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**Make Sure a "Neighborhood Watch Program" Doesn't Itself Make the News**

By Susan Springer

This past February, the tragic shooting death of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old high school student in Sanford, Florida, turned the nation's news spotlight on "neighborhood association and watch programs." Realtors® should contemplate their potential role in these groups. So ... how can neighborhoods organize responsible watch programs?

The Community Associations Institute (CAI), an international organization which actively encourages building better communities by providing education to homeowners and community association leaders, has expertise in these issues.

Because of the tragedy in Florida, CAI recently urged community associations and watch programs to review their procedures to prevent confrontations that should be handled by police. The organization offers a variety of educational materials so that homeowners understand the *extent* and *limitations* of their responsibilities. Also, CAI recently surveyed residents living in homeowner associations (HOA) and found that buyers continue to favor living in such associations.

"The more Realtors® can make sure people are informed and know exactly what they're purchasing, the more satisfied a customer the Realtor® will have and ultimately the better owner and better member of the association that person will be," said Thomas M. Skiba, CEO of the CAI.

**A Realtor's® Role**

Skiba says when Realtors® are knowledgeable about the communities that they are working in, everyone benefits. The seller can promote the attractive aspects of their neighborhood, the informed buyer is a more responsible member of their community, and sales professionals who are knowledgeable about the community can network more

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*credibly* within them.

"A Realtor® should be familiar with the structure of the association and some of the basic rules so that he or she can pass them on to a potential buyer with any established documentation," adds Skiba.

Neighborhood associations can vary greatly. Some are self-managed, while others are professionally managed. The rules differ about pets, parking, antennas and architectural guidelines. Some come with amenities, charitable and social activities, and environmental programs.



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“Information about all of those aspects would be beneficial to a Realtor® in helping package and sell that community to their particular clients,” said Skiba.

While some Realtors® work in broad geographic areas, those who specialize in one neighborhood, such as those who work in large-scale communities, have the opportunity to be more involved in that community.

### **Engagement**

“It pays for them to be not only more knowledgeable but frankly more engaged on a day-to-day basis because that ultimately supports their marketing and their successes as a sales professional,” said Skiba.

Skiba says that while he occasionally hears of buyers who first learn they’ve purchased in an association on closing day or when their assessment bill arrives, most Realtors® are great about informing buyers. He adds that first-time buyers and retirees moving out of a family home and into a condo or retirement community may be experiencing an HOA for the first time and need to be educated.

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### **Research Shows Buyers Favor HOAs**

A national survey of people who live in homeowner associations show the majority rate their experience as positive by a margin of almost nine to one. Other findings show residents rank community safety as the third most important aspect of living in an association, that they believe overwhelmingly that association rules protect property values, and that homeowners value the return they get for their association assessments. For the last several years, CAI’s affiliated nonprofit organization, the Foundation for Community Association Research, has sponsored this survey conducted by IBOPE Zogby International.

“Most folks not only are compliant with association rules but they appreciate the fact that the rules protect them and their investment in their home in a very fundamental way,” said Skiba.

### **Safety is a Major Factor**

The research shows that by more than four to one, purchasers who have already lived in HOA’s are more likely to buy in associations again. They appreciate the things which add value to a home such as consistent maintenance, curb appeal and personal safety.

“A lot of folks buy in associations because of the investment security, because of the amenities, because of the nature of the community, or simply because of the convenience of the community. Those are all positives that Realtors® can highlight in selling a property in a particular community,” said Skiba.

When asked the single best thing about living in an association, respondents listed more than ten items. First was living in an attractive neighborhood, followed by maintenance-free second, safety third, and property values fourth.

### **CAI Resources**

CAI offers a variety of education and resources valuable for Realtors® as well as homeowners, professional managers, and association management companies. Many of these materials can be downloaded for free from their website at [www.caionline.org](http://www.caionline.org).

Its brochure titled *Community Matters: What You Should Know Before You Buy* was created for real estate professionals. It gives prospective

homebuyers a look at the association experience along with its benefits and obligations. It covers governance, rules, assessments, and homeowner expectations.

“Realtors® have a great opportunity to educate people as part of the home search and purchase process,” said Skiba.

Another brochure, *From Good to Great*, gives guidelines for community association success. It outlines the rights and responsibilities for homeowners, non-owner residents and community leaders. As the brochure points out, “Good associations preserve the character of their communities, protect property values and meet the established expectations of homeowners.”

### **The Ultimate Objective**

“Having owners and potential owners who are knowledgeable and informed, and who are making smart purchase decisions about where they want to live, benefits the whole community,” said Skiba.

As Skiba points out, the tragedy in Florida is, thankfully, rare. He adds what’s important for Realtors® to know is that the presence of well-managed neighborhood associations and watch programs are definite *pluses* in any community; they further the common goal of selling homes in a safe environment to responsible citizens.



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