



What's all the buzz about? The practical applications of sustainability for your community association

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Sustainability. It's one of those buzz words that seems to be mentioned in every conversation regarding energy and the environment. But what does it really mean? And how does it apply to you and to your community association? Wikipedia¹ defines sustainability as, "the capacity to endure." The article goes on to discuss how sustainability encompasses the concept of stewardship and the responsible planning and management of resources.

When sustainability is being used in reference to community associations, those are the three key concepts that are being encompassed - endurance, stewardship and responsible planning. And when we take these key concepts into a level of practical application for community associations then we are talking about reducing operating costs by promoting increased efficiency and lower maintenance costs, while striving to be environmentally responsible.

Since approximately 70% of a typical community or building's budget is comprised of the costs of maintenance, energy and replacements, integrating these expenses is key to minimizing long-term costs. Instead of viewing the individual costs as having designated budget locations, it is important to identify the distinctive relationship between each facet of the operational costs. A professional evaluation of the efficiency of existing facilities is one important step that can be taken by an association to identify potential energy savings and sustainability opportunities.

Significant opportunities for savings can be identified by analyzing life-cycle costs. For example, traditionally a reserve study - the cornerstone of responsible planning for community associations - only evaluates the replacement costs and remaining lives of the common area components. An integrated approach to sustainable budgeting also provides an analysis of the energy and maintenance costs associated with each component, outlining the potential reductions. Similarly, it is important for an association to be educated regarding the latest options in sustainability when undertaking a design project. For capital improvement projects, the association should evaluate the utilization of construction materials which require less maintenance or energy over the course of their useful lives. This can potentially include the replacement of materials such as cedar siding with vinyl siding, or the substitution of a composite material in place of wood components such as can be found in decks and exterior trim. Professional in-depth energy audits and recommendations for high-efficiency mechanical system upgrades can also help propel an association towards greater sustainability.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the sustainable design improvements that are made to a single-family home, townhome or building will certainly prove beneficial in preserving the building's market value in today's tentative real estate market.

Additionally, as many states, including New York, are now allowing and recommending the use of deregulated energy, communities and building owners should educate themselves regarding the

various options and anticipated savings that are provided by deregulated energy. Through deregulation, individuals can remain with their local utility company for all billing, safety and reliability issues while empowering them to take charge of their energy bills and save money by selecting a third-party supplier. Associations can also use this opportunity to achieve greater stewardship and environmental responsibility by selecting a third-party supplier which utilizes a greater percentage of "green" renewable energy.

Navigating current energy and environmental trends can be confusing and even intimidating. As with most things in life, "keeping it simple" can help us to integrate these modern concepts of sustainability into useful practice. As expressed earlier, the foundation of sustainability for community associations is to reduce operating costs by promoting increased efficiency and lower maintenance costs, while striving to be environmentally responsible. By implementing a few simple steps - such as reviewing maintenance and additional savings opportunities, analyzing not only first-costs but also long-term costs, and exploring the benefits of switching to a third-party, "green" energy supplier - your association will find itself with the "capacity to endure" whatever the future may hold.

1 Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia. "Sustainability." Web. 20 August 2011. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainability>.

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