ELECTRIC CARS IN THE CONDO OR TOWNHOME ENVIRONMENT

Sara E. Barry, CMCA PCAM – UNLV Certified Paralegal

Many condominium and townhome associations have serious issue surrounding parking within their communities. There just are not enough parking spots in the community to accommodate the all too often larger families with multiple drivers.

Years ago, the parking issues were pickup trucks or motorcycles let along electric cars. With the current prices of oil, however, more and more residents are thinking that they can solve that problem with the purchase of an electric car. Since these cars have been hailed as the ultimate solution to eliminate our country's dependence on foreign oil, other residents are purchasing the cars to help contribute to a more planet-friendly "green" environment.

Since the Federal government has set goals to have at least 1 million of these vehicles in service nationwide by 2015, condominium associations would be wise to put plans in place now on how this accommodation will work in their communities. A policy is the best place to proactively address this problem.

What should be in the policy and what should be taken into consideration? Can you imagine coming home to your condo and having to drive over multiple extension cords that are strewn through the parking areas for the cars that are recharging their batteries, or finding someone else's car plugged into your electrical outlet in front of your townhome? The following are some questions that the directors should be asking and trying to find proactive solutions.

1) Who should pay for the electricity to charge a few owners' electric or hybrid vehicles; the owner of the vehicle or the rest of the owners? Do we expect to make a profit to pay for any installation of the stations?
2) How will you police "electrical theft" should an owner plug his or her vehicle into another owner's or the association's outlets?
3) Will we treat Level 1 vs. Level 2 vehicles different from each other as level 1 (depending on the battery) can take from 6 – 20 hours to charge and can be used with a normal extension cord. Level 2, however, can take anywhere from 3 – 8 hours, but uses a 240 V system vs. a 120 V system in the Level 1 system. The level 2, however, won't work with normal plug in areas and would require more than a normal extension cord. *(See notes below for help in understanding):*

   A normal household 120-volt outlet typically has a 15-amp circuit breaker, meaning that the maximum amount of energy that the car can consume is approximately 1,500 watts, or 1.5 kilowatt-hours per hour. This type of battery in a car normally needs 12 to 15 kilowatt-hours for a full recharge; it can take 10 to 12 hours to fully charge the vehicle using this technique.

   By using a 240-volt circuit (such as the outlet for an electric dryer), the car might be able to receive 240 volts at 30 amps, or 6.6 kilowatt-hours per hour. This arrangement allows significantly faster charging, and can fully recharge the battery pack in four to five hours.

4) Is the installation of the charging station a material alteration that may require the vote of the owners for installation?
5) How many charging stations would be required and where would be the most logical place to locate them?

6) Does the association need to pass policies and rules regarding the use of the charging stations and limit or prohibit Level 1 charging, which would tap into the association's common area electrical outlets?
7) Are there any liability and insurance concerns? (Get the insurance agent involved.)
8) Whether the association will require the owner to install some kind of power management system that prevents a constant drain on the system.
9) Whether the association can require a higher voltage outlet be installed so that the charging would be more efficient and use less actual charging time.
10) What will the penalties be if the owner does not cooperate with the rules and the issue goes to a hearing and possible fine situation?
11) Even if the owner has an outlet in their garage will the association have a way to address the spikes in the electricity bills after they purchase this type of vehicle? Will we make them pay for any sub meters to track this additional use?

I would never claim to be an expert in this area and only advise that condominium and townhome associations proactively be prepared to address this as it is an issue that is not going to go away, but rather increase in popularity. Get an expert involve along with your insurance carrier since if you do provide the electricity and the power is not protected adequately from current spikes and other issues of which no one can possibly be aware of the infancy of this issue.