Condo Insights

#81 – Why your association should rely on an engineer

Condominium and homeowner associations rely on various types of professionals that provide services and guidance. This column will focus on engineering professionals, their services and how an association can find the right engineer for its needs.

Why should your association rely on an engineer?

For starters, many New Jersey associations will need an engineer to comply with the Structural Integrity Act, (the "Act") state legislation (S2760/A4384) signed in 2024, which mandates periodic structural inspections of "covered buildings" (buildings constructed of concrete, steel and/or masonry) to ensure safety and prevent structural failures. Engineers are required to conduct inspections and oversee repairs to ensure structural integrity. Engineers check primary load-bearing systems, foundations, facades, and balconies to identify structural issues and prevent disasters.

In wake of the Florida condominium collapse, there is greater demand for structural engineering inspections and exterior balconies and façade evaluations. The New Jersey Structural Integrity Act requires certain associations conduct structural inspections within 15 years of receiving a certificate of occupancy, with follow-up inspections every 5 years thereafter. When repairs are necessary, engineers are needed to define the scope of work, review bids, and manage the project to keep costs under control

Compliance with the New Jersey Structural Integrity Act will require almost every association in New Jersey to engage an engineering firm to prepare a capital reserve study, (also called a "reserve study" or "CRS"). Capital reserve studies are prepared by licensed engineers and are necessary for the good financial health of any association. (The Act also allows licensed architects and Reserve Specialists to prepare reserve studies.) Capital reserve studies are long-term funding plans for replacement of association assets and common elements. The Act requires that all associations undertake and fund a capital reserve study ("CRS") and include adequate reserve funding for repair and replacement of common elements and facilities in the annual operating budget. While primarily a budgeting tool, a CRS can also help in making decisions about major capital projects and investments. The Act requires an association to have its CRS updated every five years. Even for small associations, New Jersey requires that reserve studies be prepared by professionals.

Engineering firms provide a multitude of services. A building engineer ensures the safety, functionality, and maintenance of a condominium's physical structure and systems. They conduct regular inspections (HVAC, plumbing, electrical), ensure compliance with safety codes, and plan for and manage major capital improvement projects to prevent problems due to failure to comply with project plans and specifications.

Engineering firms provide professional project-specific and general building consulting services and work on a project-specific or hourly basis. Engineers may oversee HVAC, electrical, plumbing, and mechanical systems, conduct regular walkthroughs to check for structural issues, such as roofing leaks, structural integrity, and masonry damage. Engineers work with contractors and vendors; conduct site visits to ensure repairs stay on budget and meet quality standards. An engineer's job often includes ensuring the building meets all local building codes and safety regulations. An engineer proactively identifies issues to prevent them from becoming emergencies.

The greater the size, scope and cost of a project, the greater the need to rely on a professional. Just because a fellow condo owner works in building maintenance or construction does not mean they can replace the services and expertise provided by an engineer. Take roof replacement, for example. It is not enough to simply hire the cheapest local roofing contractor. With advances in roof design, it is important to first retain an engineer to evaluate the existing roof, to prepare specifications and identify qualified contractors before going out to bid. The board's lawyer will prepare the contract. The lawyer, engineer and property manager will guide the board through the nuances of roof manufacturer's warranties and exclusions and to select the appropriate contractor.

As buildings age, the need for regular service to essential building systems is more important. Domestic water pumps, elevators, HVAC systems, fire annunciation and suppression systems, trash compactors and access control systems all require periodic service and maintenance from skilled, experienced professionals.

When you don't know what you don't know, rely on a professional. Elevator modernization projects are a good example. When it's time for major elevator repairs or service, don't just rely on your current elevator service provider. An elevator consultant is specially trained and experienced and knows how to evaluate your current elevator and control system, is aware of current codes and how to prepare requests for modernization proposals. An elevator consultant understands elevator service contracts and is qualified to evaluate the current condition of your elevator relative to periodic maintenance to ensure the elevator service company is fulfilling its obligations under your service contract.

How do you find qualified professionals? The best referrals are from other professionals, such as the authors of this column. Another source is CAI-NJ, the trade organization for community associations and professionals in New Jersey serving condominiums, community and homeowner's associations.

In many instances, the association's hired professionals will work as a team with a) the property manager providing the referrals and coordination, b) the lawyer drafting the contracts, c) the engineer preparing the specifications, and d) the insurance agent making sure there is adequate insurance on the project.

Effective board members recognize the value in relationships with engineers among several professionals and service providers to protect their association's common property and interests. Lowest cost shouldn't necessarily be an association's highest priority. The right blend of experience, service and price will provide the best long-term value for any association.

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