

# The Power of Participation

## 10 tips for overcoming apathy in your community

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### How do I get more neighbors to participate in community activities?

Although I work with community association boards primarily on financial and business matters, I am still asked this question, as board members look for creative ways to engage residents. I also faced resident apathy first-hand during my eight years on my neighborhood's board of directors. At various times we needed board members, committee chairs and volunteers, project leaders, and, of course, better attendance at annual meetings.

Some apathy is normal, as many people move into planned communities so they don't have to worry about things like common area maintenance, assessment collections, and pool party planning. On the other end of the spectrum, lack of participation doesn't necessarily mean that everyone is perfectly happy. Sometimes residents don't speak up due to lack of information or lack of opportunity to provide feedback.

### Start with the conversation, and follow with the ask

Encouraging participation has to start with some dialog before you can ask for help. Reach out and share information, then request support where needed. As you get more of your neighbors to help run your community and community activities, you will find that activity attendance (at socials, clubs, meetings, etc.) will also rise.

Here are 10 ideas to get neighbors more engaged in your community:

- 1. Communicate your goals.** What do you want to accomplish as a community? It is easier for residents to volunteer when they know the end game. Allow participation, especially when addressing major challenges, as vocal neighbors sometimes really do want to help.
- 2. Publicly answer questions.** If one person has a question, most likely others have the same one. Use your newsletter or other communication tools to answer even the tough questions.
- 3. Share good news.** Use your newsletter, email list, website, or bulletin board to recognize neighbors who are doing things right, like publishing "home of the month" pictures or listing completed home improvement projects approved by the architectural committee.
- 4. Publish budget updates.** As a CPA, I had to mention something financial. Send monthly budget updates, or at least a few budget bullets. Don't wait until the annual meeting.
- 5. Add a social element to meetings.** As an example, host a new neighbor reception before your annual meeting to boost meeting attendance.
- 6. Keep it simple.** Ask neighbors to volunteer first for small projects, like one hour at the movie night concession stand. Get them involved, and then try to expand their commitment later.
- 7. Never miss a recruiting opportunity.** Pass around a sign-up form at social events. Make an appeal at annual meetings. Offer complaining neighbors a chance to volunteer. Maybe they will stop complaining... Answering questions and addressing complaints can be the first steps in neighbor engagement.



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*"Recruiting is a never-ending effort to maintain that level of participation."*

- 8. Tighten controls.** Here is my other CPA tip. If apathy is expressed through increased assessment delinquency rates or declining focus on property maintenance, you may find that tighter controls, like a strict collections process, will quickly change behavior.
- 9. Focus on new residents.** Take advantage of the enthusiasm and help new residents get quickly involved in the community. Volunteering is a great way to meet neighbors and make new friends.
- 10. Thank your volunteers.** We use the front page of our newsletter to thank specific volunteers every month. Also consider an event, like an annual reception, to recognize all volunteers.

### Wash, rinse and repeat

The key to successfully engaging your neighborhood residents is to build momentum over time. Just sending out an email won't work. Pick a couple of ideas, or come up with your own plan, and try it for 6 months. You'll find interest building over time, with more residents volunteering when they see others doing it without giving up all their free time.

Out of 500 homes in my community, there are about 60 board, committee, and project volunteers at any given time. Recruiting is a never-ending effort to maintain that level of participation. We have a saying that our neighborhood "runs on volunteer power." With a little effort over time, yours will too. ■