



HOMES

New association aims to unite local condo boards

Increased communication can solve problems, share information

by **Lacey Sikora**
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Richard Willis (above) formed the Oak Park River Forest Condominium Boards Network as a way to help condo associations navigate issues they all face without having to reinvent the wheel for each development. | Alex Rogals/Staff Photographer

Condominiums make up nearly 20 percent of Oak Park's housing stock, according to the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University. Condominium buildings are governed by their own homeowners associations (HOA), but in general each board operates on its own without input from other similarly situated buildings.

Until recently, HOAs were left to grapple with issues on their own, often reinventing the wheel each time a problem arose or they needed to find a new service provider.

Richard Willis wants to change that.

The longtime Oak Park resident and owner of multiple condominiums recently formed the Oak Park River Forest Condominium Boards Network (OPRFCBN.) He hopes other local condo boards will join forces to share knowledge.

As the board president for a condominium association, Willis says he was inspired to form the network so associations could share information.

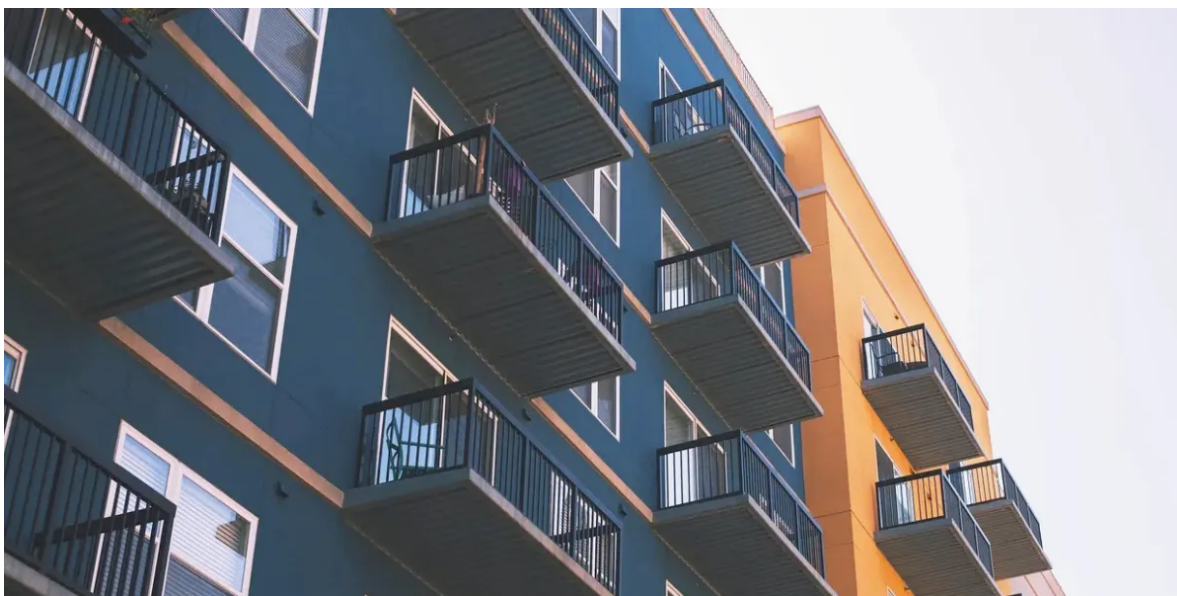


“I’ve found there’s no communication amongst the boards,” he said.

He says there have been multiple situations in his recent tenure that would have benefitted from crowdsourcing and shared contacts among local boards.

For example, he recalls what he describes as a “dog situation” with a neighboring building. It was a small issue that would have been readily resolved, but his board couldn’t figure out how to contact the board at the building where the four-legged offender resided.

“It was a minor issue that would have been so much easier to coordinate across a group,” Willis said.



He cites other instances, such as a building engineer retiring or finding an insurance company, as other examples of times it would be helpful to use a hive mind and increased experience to help out all boards in a consortium.

Willis says he was inspired to form the board after a personal encounter. He was introduced to someone who said she was a member of a local condominium board. Willis asked her who her building used for HVAC services and found she had a great recommendation.

While the network is just getting off the ground, he thinks that the group's benefits will go well beyond sharing contractor recommendations.

He sees a possibility to leverage the power of numbers in any number of transactions that condo boards take part in regularly.

One area that he feels is ripe for collaboration is banking.

"Every one of these condo associations, if they're well run, has a fair amount of money in the bank," Willis said. "What if we all got together and tried to get a better rate? This would benefit all of us."

He sees this mindset of applying to any number of services used by condo associations, from plumbing to budgeting and accounting.

“There’s a lot of benefit to group purchasing,” he said.

In the future, Willis thinks the network could negotiate with local hardware stores or big-box stores to get the same discounts that contractors receive for their large-scale purchases. He anticipates that he will do the initial legwork to make contacts with stores and hopes the network grows enough to make group collaboration the norm.

Willis says both condo boards and individual unit owners are encouraged to join. He expects that there will be a formalized agreement in place before boards can negotiate with banks or service providers, but says the group also has a more constructive purpose that can already be accessed.

The Facebook page for the group, facebook.com/OPRFCBN, is up and running and allows members to share recommendations for contractors and service providers as well as ask questions of the group. Willis has also launched a website at OPRFCBN.com.

Willis thinks the utility of the group will be quickly evident.

“As people cycle on or off boards, you can lose their knowledge, so we want to keep the group open to boards and individual owners,” he said.

Emphasizing the large portion of Oak Park housing that is made up of condominiums, he says that condo owners can be overlooked in decision-making of local government. He’s hoping the OPRFCN will change that too.