

THE "BEAUTY" OF OLDER BUILDINGS

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Quite a few people, in today's housing market, are very interested in buying older homes or condominiums. Some young couples, anticipating their first home purchase, will lean towards those ten foot ceilings, larger room space, plaster walls, true wood floors and possibly a working fireplace. In the most part, most of these buildings are in the older parts of the urban centers of Norfolk, Newport News, Hampton and Portsmouth.

Older home buyers need to consider the hidden costs they may find in maintaining that older building. While older buildings have the advantage of having "all the developer's bugs worked out," in a condominium conversion not all the building components and systems are new. The cost of a Unit Owner not properly maintaining his part of the building may affect the entire Association. The most important thing to do is to fully familiarize yourself with your condominium documents. They will tell you what is yours and what belongs to the Association.

Many older condominium buildings have steam heating systems as an example. A boiler (oil or gas fired) produces steam which is then piped to the dwelling units. The boiler and the fuel to run it are maintained and paid for by the Condominium Association and are integral parts of the annual operating budget. Inside the dwelling unit, radiators supply and regulate heat in the unit. That unit owner owns the radiators in each unit. Usually, there are three main operating parts to a radiator; the radiator itself, a control valve which turns the radiator on and off and a bleeder or pressure relief valve. These components must be a part of any annual owner maintenance program. If the control valve doesn't work, the radiator can't be turned on/off (easily recognized in an older building by how many windows are wide open on a 20 degree day!). In the Hampton Roads area, the boiler will usually be on from September to April/May. If the radiators in a majority of the units in a multi-unit condominium aren't working properly or don't get annual maintenance, six months of boiler operation can really strain the annual operating budget, sometimes resulting in special assessments to the Unit Owners to make up for budget deficiencies.

Related to the above, those true wooden floors may also be damaged by leaking radiators, if not maintained properly. If your unit is located on an upper floor and it causes damage to the unit below, the owner with the leaking radiator will be responsible for the damages you have caused. In some cases, that owner will either be responsible for all the costs or at least the deductible amount if an insurance claim is filed.

Older windows can also cause problems if they begin to leak air or water around their frames. Replacing these windows often have another approval needed. Many older neighborhoods have municipal design review committees that have authority over any changes to the exterior of the building which may alter its historic character. These committees have an important part in maintaining the historic look to the neighborhood. It

was often the neighborhood's historic character that attracted the buyer to live in an older urban area in the first place. But these committees often have far different goals for the windows than to just stop the cold drafts and water leaks. So in addition to getting the unit owners' approval of the style and function of replacement windows, is it also necessary to negotiate that appearance of the new windows with the city's design review committee. It is not easy to find replacement windows to match the original design so there will always be some extra construction costs involved in any window replacement project.

Many associations in older buildings have difficulty finding replacement parts for equipment that ceased to be manufactured 25 years ago. Having a good network of suppliers and trades people that can get these hard to find parts is good, but often the reduction in operating or maintenance costs justifies replacing the entire component or equipment.

Phil Shanley is a manager with DMS Management in Norfolk. Many of the buildings his associations are in are over 80 years old!

