

How Community Associations Can Jump on the Green Bandwagon

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Everyone wants to go green, save energy and cut their carbon footprint. Individuals can do so by recycling shopping bags, cans and clothes, by reducing their use of heating, air conditioning and lighting and by driving a hybrid car, taking public transportation or bicycling. Although Community Associations do not have those energy saving opportunities, there are many ways associations can jump on this green bandwagon.

Communities, whether condominium, townhome or home owner associations, have the unique ability to drastically reduce energy use because these organizations can go green on a larger scale than individual home owners. Unlike individual owners, associations are responsible for the entire site as well as any common elements such as pools, clubhouses and shared mechanical equipment. When switching to more energy efficient lighting, for example, an association can replace the bulbs in all shared hallways, each common area building and every site light on the property, whereas a homeowner can only replace a handful of bulbs within their home. With so much opportunity for greening, the energy savings for associations can certainly add up.

Energy Savings Through Mechanical Equipment

One of the most significant opportunities for associations to go green is by upgrading its mechanical equipment to more efficient systems with improved controls. Simply, upgrading to a more efficient furnace can yield a rapid payback with thousands of dollars in savings over the life of the equipment. Today, boiler systems can achieve efficiencies as high as 97%, converting nearly all the fuel to useful heat. Replacing a property's boiler can also cut pollution output in half, not to mention the association's fuel bills and maintenance costs.

For further greening in the area of mechanical equipment, associations can invest in programmable controls. This technology allows the association to adjust the times and settings of the heating and/or air-conditioning in common area buildings according to a pre-set schedule, outdoor temperature and the anticipated performance of the building. As a result, the equipment can be set to operate only when necessary and at the peak efficiency. In winter, lowering the temperature of a clubhouse or common area during non-open hours or when residents are sleeping can reduce utility bills by 5-15%. In addition, ongoing remote monitoring of the mechanical systems will detect any abnormalities which can then be corrected in real time. In short, improving the performance of an HVAC system and implementing efficient controls on a common system can yield savings of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Energy Savings Through Lighting Solutions

Another method for associations to go green is to switch to a more efficient lighting system. Compact fluorescent light (CFLs) bulbs use 75% less energy than incandescent bulbs and last 6 to 12 times longer. Experts agree that replacing regular lights with CFLs can be the cheapest and most effective way to cut energy usage immediately. According to the EnergyStar online calculator, the energy savings from replacing just one 13-watt incandescent light used only four hours a day would render a payback of between 3 and 8 months. Now imagine the energy savings that would be realized after switching to CFL bulbs throughout an entire community. Even more efficient than CFLs are Light Emitting Diodes (LEDs). LED fixtures make great outdoor lighting for parking lots and walkways, a crucial component of most associations. As prices for LEDs continue to decline, these fixtures offer an increasingly attractive alternate to incandescent and CFLs.

For further savings in lighting, associations can invest in motion sensors and controls. Motion sensors automatically turn off lights when a room or area is not occupied. Controls are capable of dimming the lighting based on the time of day and available natural light. This technology is especially useful when installed on outdoor lights, but can produce significant savings in clubhouses and common hallways.

Reducing Energy Wastage

In addition to using equipment that uses less energy, associations can go green by reducing energy loss/waste. Communities can reduce energy loss by increasing building insulation, sealing air leaks and weatherproofing windows within their clubhouses and other common areas green. Properly insulating attics and wall spaces can reduce the amount of heat escaping from the building and save significantly on heating and cooling costs. Sealing air leaks means filling in the gaps around windows, doors and air ducts so that heat cannot escape in cold months and cool air is not lost in summer months. Sealing air leaks will reduce drafts, make the building more comfortable for the occupants and can result in energy savings of 5 to 30 percent per year.

Windows are one of the largest sources of heat loss because of their low insulating ability and high air leakage rates. Likewise, in summer, windows are a major source of unwanted solar heat gain. In some cases, windows are responsible for up to 50 percent of the property's heating and cooling energy costs. An association can retrofit single-glazed for double-glazed low E windows, which can cut heat loss and gain in half. Another option is to invest in window shades, such as blinds, shades and curtains. These shades block sunlight, reducing the need for air conditioning in the summer, and serve as added insulation against outside temperatures in winter.

Renewable Energy

Lastly, community associations can go green by investing in a renewable energy source such as solar paneling, geothermal heat pumps or wind turbines. Federal, State and Local rebates have made renewable energy sources a viable option with reasonable payback periods. Photo voltaic has become especially practical as there are opportunities to lease solar panels rather than purchasing this expensive equipment outright.

Going green is often viewed as an idealistic and expensive endeavor. However, these cost effective methods of reducing your carbon footprint illustrate how easy and inexpensive going green can be. To top it off, going green can drastically decrease an association's annual expenditures, often saving thousands of dollars over the life of the energy efficient equipment.