



# SAVING MONEY, IMPROVING COMPLIANCE, AND FOSTERING VOLUNTEERISM THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

By John D. Hansen, Esq.



**F**or better or worse, social media is a part of our culture. It has many benefits and many challenges. No matter what your opinion is of social media, it has a role and an impact in community associations. But it goes beyond a medium to make announcements, search for a lost pet, discuss why a patrol car was in the neighborhood, or promote garage sales. Social media can actually save associations money. Social media may even reduce the amount of violations and create a larger pool of owners willing to serve on boards and committees.

To illustrate this point, we can start with the opposite of these trends. In *Harrison, et. al. v. Sierra Dawn Estates Homeowners' Association, Inc.*, 2010 WL 25436168 (Cal.App.4 Dist.), which is an unpublished decision, the court of appeals took up the issue of rental restrictions and some of the characteristics of tenants. The court considered this to determine if it was reasonable to limit the number of tenants in a community, and restrict rentals in general. Sierra Dawn Estates Homeowners' Association, Inc. manages a senior community consisting of mobile homes. A majority of the Association's members adopted a rental restriction that included the following provisions: (1) the new owner of a unit cannot rent out his or her unit for at least one year after acquiring the unit; (2) the maximum term of a lease is one year; (3) leased units cannot exceed 20% of the total units; and (4) no owner can lease more than 3 of his or her units.

The court upheld these restrictions and found that there was ample evidence to support the reasons for the association's

adoption of the restriction. First, there was evidence to support that rental units were generally correlated with crime. Second, renters tended to violate rules more often than owners. Third, renters caused a need for more maintenance and increased costs. Finally, renters were less likely to volunteer in the community or contribute to it. Based on the evidence produced, the court affirmed the validity of the rental restriction.

Another way to describe the issues in Sierra Dawn is that when people are not invested in their community, they are more likely to break the rules, neglect maintenance, and resist getting involved and contribute.

A related issue is turnout in elections, which is traditionally low. However, many associations have experienced that when there is a controversial issue at stake, or if there has been controversy that has received a lot of attention, such as an increase in assessments, more ballots are returned. The

problem with this phenomenon is that it requires controversy, which usually arises from something potentially negative and the resulting interest is divided for or against an issue, or the board.

If, however, you can build positive interest in the affairs of the association, you can obtain the same result of high voter turnout without the negative side effects that come with controversy.

This brings us back to the use of social media. Social media is not for everyone, and many people prefer the privacy of having no social media footprint. However, social media use by an association does not require anyone to personally join social media or even expand a personal social media presence. An association can prepare an official profile that can be used for sending extra notices, posting useful information, promoting members, starting conversations, creating a place where people can communicate and share about the community, etc.

Before creating a social media account, an association should adopt a policy regarding what platforms will be used, who is authorized to post items, what type of items will be posted, and other issues relevant to that community. You want to avoid an unauthorized post that could be defamatory, discriminatory, or damaging. You should also be intentional about the types of accounts and controls that can assist you in managing what gets posted. Boards should also consider adopting a budget for social media, which could be used to cover any added management time, boost posts on Facebook (makes them reach more people), purchase copyrighted images that may be useful, pay for promotional videos to be created or photographs taken, etc. A few hundred dollars can go a long way on social media.

Social media can be used to promote services, such as parking passes and architectural forms. For example, you could post: “Having a party this weekend? Give us a call to get your parking passes emailed to you. We hope you have a great event!” Not only is this drawing positive attention to the association, but it is making parking passes convenient and reminding members about parking rules without any kind of threat. Another example would be: “Tired of brown grass? Here’s a link to our landscape application. We can’t wait to see your new design!”



Making compliance easy and making it a topic of discussion can reduce violations. To take it a step further, consider this post: “Take a look at the great job the Smith’s did with their yard! (include picture) Let’s see who can top this! Click here for an application.” Promoting members and their hard work draws positive attention to the Association, as well as makes a member (future director) feel good and can encourage healthy competition for best landscape. This could be particularly helpful when associations cannot fine owners for a lack of watering, and is a practice currently engaged in by local water agencies and cities.

You can also promote activities, such as meetings and social events, and if past events generated good pictures, include pictures to show members that the annual meeting and BBQ is a fun social event that is well attended. A 12-point font notice on a bulletin board does not have the same impact as a picture of a smiling group with a refreshment in their hands that flashes on someone’s mobile device or tablet.

Additionally, social media can be used in ways that are not typical for association notices. For example, “Local realtor Jane Smith says new entry monument and landscaping is having positive impact on home sales. Your assessments at work!” This highlights the good work that management and the board are doing, and gives the members positive news about their homes. On a different subject, you can keep members informed of local issues: “@SacPolice says reports of vehicle tampering in our neighborhood. Remember to remove valuables from your vehicles at night and lock your doors.”

Finally, social media can be an opportunity for an association to turn a negative into a positive, and to stay ahead of controversy. For example, you can publicly handle members concerns: Member posts – “Our HOA is wasting our money and our buildings look terrible.” Response – “Thanks for your comment and we will do whatever we can to address your concerns. We would love to meet with you to inspect the areas you believe need work.” This responds to the member post or comment in a positive manner, and lets the rest of the membership see it happening. Another way to take on controversy is to draw attention to negative publicity associations receive in the news, and talk about how you are different: “Did you see the article

on sfgate.com about bad HOAs? Let's talk about what we can do to ensure no one in our community ever feels that way. Come to our meeting next Thursday and share your ideas to keep our community great!"

If you want more examples of positive uses of social media, follow your local city, county, city councilmember, or county supervisor.

There's a point to all of this beyond making communities more social. As a person who does not personally use social media, that primary effect is not enough. Back to the Sierra Dawn case, the problem with tenants is that when people are not invested in their community, they are more likely to break the rules, neglect maintenance, and resist getting involved and contributing. The same principle holds true for owners. If they are less invested in the community, do not understand the purpose or benefit of the association and management, and do not find any value in living in a community association, they are less likely to participate and contribute. Giving them information in a 25-page annual disclosure, or on the bulletin board on overlooked notices, or at meetings they may not attend is not enough. You need to reach them where they are, and for many people, that is social media where you can send a notice right to their pocket, their nightstand or their desk.

If members are engaged, see the positive benefits of the association, experience the services the association and management have to offer, and see the impact of good maintenance on home values, they will care more. They may learn something that interests them and causes them to want



to run for the Board. They may be enticed to attend an event or meeting they would not have otherwise attended because they saw a picture and reminder that morning on their phone. That may lead to a conversation and an eventual committee chair appointment. They may forget about the parking restrictions before having a party, but instead of getting a violation notice after the fact, they see a tweet or a post and easily obtain the parking passes they need.

The more the association can remind them it is there and does good things, the more effective the association can be.

Less violation notices, more interest in serving on the Board, more archi-

tectural applications and well-maintained yards, higher election participation, and higher property values are potential results of a strong use of social media, and that all translates to saving time and money.

Finally, as it stands now, if you search an association's name on the internet, you may find a website that is generally only accessible to members, and may find negative comments on various websites. Imagine though if an association had a strong social media footprint, and instead when it was searched someone found a Facebook page or Twitter feed full of positive, informative and interesting posts, including information about the management company that put them there. That could improve the chances of prospective home sales, would start members off on the right foot, and could potentially drown out any unflattering information on the internet.

Social media is not for everyone, but it's not going away any time soon and can be a very useful tool for associations to improve compliance, improve maintenance and aesthetics, improve volunteerism and contributions, and promote the hard work and positive results achieved by managers and boards. 🏠



**JOHN D. HANSEN** is a partner at Baydaline & Jacobsen LLP, which provides general counsel and litigation services to over 800 community associations in the Bay Area and Central Valley. Mr. Hansen has been practicing community association law for seven years, and handles both general counsel and litigation for community associations. Baydaline & Jacobsen LLP is located in Sacramento. Mr. Hansen frequently speaks at seminars and conferences regarding community associations, and has authored articles on a variety of topics important to community associations.