





Bill Lang, RCM
Onyx Property Group

Embracing Diversity

Condominium corporations and directors should encourage more diversity among the owners who run for their boards. Currently, people from minority backgrounds are underrepresented in board positions. Too few are even remotely interested in running for open positions. Trends indicate that condo ownership demographics have changed over the past two decades, with ownership among various ethnic groups and women having increased substantially. Gone are the days where condo boards are an “old boys’ club.”

Before accepting an offer to work in Waterloo Region, I was offered work as a property manager in predominantly Cantonese and Vietnamese speaking condominium complexes. It did not bother me that they were trying to put an Asian face in the role; I spoke the languages and understood the culture. However, I decided not to accept the posi-

tion because I wanted to work in a more diverse community rather than “specialize” in working with one particular group.

Confronting Racist Behaviour

In exploring the reasons behind the under-representation of minorities, it is challenging (but necessary) to come face-to-face with a number of uncomfortable truths. Being a Manager of Asian descent, I have firsthand experience with racist behaviour from a condo director, which occurred during a board meeting I chaired. While such incidents have fortunately been rare in my career as a property manager, it impacted me and served as a poignant reminder that prejudice is still alive and well. In short, the director made a racial slur that exhibited an ‘old school’ mentality during the meeting. As a result, a letter was written to the offending director to cease and desist such language. An

apology was sought and given, and the matter was deemed closed.

This incident gave me pause to consider the reasons for low to non-existent interest in board positions among owners of diverse backgrounds. One potential reason includes the perception that ‘other people’ are already taking the reins of leading the condo community. This mindset may stem from feelings of alienation, perceived bias, or language barriers.

Commitment to Diversity

A commitment to diversity and inclusivity requires lasting and continuous communication and action within the condo community and on the board - not hollow gestures and glib recruitment. Without it, some owners will feel uncomfortable in the running for or being elected to a position. Any diversity initiative we undertake with our boards should be based on the owners’ community



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needs, rather than on what we as property managers presume should be done. We should try various means of identifying diversity gaps in our condo boards. These include surveys looking for owner input on diversity in their community, speaking directly with specific owners whom we know are engaged with the condo community or asking residents if they know anyone who might be a good fit to join their board. Condo boards should also host town halls to encourage more owners of diverse backgrounds to run. The key to town hall meetings is to foster two-way communication rather than merely lecturing owners about “acceptable” levels of diversity. That approach is almost guaranteed to alienate some people.

Many boards are also focusing on “diversity of thought,” a term coined in a Harvard Business Review article on Corporate Boards, by seeking membership from a broad range of professional, economic and cultural backgrounds. Of course, diversity of thought only really works if those people are being heard and listened to. Having diversity on paper and not in practice brings us back to the sort of tokenism that does not truly help anyone. Only genuine efforts to listen to diverse perspectives, elevate marginalized voices, and confront systems within the condo that have hindered diversity will work.

Diversity initiatives should not have the sole intention of benefitting marginalized members of a community. Instead, the perceptions need to be reframed and expanded to acknowledge that genuine diversity and equity in a community contributes to that community’s optimal strength as a whole. It serves the best interest of owners if the best-qualified candidate is vetted and

selected without prejudice or bias. In a condo community where marginalized people are excluded from positions of power, many valuable candidates whose abilities will benefit everyone may be left out of the conversation.

The Best Person for the Position

Conversely, “token directors” selected strictly out of a need to fill a “quota” may be a detriment to the community. Inclusion for the sake of diversity is wasteful and is not a productive way to run any condo

a clear path forward. Over the years of being a property manager and working with many boards, I have witnessed significant growth in the prevalence of female directors and the amazing contributions stemming from this form of diversity. In fact, at one point, nearly all the presidents in my portfolio were female. My experience has unequivocally shown the benefits of a condo board that reflects the diversity of the ownership. More needs to be done along the same lines for condo owners of all diverse and marginalized backgrounds, including those with disabilities. In my

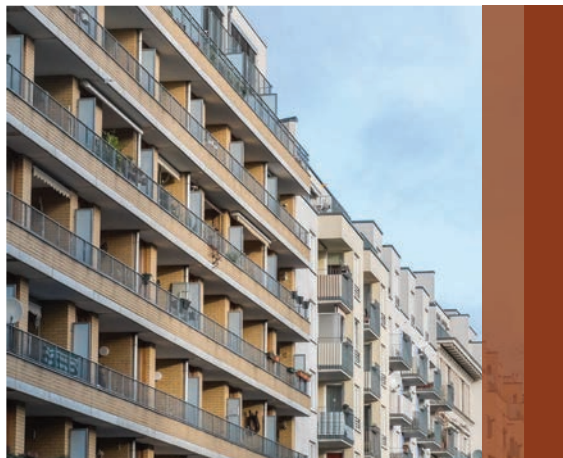
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corporation. The last thing a condo corporation wants is a very influential position of responsibility seemingly “reserved” for someone who may look different. This is not only wrong but demeaning to the person seeking election. Furthermore, if a director who was elected solely on their ethnic background is incompetent or ill-suited to their role, their shortcomings may unfairly stigmatize whatever ethnic group they belong to. It is essential, for the sake of long-term success in promoting diversity, that the elected directors are highly competent and qualified so they can serve as ambassadors for this long-overdue shift in mindset.

I will leave you with an anecdote from my career, which gives me hope for the future of diversity in this sector and paints

view, equitable representation has been achieved for women on condo boards. Now we must keep that momentum going until there’s true diversity everywhere. Things aren’t equal for any of us until they are equal to all of us. ■

Bill Lang, RCM, is currently the director of property management at Onyx Property Group, located in the Waterloo Region. With over 13 years on the job, he has a vast array of experiences in property management. Bill has managed condominiums in Waterloo Region, Toronto and the GTA. Bill majored in marketing and political science at college and university and is currently an RCM and General Licence holder. onyxpg.ca



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