

Condo Insights

#53 Safety & Security Systems

There are many different aspects to safety and security in community and condominium associations. Property size, location, configuration and layout, building size and type and number of amenities all affect and influence the type and extent of safety and security systems required for and desired by condominium associations and their members.

Safety

Safety begins with following fire safety and construction codes which protect public health, safety, and welfare by establishing minimum standards for building construction, ensuring adequate fire protection systems, and providing clear guidelines to minimize fire risks in new and existing structures, ultimately aiming to prevent injuries, property damage, and loss of life in case of a fire. These codes are enforced by the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, Division of Fire Safety.

Municipal fire officials conduct annual inspections of certain condominium buildings to ensure compliance with state fire safety codes, identify potential fire hazards within the building, and proactively address any issues before they escalate into serious risks, ultimately protecting the safety of residents by enforcing proper maintenance of fire safety equipment and building practices across all units and common areas.

Fire alarm and suppression systems in multi-family residential buildings are designed to alert residents in event of fire, as well as to control and suppress a fire providing time for residents to evacuate and for firefighters to arrive to evaluate conditions and to determine the most appropriate way to fight the fire. Fire and smoke detectors have been enhanced to detect dramatic rate of interior temperature rise and even the presence of carbon monoxide. These systems are inspected, tested and certified annually.

Fire alarm and suppression systems represent a significant investment to purchase, install and maintain. Outdoor components should be made of materials able to function in a harsh environment. Mandatory annual inspections are intended to identify components that require repair, replacement or upgrade.

As an aside: The companies that manufacture and service these systems make significant investments in equipment and training. To protect their investment, some companies mandate that their proprietary equipment can only be purchased from and maintained by a limited number of authorized certified vendors or utilizes software that relies on pass codes that are not shared with other vendors. This can make it difficult to switch to a different company. Non-proprietary fire alarm systems are open sourced which means that multiple vendors can service the systems and equipment.

Failure of plumbing and appliances such as water heaters and washing machines can cause significant damage. Something as small as a hairline crack in a refrigerator ice-maker line can cause a leak which results in thousands of dollars of damage to multiple condos if not found in a timely manner. Security measures include mandatory policies to maintain interior temperatures to prevent frozen pipes, turning off water at the main unit valve when the condo unit is vacant for extended periods of time, regular inspection of water heaters and HVAC condensate drain lines, upgrading washer hoses, ice maker lines and using leak detection sensors in critical areas. A condominium with a history of water damage claims will likely realize higher property insurance premiums, increased water damage deductibles and even cancellation.

Security

Security systems are important because they can help protect residents and property, create a convenient and safe environment, deter crime, reduce liability and help control insurance costs. Safety and security concerns include fire, water damage, unauthorized individuals on property or in private residences, theft, natural disaster, and even air quality.

Security systems include access control systems including gates and locks, video surveillance and video intercom, security guards, doormen and alarm systems. Access control deters unauthorized individuals from entering the property. Access control systems include driveway gates, entry door locks for buildings and gate locks on swimming pools. Access control operates using keys, cards, fobs, codes and smart phone apps. Associations should evaluate and understand the system and costs involved, including initial purchase, ease of operation, mobile access control, maintenance and service contracts, holistic integration, audit trails, data storage, service interruption recovery protocols and expected useful life of essential components.

Before significant investment into access control systems, condo board members should document the purpose and priorities of such systems including member priorities and operational objectives to maintain focus and ensure association funds are invested into systems and equipment that achieves association objectives. Acceptance of such systems by unit owners is an important and often forgotten consideration. Even the best security systems and protocols won't function to the highest capacity if residents resist, and systems can be breached if a resident shares keys, cards or codes with outsiders.

Video surveillance systems, including cameras, doorbell cameras and intercoms have become prevalent. Security and doorbell cameras located throughout common areas help put your community at ease. Many modern surveillance cameras can be monitored by property managers, security staff and residents through the use of remote (cloud-based) servers and smart phone apps. Cameras should be placed at points of access, in community spaces, parking garages, elevators, exercise rooms, package rooms and other areas identified as high priority by association residents and board members. We order more packages online than ever before. Preventing package theft is a common justification for installing surveillance cameras at delivery and storage areas.

Security guards provide a physical presence, which alone can deter potential intruders. Guards are responsible for monitoring the premises, managing access control, and responding to emergencies, making them an integral part of condo security. Guards are most effective if they have proper training to know how to use and operate alarm and security systems and equipment, know where to find important contact information, and are provided with comprehensive emergency procedure manuals.

Condo security includes personal security practices implemented by the residents. Condo owners use their own security systems to monitor what's happening in and around their unit, to alert them to if someone is ever inside their residence without permission and to avoid the possibility of theft or unexplained damage. Associations may want to establish a policy regarding where and how to angle doorbell cameras so as to ensure one owner's doorbell camera does not include camera coverage area inside a neighbor's private residence. Even if the association has security guards, access control, surveillance cameras and alarm systems, having their own security system provides an extra layer of defense and assurance to many condo owners.

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