

# ASSOCIATION BRIDGE, LLC

*Leading community associations over deep waters*

## **GETTING THERE – MAINTENANCE**

### **When Water is Not Your Friend**

***Preventive & Proactive Approaches to Leaks, Overflows, and Other Potential Disasters***

***By Thomas L. Willis, PCAM®***

I vividly recall receiving an emergency call from a high rise resident one Saturday many years ago. A panic-stricken young woman is hollering into the phone in order to be heard over the sound of rushing water in the background:

*“You have to shut the water off to the building quick! I have a flood!”*

*“OK - Help me to understand what’s going on. What’s leaking?”*

*“My sink. I don’t know what happened. I was replacing the faucets and all the sudden the pipes blew up!”*

*“Uh oh. The shut-off valves under the sink aren’t holding?”*

*“What valves?”*

*“Those little football shaped things you see when you open up the cabinet doors that turn off the water to the sink.”*

*“Oh....”*

My first time D-I-Y unit owner did not realize that trying to replace a faucet set without shutting off the water under the sink first was slightly problematic. She turned off the water, but the damage was done. Her neighbors were not amused.

OK, I know water is vital for life. When I was a kid, I loved the stuff in all its forms; summers at the beach, snow days off from school. But that all changed. As any manager of condominiums and cooperative will tell you, if water is the topic of the day, it’s frequently not a good thing. Whether it’s either seeping, blowing in, spraying, gushing, dripping, or overflowing, one way or another it’s causing damage to property and heartburn for building occupants, owners, board members, and the professionals that serve them.

So what are you to do? Hoping nothing will leak won’t work. Winging it is not an option. The time to act is before the proverbial fecal matter hits the fan. A systematic analysis of your property and operation with a view to identifying specific risks and action plans is the way to go. You will (1) identify, (2) prevent, (3) respond, (4) mitigate, (5) assign, (6) repair, and (7) learn. While it is true that you cannot anticipate every possible scenario, it is also true your chances for effective action are poor without advance planning. Dwight Eisenhower said, “In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.” This is a battle you can win.

While this article focuses on water-related risks, the same approach can be applied to any risk management and emergency response plan. Space constraints do not allow us to outline every possible situation, but hopefully we will help you to get a feel for the kinds of things you should be considering when planning for the specific needs of your property. The idea is to get in the habit of thinking through your property and the “what ifs.”

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***I HAVE SERVED MY CLIENTS WITH FORWARD-THINKING, FUNDAMENTALLY SOUND SOLUTIONS FOR MORE THAN 25 YEARS. IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN PRAGMATIC EXCELLENCE, WE SHOULD TALK.***

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**Inspect Using Your Big Brain (or Borrowing Someone Else's if Need Be):** It is vitally important to know your building and **identify** potential risks. You don't have to be an expert in everything – seek guidance from those that are. As you inspect, note the location, age and condition of components both inside units and in the common elements. If something can leak, back-up, or overflow, think about it.

- Domestic water supply and HVAC systems and piping
- Waste piping, drains, sump pumps and sewage ejectors
- Fire suppression systems
- Roof, roof drainage, and exterior façade
- Surface drainage

**Preventive Maintenance:** Where possible, keep water from going where it ought not. Thinking preventively is more than hiring contractors to perform maintenance on equipment. A few areas to consider, with applicability depending on the specifics of your property:

- Identify the location of isolation valves, make sure there is a chart identifying the location of each and what each controls. Plan to exercise these valves regularly so they actually work when you need them.
- Maintain equipment (sounds obvious, but you'd be surprised).
- Caulk, flash, point up, or otherwise seal exterior components where needed.
- Make sure landscaping is graded to flow water away from buildings and window wells.
- Consider an in-unit service policy to change filters seasonally and clear condensation drains to prevent back-ups.
- Better yet – expand the in-unit service policy to include a “risk management” inspection. If staff is already in a unit to change filters, there is opportunity to inspect things such as tub caulking/grouting, dripping valves at the toilet and under sinks, rusty water heaters, or evidence of water damage.
- Plan for prevention when performing projects (such as installing ice shield when replacing shingled roofs to prevent ice damming)
- Communities with mature trees tend to under budget for tree maintenance. In addition to the risk of damage from falling trees and limbs, clogged downspouts can lead to water infiltration
- Routinely communicate proactive steps residents can take to prevent emergencies in units.
- Inspect and test sump pump systems and sewage ejectors to make sure they work.
- Talk to legal counsel about the possibility of adopting a unit maintenance standards policy that identifies “high risk” components (such as ice maker lines, washing machine hoses, water heaters and the like) that sets a standard of maintenance and eventual replacement, clarifying the “duty to maintain” clause in the bylaws.
- Proactively jet common drain stacks and laterals.
- Require audible alarms or shut off controls as available for unit HVAC condensation pans to prevent overflows.
- As a roof nears the end of its useful life, consider an annual roof inspection by an outside expert to plan for aggressive maintenance as needed.
- Make sure heat tape on water pipes is operable to prevent freezing and bursting.
- Properly winterize irrigation systems, hose bibs, and pool house plumbing to avoid freezing and bursting.

Finally, the value of regular, thorough property inspections cannot be overemphasized. Managers can't be desk jockeys. This is one of the best strategies to catch things before they become problems.

**Ready for Mr. Murphy?:** Sooner or later, despite all your best efforts, Murphy's Law will rear its ugly head. Water events seem to happen on an upper floor during non-business hours in order to cause the most damage possible. A unit owner whacks a sprinkler head with an errant ladder, a toilet explodes, fun stuff like that.

Advance planning for your **response** is a must. This should include:

- Have an emergency response plan in place that includes valve charts, the location of utility shut-offs, and fire suppression system information, emergency contact numbers, and procedures to be followed in case of emergency.
- Schedule reviews of the emergency response plan to update as needed, review the plan with all new staff members, and scheduled reviews of roles and responsibilities with all responsible parties.

**Don't Compound the Problem - Mitigate:** The plan to respond to emergencies should include procedures to mitigate damage whenever possible. At this juncture, forget about who will be ultimately responsible for the leak – your duty is to avoid bigger problems later and protect the property as a whole. Inaction is not an option.

- Isolate and stop water flow as fast as possible
- Make sure thorough inspections are included – do not assume water has been contained in a single unit or group of units.
- Get the water up as fast as possible, open wall spaces as needed, get blowers, dehumidifiers and the like in place fast. If in doubt at all, call in the professionals to apply proper protocols
- If it's "dirty water" (a sewage back-up), bring in the professionals. Don't go cheap with self help, you'll only pay later.
- 2 rookie mistakes to avoid: "I am waiting until I hear back from the insurance carrier to clean up the water" and "It's a unit owner responsibility so I will wait for them to fix the pipe and clean up the water." **NO!** Unless, of course, your goals are to make your residents uncomfortable and unhappy, and to throw a bunch of cash at the mold remediation guys.

**The Crisis is Over – But Don't Stop Now:** When the emergency has passed, it's time to figure out who will be responsible fix the damage and what caused it. Communication with all affected parties is huge. If the thing that caused the damage is a unit component and will be a unit owner's responsibility, you've got to communicate that accurately and clearly. If it was a common element, get it fixed. If insurance is involved, that may add complications. The best way to prepare to **assign** responsibility is to be thoroughly familiar with association governing documents, policies, the condominium act, and the master insurance policy. Refresh your memory in light of the recent incident. If you need help interpreting any of those, get it before you open your mouth. You may be telling people something they don't want to hear, so making sure you know what you are talking about is a particularly good idea.

**Close the Deal:** Now that you know what you are responsible for getting **repaired**, get it done. If an insurance claim is involved, coordinating with adjusters and getting agreement on the scope of work can delay the work. Also, competitive bidding might be required, which might slow progress. Unfortunately, nobody wants to hear that. The best way to plan for this phase is to set reasonable expectation, under promise and over deliver, be mentally prepared so as not to get defensive, and communicate, communicate, communicate (and document!).

**What Did You Learn?:** Analyze your performance. Did an event show a chink in your planning armor? Are you seeing a pattern of leaks that tells you a system requires better maintenance? Is it time to plan for replacement?

Can you improve your proactive communications with residents? Let experience be your teacher and help you to raise your game where needed.

Now is the time to inspect, to identify, to think and to plan. Prevent problems whenever possible. Plan to control what you can and manage the rest. Get help where you need it. Remember the “5 P’s” – Proper preparation prevents poor performance. And sleep a little easier.

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