

Enhancing Outdoor Spaces

When community associations and homeowners look to spruce up their property and increase the neighborhood's marketability, they'll often rely on improving their surroundings.

While outdoor enhancements might begin with landscaping, they also might include improving recreation areas, adding or rejuvenating signs, lighting, walkways and other projects.

To ensure that there's enough man-power to get the job done, the association should seek both volunteer and professional help in both planning and implementing improvements. Because an enhancement project may create controversy and be time-consuming, the association should create a member task force or committee to investigate, survey and make recommendations to the board. Having broad community representation on the committee will improve the chance of success.

Depending on the nature of the enhancement project, various professional consultants may be needed to make recommendations and help with planning. Design professionals—such as a landscape architect, arborist and a horticulturalist—will be familiar with government requirements for the proposed improvements before they are presented to the community. With professional help, plans that don't meet specifications will be eliminated before residents see them and expenses will be reduced in the long run.

The association manager also has a role in this process. He should be mindful of safety issues, essential services and repairs that need to be addressed before undertaking the project. The association manager should also provide examples and materials from other communities, reference past

improvements, provide cost information, identify reliable consultants and suppliers and ensure that plans and decisions are documented.

For most associations, an outdoor improvement program is worth the effort and expense because it eliminates unsafe conditions, increases curb appeal, creates a sense of community, responds to current recreational needs, adapts to changing tastes and, with improved lighting, may even foster a greater feeling of community security.

Associations will often focus on landscaping when enhancing their outdoor spaces; of course, large-scale landscaping can be a significant financial investment. Common landscaping upgrades will not only improve appearance but also reduce future maintenance costs, hide unsightly features, provide sound and visual barriers, create natural areas, add beauty and prevent erosion.

Besides landscaping, there are other features that can greatly improve an association's outdoor areas: increased lighting; updated identification signs or fences; swimming pool, playing field and court enhancements; and installing bus shelters, benches, gazebos, picnic areas or pathways. Additionally, outdoor enhancement programs can also upgrade security, mitigate unsightly areas (like dumpster sites) and improve street signs.

Some improvements might require the approval of local government officials for zoning, building permits or inspections. Be sure to consult local utility companies about the location of underground cables, pipes, mains and wiring. Additionally, be aware of federal requirements regarding issues ranging from accommodating disabled persons to managing storm water.