

LOCAL & STATE

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The Miami Herald



SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2011 | EDITOR: JAY DUCASSI jducassi@MiamiHerald.com | 305-376-3557

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HOMEOWNER COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Boot camp drills condo leaders

■ About 750 condo and homeowners association leaders attended a five-hour boot camp to make them more savvy about running their communities.

BY DONNA GEHRKE-WHITE
Special to The Miami Herald

“General” Donna Berger frowned. Saturday’s boot camp recruits were still chatting in the crowded room.

Only these weren’t fresh, head-shaven troops. These were mostly veterans of the Early Bird Special, the elder statesmen of condominium and homeowners associations gathering to hear the latest advice on governing communities during one of South Florida’s most challenging economic times.

• TURN TO BOOT CAMP, 2B



PETER ANDREW BOSCH/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

LISTEN UP: Attorney Ray Piccen offers some tips to hundreds of homeowners and condo association members who attended the boot camp session.

Boot camp drills condo leaders

• BOOT CAMP, FROM 1B

"Quiet, soldiers!" barked Berger, a fatigue-clad attorney and executive director of the nonprofit Community Advocacy Network, which advocates and educates about community associations.

Some 750 people then settled down at the Board Member Boot Camp — a special event that saw experts don military-style uniforms and assume fake ranks to instruct participants on how to detect fraud, negotiate contracts, get along with difficult homeowners and even foreclose on people defaulting on their maintenance fees.

All were crucial topics at the five-hour session at Century Village East in Deerfield Beach even if the discussion leaders wore fatigues and threw fake grenades into the audience in a playful mix of fun and business.

Berger, for example, promised a boxed lunch better than military rations. And when one woman in the audience confided that she had been on her board for more than 15 years, Berger deadpanned, "You need a hobby, ma'am."

The audience roared with laughter.

But beyond the one-liners and jokes were serious matters that increasingly beleaguer South Florida, where more people than ever live in some sort of community association.

Associations are a billion-dollar South Florida industry. Volunteer boards need to know how to watch over the money, Berger



PETER ANDREW BOSCH/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

NOW HEAR THIS: Donna Berger, a fatigue-clad attorney and executive director of the nonprofit Community Advocacy Network, gives advice to leaders of condominium and homeowner associations.

said. And the state is increasingly concerned that boards be better educated. So Saturday's seminar conferred credit under a recent state law that requires condo association members to attend a class or sign an affidavit swearing he or she read their associa-

tion documents. (Florida does not have a similar law for HOA leaders.)

Fraud is a concern. One woman volunteered at the seminar that her association was out \$7,000. Other associations have lost much more, Berger said.

Watch out for association employees or board members who won't turn over bank statements for others to examine, she warned.

Stephen Risley, the new president of a Deer Creek condominium association in Deerfield Beach, took detailed notes. His new board was concerned about suspicious invoices that charged his association thousands of dollars.

"I want to learn as much as I can so I can do the best job I can," Risley said. "It's all about getting the information."

He said he became interested in joining his condo board when members of a previous board appeared secretive and only met a couple times a year.

Risley's approach: He set up a website to give homeowners information about the condo's vendors and budget. On it are links for homeowners to read state condo law.

Communication can be good in warding off problems, attorney Berger said.

But it has to be the right kind.

Don't put anything in writing that could be embarrassing in court, Berger cautioned, citing a board president who sought advice by email on how to oust a problem resident.

Silence also works, she

advised. Letting a resident vent without responding can be effective.

Association leaders should also keep mum with vendors on some matters.

Do not ask vendors, for example, for advice on a project. "They will tell you everything," said "Major" Ray Piccin, an attorney in Berger's law firm of Katzman, Garfinkel & Berger. Instead, ask the project's engineer for ideas.

High-ticket items should be bid out and contracts not signed before an attorney has read them, Piccin warned.

Vendors will want to cozy up to board leaders — but keep your distance. Boards may have to make decisions for the good of the community that won't always profit vendors, Piccin said.

"Major" Howard Perl, another attorney with Berger's law firm, said boards have to be careful in enacting "knee-jerk reactions" — such as changing a community pool's hours after vandalism.

Use reason, he advised.

Also, board members cannot stop owners from renting if their original documents allow them, Perl said.

"Colonel" Leigh Katzman, one of Berger's law partners, earned some of the seminar's loudest applause when he said boards should not tolerate people who do not pay their maintenance fees. Everyone else carries the burden, he said.

Instead, he recommended that boards foreclose on units with past-due accounts, "the sooner, the better."