



Homeowners associations are often called on to provide security for the community. Some associations provide controlled entry, armed patrols, video cameras and other high-tech gadgetry. Others build fences and moats. All of this is costly, but does it really do the trick?

Security is mostly perception, and that percep-

tion may be different depending on the observer. For example, a resident may feel secure because of a new video surveillance system. Meanwhile, an intruder laughs because the system can be neutralized easily or has major gaps.

One thing is clear. The association needs to be careful about preempting local law enforcement. This is especially true in the case of breaking and entering or physical altercations. Doing so may expose the association to additional liability. A number of significant court cases have found associations responsible for facilitating assaults, rapes and other violent crimes because they failed to provide promised security. In most of those cases, the community had boasted about its security. Never make such boasts. They are a challenge to criminals and great lawsuit fodder for attorneys.

On the other hand, associations should be conscious of security issues and make the buildings and grounds reasonably safe and secure. There are many relatively inexpensive steps an association and its residents can take. Unfortunately, residents are often the worst gap in security. They leave gates open, hand out keys and codes, and rarely question strangers even if they see them breaking into someone's car.

To address this weak link, a neighborhood watch committee is helpful. If the watch committee detects security laxness, it can remind individuals personally or put out periodic reminders about specific security issues. The committee's job is to keep residents aware, not scared. Information distribution and meetings are particularly effective following a crime. The committee can also host meetings with guest speakers like police, detectives and security companies. Most residents know what they should do about security, but reminders will help keep them focused on the issue.

While cameras and guards seem like a good idea, bad guys rarely parade in plain view. It's better to

also work. The fact that there is neither 24 hour surveillance nor real cameras doesn't inform the criminal of that. If you can deter three out of five criminals, you've just reduced crime by 60 percent.



By Richard L. Thompson

Once again, security is mostly perception. While an association can pay for expensive guard services, the guards can't be everywhere at once. You can buy expensive security cameras and recorders but who's going to monitor the equipment? And even if you catch someone on camera, the chances are slim you'll be able to identify them.

Every association should provide a reasonable level of safety and security. Exterior lighting should be well-placed and working. Gates and locks should be industrial grade. Landscaping should be trimmed to reduce cover and to allow light to disperse. Finally, get the resident's security perception in alignment with the intruder's. Once both are on the same page, security becomes closer to reality.

Playing Cop

Question: What is an association's responsibility for implementing security measures when a known violent resident exists? We're considering surveillance cameras and I was wondering about the pros and cons.

Answer: The board is in a Catch 22 when it comes to security. If it fails to inform other residents about a violent resident who subsequently injures someone, the board will be held responsible. If the board inform residents of a violent resident who subsequently files suit against the association for defamation of character, the board could also be held

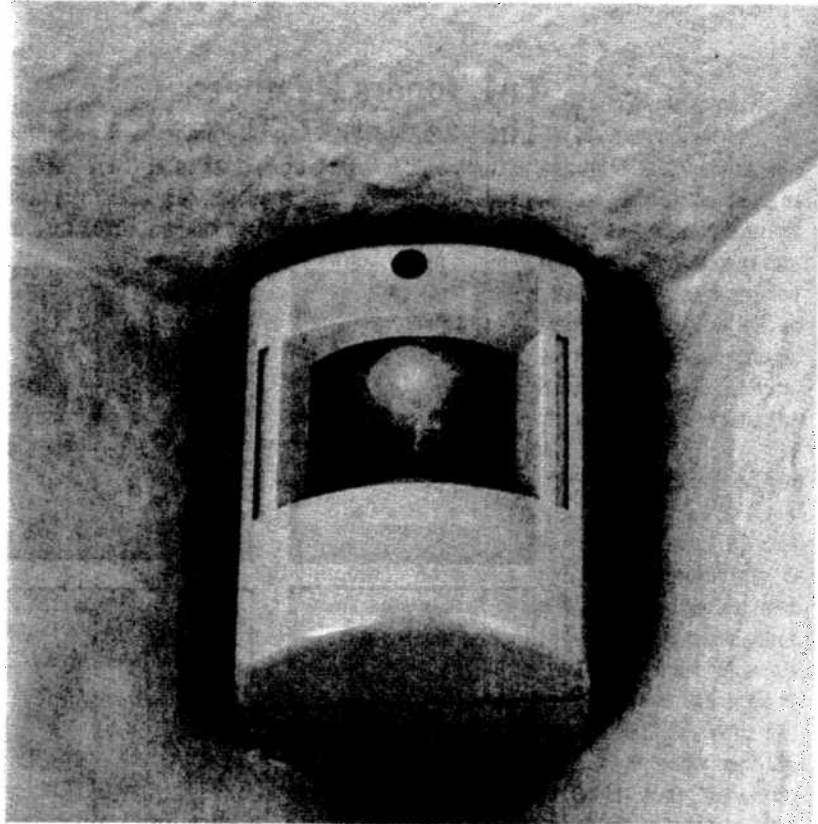
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responsible.

Installing video surveillance cameras is a very expensive and uncertain method for controlling crime. As mentioned in the accompanying article, security is more perception than reality, and many surveillance cameras are simply fake cameras with blinking red lights. Using the same theory, inexpensive signs that read "24 Hour Surveillance" can be just as effective as cameras.

Most security problems should be handled by local law enforcement. An association board is rarely prepared to deal with crime in an effective way, but police are trained and paid to do the job. The board can have local law enforcement attend a board meeting to discuss the issues and solutions. This is particularly important since it will be recorded in the minutes that law enforcement was formally put on notice of problems.

Obviously, if law enforcement suggests corrective measures to increase security (like better lighting, increased fencing or reducing landscape), the board needs to act. But in the final analysis, the association should leave playing cop to the cops.



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