. The opening itself in the building's exterior walls is referred to as a fenestration. Since the Association is responsible for the building façade, the Association controls the opening into which the windows and doors are installed.

Even though the unit owner is responsible for the maintenance, repair and replacement of windows and doors, it is important that the association dictates the types and models of windows and doors to be installed. Windows, doors (and skylights) must be selected to ensure that replacement products are compliant with building code requirements for wind and rain resistance. Wind load resistance is the structural integrity of the window or door to keep intact and prevent the pressure of high-velocity winds from breaking or damaging the window or door, entering the building and causing significant damage to the structure and interior contents.

The Association should rely on its building consulting engineer for guidance to identify not only the types and models of replacement windows and doors but also to provide drawings, details, procedures and protocols for installation. The Association Board should formalize this information (acceptable replacement products and installation procedures and requirements) into resolutions as part of the official record of policies and procedures that govern the Association and its members.

Why is this necessary and important? The Association Board has a duty to preserve and protect the common elements. The building envelope is the single largest common element. Replacement and installation procedures and protocols for windows and doors ensure the right products are used and proper installation methods are followed to prevent moisture infiltration not only into the common elements but into any adjacent units.

After severe storms and hurricanes, concerns arise about wind-driven rain leaking through or around windows and doors, even though there is no evidence there was any failure or problems with the windows or doors. Even if the window or door has been properly installed for structural integrity, it may leak if not flashed and sealed correctly and in accordance with manufacturer's requirements. Poor or improper installation may leave gaps which can allow wind-driven rain to penetrate during severe storms.

The age of a window or door, condition of weather-stripping and sealants, and clogged drain or weep holes can contribute to leaks during severe storms. Windows and doors need periodic inspection and follow-up maintenance.

Even though windows and doors are unit owner responsibility, some associations may take on the responsibility for coordinating group purchase and replacement of windows and doors. This approach provides a large degree of control by ensuring all the windows and doors are the same, the installation procedures are consistent and by using one contractor, there is continuity and efficiency throughout the project. This approach also establishes consistent timelines for material and installation warranties offered by the manufacturer and installer.

Window and door installation isn't a project most unit owners are qualified to perform. Even though some unit owners may want to take on this project themselves, given the weather exposures and comprehensive installation procedures, the more important it is to rely on qualified, reputable, and insured contractors.

When rain events are coupled with high wind speeds, it is not uncommon to experience water infiltration around or through windows, doors, and skylights. Keep in mind that in hurricanes and tropical storm events, even if the appropriate product is in place and it is installed following proper procedures and protocols there may be some water infiltration because the strength of the storm winds exceeded the product rating.

Depending on material and manufacturer, windows and doors may have an expected useful service life of 25 years. At the shore, most original installation windows and doors do not last that long. Associations are encouraged to control the window and door replacement process for the benefit of all owners.

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