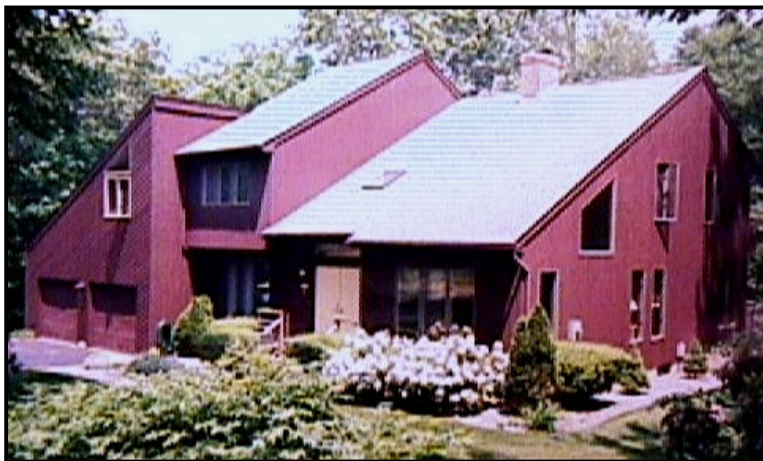


The Joys of Condo Living

by Vic Berecz

It was over a quarter-century ago ... our first experience with condo living. My company sent me on a two-year special assignment to the Washington, DC area and rented us a condo in suburban Virginia. It was great timing for us ... daughter in college, son just graduated and willing to live in and keep up our Connecticut place. Though we survived the full two years, it took us less than three months to decide that *Condo living is for old farts!*

We listened to our neighbors squabbling for two years about budgets, noise, reserves, aesthetics, and all the other issues that beset communal living. Even as outsiders, which is what *renters* are in every condo community, we couldn't avoid the "agita" that seems to pervade condo living. In 1988, we were overjoyed to get back to a new home in Connecticut ... the nicest, quietest and most rural home we've ever owned. It was a wonderful place to enjoy life alone together, yet with plenty of space to have the whole family together with us for the holidays and other occasions.



Funny thing, less than a decade later we were retired and had chosen a *snowbird* lifestyle. And, we owned two small condos. How did that happen? Had we devolved into a couple of old farts ourselves? And, more importantly, how did we fare in that alien environment? That's an interesting ... and on-going ... story. So let's take a slightly tongue-in-cheek look at condo living and how it reshaped our lives.



My folks had already lived in Florida for three decades, and we visited them frequently. In the summer of 1997, we helped them move from their last house to a "senior living" facility. There we realized that when we visited in the future we'd have to sleep on their living room couch and eat in a walker-infested common dining room. The very next day we were looking at condos. The following day we bought one ... our own little tropical paradise on a narrow barrier island.. It came with rental commitments for the following December, February, and March ...

but that was fine by us, we were just going to vacation down there a couple of months a year and make the entire cost up with rentals. Uh-huh!



OK, let me first tell you about the really smart thing we did ... we took the advice of *Hagar the Horrible*! We bought on the Gulf of Mexico side of the street, even though comparable condos just across the road were half the price. That first year we spent the month of January in our Florida condo and loved the weather, the pool, the beach, and especially the sound of the waves lapping on the shore at night ... and the traffic wasn't even too bad. Back in central Connecticut, February and March were cold and snowy to a real extreme. We drove from that snow to a warm, sunny Florida at the beginning of April and said to each other "Why spend the worst winter months up north again?" But, remembering the heat, humidity, and rains of the previous summer when we moved my parents, my wife said: "I'm never again going south of the Mason-Dixon Line in the summer." [Joan has relented since she has grandchildren in the Carolina's ... but that's another story.] So the answer in 1998 was simple, we'd become *snowbirds*!

MCHUMOR.COM by T. McCracken



"Nah, I don't want to play house.
Let's go condo instead."

condo life there. But, we sure learned the ropes of condo living in Florida over the next few years – especially when it comes to taxes and rules and regulations ...

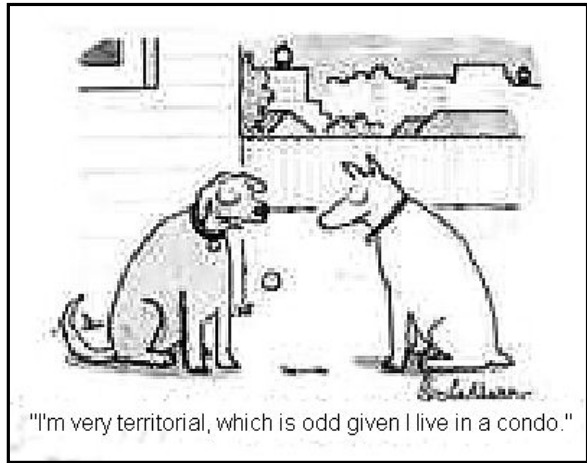
That decision created a problem. You simply can't leave a very nice, quite expensive rural house closed-up and unattended for four months in the winter. So the choice quickly narrowed to condos north and south. We were fortunate to find a buyer for our house, though at a very substantial loss, and were able to buy a lovely condo in a new development not far from where two of our grandsons live. The fact that the northern condo community was controlled by the developer for several years spared us many of the trials and tribulations of



"Look, buddy -- if you don't like taxes and regulations, why don't you go live in Russia!"

... and traffic. You haven't seen traffic until you've seen a narrow 7-mile-long barrier island with only one road running its length and a two-lane bridge at either end during "tourist season." But the good comes with the bad ... bikes are faster than cars (actually walking often is) and they save gas. Plus, we were lucky enough that *Publix* built a supermarket within easy walking distance. Sometimes we don't take the car out for weeks at a time.

Like these pups, I guess I'm a bit territorial too ... I care about my property. Though I don't lift my leg to mark it off, I like my way of doing things. So it wasn't long before I opted to become a part of the Condo Board where I'd have some say. That's when I really began to learn about condos as a community. Our community was made of largely of retired people who had owned small businesses – very different than my corporate employee background. But, in reality the thing that created the greatest difficulty in our Florida community were the differing priorities associated with the two major aspects of



condo ownership – to serve as a home and to be a lucrative investment vehicle. To me, home comes first ... we don't view our condos as investments. To many others money always comes first ... that means "property values."



But, I had a trick up my sleeve. I knew how to create and use Excel spreadsheets. Soon I was the treasurer of our condo association. Unrealistic budgets and inadequately-funded reserves became a thing of the past. Prices for condos in our neck-of-the-woods skyrocketed. So everybody was happy despite higher maintenance. Soon, I got elected (or was it tricked into?) condo president. No problem. The management company does most of the work anyway ... that's what we pay them for!

Well, as you all know *S**T HAPPENS* and this time his name was Hurricane Charley. After putting our island completely under water for a few hours, Charley left a god-awful mess. After a week, people were allowed to return to the island and cleanup began. But soon our condo's off-island management company fired us! I know, that's not how you expect the *30-days Notice* clause in the contract to go. For the next several months, the ball was always in my court ... but I must say, I got plenty of help during that crisis period. The concept of community really worked. Once we got repairs completed, hired an on-island manager, and got our heads back on straight, things went back to normal ... almost!

The insurance companies all took a big hit from Charley. So they decided to pull out of Florida. Insurance costs skyrocketed, if you could find someone to take your business. There were shortages of building supplies, we were lucky that "Chinese Drywall" didn't find its way into

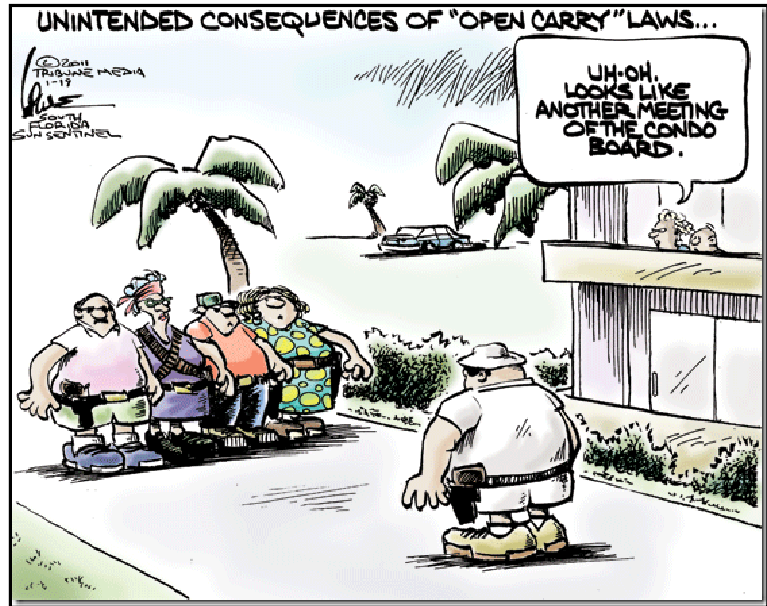


our building, but many of us had to wait months until window screening material was available. And, of course, prices were up and complaining came back into vogue ... on the other hand, why shouldn't a person call the president of the condo association at 2:30 AM (with full knowledge that he's 1500 miles away) to report that the wind is blowing at 50 mph and the roof is leaking, and demand that the president (that's me) get someone up onto that roof and fix it immediately. Ah, such are the perks of volunteering.

But, the prices of beachfront condos kept going up. That brings to mind: so did property taxes. And, Florida has a two-tier tax system. "Non-resident" property owners pay more than legal Florida residents ... a lot more. After a 75% property tax increase in one year, we started making inquiries. We were paying more than triple the taxes of our neighbors in the building who were Florida residents. Talk about "Taxation without Representation" ... in Florida they've got a lock on the system. So, *if you can't beat 'em, join 'em*. We became legal Florida residents.

Soon a good deal of in-fighting began on the Condo Board. It was over a lot of things ... some big, some small. That's me at the right of the picture, I think. Anyway, when my term was up, I left the Board. Unfortunately,

the problems of the Board flowed over to the community as a whole. Everybody was hiring lawyers and generally being asses ... including me. With the owners split pretty-much down the middle on many issues, I got involved in a contested election for the Board. Usually they have to twist arms to get anyone to serve. Now two of us were fighting over a seat on the Condo Board. Suddenly, I was a politician ... and acted like one. In retrospect, that's certainly something I'm not proud of ... maybe that's why I hate so much what's going on in the upcoming elections that really count.



Anyway, to make a long story longer, I won the election but several months later had to resign due to a serious illness in my family. By then most issues were resolved, leaving our group of condo owners pretty much back where we started ... some good friends, some good neighbors, some passing acquaintances ... but everyone at least saying "Good Morning" to each other. In other words, we're a functioning community again. Plus the financial crisis of 2008 caused property values to plummet, which put a slight damper on all our lives.

In some respects, I've become an elder statesman in our Florida condo ... people ask for my opinion on issues but feel free to ignore my advice. That's OK ... it makes me feel good that they asked. I still don't agree with everything that goes on and how many issues are handled.

Maybe the cartoon is right – perhaps I don't go with the aesthetic of the building, and the *Rules and Regs* that I wrote years ago say everything visible from the outside must conform to those aesthetics. But, I think I've become too old and too tired to make much of a stink any more. I guess, like the guy in the picture below, I've just become an old Florida biker, and I'm taking Joan along for the ride.



To sum up, I suppose the lesson I've learned is that home is important and neighbors are important, and living in a condo adds one more community to which we owe our allegiance. Yes, I believe that by choosing to be part of a community we incur the obligation to help improve the lives of all the members of that community. Maybe that's why I recently volunteered to be a part of the Financial Advisory Committee at our Connecticut condo. The circle goes round-and-round.



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