

Pros tackle your questions for free in new online forum



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Community Living

Got a question about how your community association should spend its money or run an election? Or what kinds of insurance you need?

You'll get answers at a new interactive website, PropertyU.net. Dozens of Illinois association experts are standing by to provide information and guidance at no cost.

The site was launched two months ago by Mark Cantey, a Wheaton-based certified public accountant who specializes in associations. He got the idea after noting the popularity of industry conferences and seminars where attendees are invited to question panels of vendors and service providers.

"People come to those events to get their specific questions answered," he said. "I thought, 'Why don't we utilize technology and the Internet to do an electronic homeowners forum?'"

Board members, property owners and other site visitors can browse a searchable inventory of previously answered questions or enter their own. New questions are sent to the appropriate experts, called PropertyU Professionals. Their answers and identities are posted, along with a link to contact the expert if the questioner wishes to continue the conversation privately. Most questions are answered in a couple of days.

One recent question: "Is a board member who was appointed by the board to fill a vacancy up for elec-



SOFIE DELAUW/GETTY PHOTO

At PropertyU.net, visitors can get free association guidance from lawyers, bankers, roofers, engineers and more.

tion at the next annual meeting, or does he complete the term of the board member whose position he filled?"

An attorney replied: "The board member appointed remains on the board until the next annual meeting. The term of this appointed board member does not extend beyond the annual meeting."

Another question concerned sunken sidewalks that created high steps to the nearby stoops: At what height are the steps considered a trip hazard?

Two contractors gave similar responses: The standard riser height is $7\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Raising the sidewalks via a process called mud-jacking is possible, but a more durable choice is concrete replacement.

"If you throw out a legal question, for example, we have three or four lawyers, so you'll get three or four answers," Cantey said. "They might each have a somewhat different perspective."

The site also has a library of articles and documents, many written by the experts. The current offerings include how to prevent ice dams, financial tips for self-managed associations and association-pertinent laws.

The roster of experts is vetted by Cantey and includes managers, land-

scapers, bankers, engineers and roofers, each with experience and interest in serving associations. To be approved, they sign an agreement that bars them from overtly promoting themselves or their companies or from contacting anyone who has asked not to be contacted. Experts are not given access to visitor email addresses.

Visitors are free to hire any of the experts but are not obligated to do so.

Cantey cautions the site's content is for educational purposes only and is not to be construed as legal advice: "Prior to taking any action, you should consult a qualified professional in the appropriate field."

One of the site's legal experts is Fullett Rosenlund Anderson PC in Lake Zurich. Erica Horndasch, the firm's director of client services, said: "The site is easy to navigate. Post a question, and get your answer. It's that simple."

Cantey may eventually charge experts a monthly fee, but for now he is more concerned with expanding the knowledge database. He has already begun work on a similar site for Wisconsin associations.

"This will become like an association Wikipedia," he said. "Every day it gets bigger."

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