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The Worst Volunteer Position in America

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I have volunteered with many organizations. I've been a soccer and baseball coach, scout leader, a Lions Club president and even an EMT with my town's first aid squad. I've helped many different kinds of people, in many different kinds of situations. In these positions, the vast majority of people I helped appreciated it. I assume thousands, actually hundreds of thousands of other volunteers have had similar experiences.

But there is one group of unpaid volunteers, numbering in the millions who are not only unappreciated, but many times hated by those they help. They routinely read complicated legal documents, spend hours meeting among themselves and with their groups' members and have the pressure of knowing their decisions will have great impact. They are volunteer homeowner association (HOA) board members.

It could be argued that they are the most despised volunteers in America.

Even the most calm, polite and unassuming people can turn into mommy grizzly bears when you get between them and either their money, children or, heaven forbid, both. One day, for example, your neighbor is exchanging pleasantries with you at the clubhouse. She is a lovely woman. But you see her the next night at your community's HOA board meeting, and she is ready to burn an effigy of you because you informed her she cannot paint her house red with white polka dots.

I've never been an HOA volunteer, but I'm a publisher in the HOA industry. I've heard it all. Most HOA board members are not power hungry dictators. Many took the job because no one else did. Board members have to deal with everything from landscaping to "slip and fall" lawsuits. On top of that they have the responsibility to tell their neighbors things like how high their grass or fence can be.

When I coached sports, people said "Thanks for teaching my kid how to throw." In Boy Scouts I would hear "Thanks for setting up the camping trip." At the Lions Club I'd get "Thanks for the fundraising," and the First Aid Squad "Thanks for the ride to the hospital." People understood they were receiving help. But HOAs are different because the average resident doesn't really understand how the association board members protect their property values. They don't see that efforts are being made to collect dues from delinquent homeowners. This is money that everyone else would need to make up the difference on if uncollected. They don't understand that there are timetables that need to be organized for building money in reserves to maintain their common elements such as pools, parking lots, signage, trees and more. The beneficiaries of these volunteer efforts either take them for granted, or they assume since they pay dues, they are entitled to live unaware of what goes on to maintain their properties. After all, the community was sold to them as "maintenance-free living." They don't understand that it's maintenance free because volunteers are overseeing the management of the community. The aspect of management and oversight are completely overlooked.

The best analogy I can make about this misunderstanding is to use government as an example. We all pay taxes, however we know that this money can be used in a variety of ways depending on who is in charge. Just because we pay taxes, we don't assume we can all live like children in their parents' houses - completely free of responsibility. If the schools are falling apart or people are speeding down local roads, we expect local government to take action - make decisions and plan so "our town" doesn't become Armageddon. It's basically the same with these communities. The HOA board can hire a management company, but it's up to residents, those who actually have a stake in the real estate and the heart of the neighborhood, to steer management in the right direction.

Here's the main reason why being an HOA board member could be the worst volunteer job in America. When I was a soccer coach of eight-year-olds, I had to deal with a player's dad who was insane. He never volunteered. He just showed up every now and then and would berate the team and myself from the sidelines like a crazy person. I got though it for two reasons. First, everyone else knew he was nuts. And

second, perhaps most importantly, I could go home and be done with him after the game. Unfortunately for HOA board members, they need to live side-by-side with their antagonists. The soccer dad could only scream from the sidelines. He was not entitled to speak his peace or "take the floor" at meetings on a monthly basis. I didn't have to see him every time I pulled into my driveway. He couldn't approach me while I was walking my dog.

There's more going on at your HOA than people letting their dogs poop all over, or residents who can't park their cars within the lines. For most people the investment in their home is the most critical investment in their lives. Yet, many people spend more time investigating which model of car to purchase, compared to what they are getting into with a HOA.

That is a big mistake, because whether you are a HOA board fan, or antagonist, or something in between, that lack of knowledge can hurt. HOAs do run into major financial issues, some even go bankrupt. What is your home value going to be if your pool has algae in it, or the clubhouse is falling apart?

My suggestion is get to know your board members outside of the "public meeting" sessions. These meetings are important to attend but many times attract the more vocal residents, whose hobby in life are to attend these meetings and "yell from the sidelines" like my soccer friend. This way you can simply ask "how is the HOA doing" in a cordial environment, and hopefully get answers to your questions, and stay up to date on how your largest investment is doing.

Now from the other side things did you hear about the HOA president who put a siren and red lights on his car and appointed himself sheriff..

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