

# Creating a Proactive HOA and Condo Building Maintenance Strategy

By Hazel Siff



**T**he tragic collapse of the Champlain Tower South condominium in Surfside, Fla., in late June has raised concerns from board members, community managers, and residents about building safety and brought condominium structural integrity and maintenance to the forefront.

While disasters like that in Surfside are extremely rare, association leaders can benefit from making building maintenance a priority in their community.

Some states have laws with requirements related to structural integrity, maintenance, and reserves. Every city and locality may have different ordinances based on these laws that are meant to adapt to regional climates, local concerns, and changing needs through the years, says Howard Dakoff, a partner at Levenfeld Pearlstein in Chicago.

He recommends that boards and managers have a good grasp of locally applicable ordinances to ensure their community is prepared. This should include employing the help of experts in various stages of maintenance and repair to certify the best quality and reliability as well as protect the board from legal liability. He also notes the importance of ensuring that a community has a current certificate of a service provider's insurance on hand before working with them.

Brian Butler, CMCA, AMS, PCAM, senior vice president at FirstService Residential in Chicago and president of the CAI Illinois Chapter, says that associations should try to limit switching between structural and mechanical engineering experts, as it is important to work with experienced service providers that also know the community's unique needs.

In addition, Butler believes community association leaders should always focus on maintenance and safety. "Be present, and comply with inspections," he says. "As you sit here with duties to the associations that you manage and the residents living in them, you do not want to end up dealing with something similar (to Champlain Tower South) because you did not attend an inspection or a building walk."

Peter B. Miller, RS, principal at Miller Dodson Associates in Annapolis, Md., and a leading authority in reserve studies and strategic reserve planning, recommends that communities work with reserve study experts to ensure accuracy. Reserves are an integral part of keeping a community financially stable. Conducting reserve studies helps determine which components are imminently close to the end of their useful life as well as which ones will need repairs.

If residents ask why they must pay assessments to fund the association's reserves for a project that is scheduled for the future, Miller suggests that boards and managers explain that, "We're not asking you to pay for ten years. We're asking you to pay for the life expectancy of a project that will one day be needed, for every year that you live here."

The collapse of Champlain Tower South certainly brought concerns about condominium building maintenance, but board members and community managers can work to mitigate risk by being financially prepared and staying knowledgeable about emerging community needs and local ordinances. "We're all very tense because of the cautionary tale that just happened, but we're hopeful that education will help lead to better outcomes," says Butler.