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RESIDENTIAL



commUNITY

The Value of Fostering a Sense of Community in Your HOA

INTRODUCTION

Buyers frequently choose to live in HOAs because they provide potential opportunities for neighbors to get to know each other. This is more likely to happen if the HOA is committed to fostering a sense of community.

Each year, more and more Nevada home buyers choose to live in homeowners associations (HOAs). Between 2014 and 2015 alone, the number of Nevadans living in HOAs increased by over 22 percent, from 530,000 to 648,000.^{1,2} Whether these communities consist of single-family homes, condo units or townhomes, there is no doubt that they have become an appealing choice. Among the reasons for this growth are that community associations can enhance residents' lives by:

- Increasing property values
- Providing services such as maintenance and landscaping
- Offering desirable amenities like swimming pools, clubhouses and fitness centers
- Raising home standards and aesthetics

Additionally, buyers frequently choose to live in HOAs because they provide potential opportunities for neighbors to get to know each other. This is more likely to happen if the HOA is committed to fostering a sense of community.

How exactly do successful HOAs do this? First, it's important to understand what a community is. Look in any dictionary, and you'll see a variety of definitions, for example:

A unified body of individuals

A group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society

A group linked by a common policy

Often, a community shares a set of core values or principles, either written or unwritten. In the case of HOAs, those principles can be seen in the offerings they provide and in the association's governing documents, including their Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions (CC&Rs).

This paper looks at the human need for connection and community and how this need relates to HOAs. It then examines specific ways that your board can foster a greater sense of community among your residents by having a well-run HOA, communicating openly, creating enjoyable events and lifestyle programs, encouraging volunteerism, focusing on community pride and promoting your role in the larger community.



CONNECTIONS:

The Importance of Community

Humans are social creatures. In fact, a number of studies have shown that we are hard-wired for connection. Although people have traditionally sustained their need for connection by not straying very far from the towns in which they were born, today we are less likely to follow this tradition. Modern transportation has made it easier to travel farther and farther from our hometowns for economic opportunities, a different climate or a change in lifestyle.

In a country as large and diverse as the U.S., this mobility has meant that many of us are removed from our extended families and long-time friends. Nowhere is this truer than in Nevada, where only about 31 percent of the population can claim to be a native of the state, the lowest percentage of any U.S. state.³

With people moving around so much, it's no wonder that we Americans have had to find alternative ways to find social connections. Modern "tribes"—groups of people who come together based on proximity or common interests—have had to take the place of extended families to provide us with the sense of community we crave. But how can we know if our tribe is really providing this? Social psychologists have found that experiencing a sense of community is dependent on four conditions⁴:

- 1. Membership.** Members need to feel like they have a right to belong to the tribe and that they are accepted by the other members. They must also be invested in what happens to it and willing to make sacrifices for its greater good. Membership comes with boundaries that dictate who is "in" and who is "out." These boundaries help to establish a sense of security (both emotional and physical) for the members.
- 2. Influence.** Influence must be a two-way street in order to create a sense of community. On the one hand, members must feel that they can impact their tribe. On the other, the tribe must be able to influence individual members so that it retains its cohesiveness. An excess of influence on either side creates an imbalance.
- 3. Integration and fulfillment of needs.** When members share some of the same values, it is easier for the tribe to meet everyone's individual needs. Members will also feel like their needs are being met if they perceive the tribe to be successful and competent and their membership to be a privilege.
- 4. Shared emotional connection.** Just like in a family, members of a modern tribe will feel more connected if they have some sort of a shared history. In addition, regular interactions are crucial. How positive these interactions are and how well the tribe resolves any issues among its members will determine the strength of the connection.



HOAs AS MODERN TRIBES

What brought the members of your community association together? Was it the location of your building or community? Or was it the kind of lifestyle it offered? Whatever the reasons, you and your neighbors have formed a modern-day tribe by virtue of having chosen to live in your HOA. Belonging to the same “HOA tribe,” however, doesn’t ensure a built-in sense of community. As in any tribe, the four conditions described above must be present in order for residents of an HOA to feel like they are more than simply a group of disconnected neighbors.

HOA Membership

The right to belong to an HOA community and to be accepted as a member occurs as a result of purchasing a home and agreeing to pay the annual fees. Homeowners have an investment in the community and a stake in preserving or improving it. They want to protect the community’s boundaries and prevent outsiders from entering uninvited. They may even create a neighborhood watch program to protect individual and common property.

Social membership and acceptance in an HOA community may be a little more challenging. Consider, for example, the challenges of dealing with a particularly difficult resident or board member or the alienation renters might feel if the rules are applied differently to them. Residents who find themselves in these types of situations may not feel fully accepted by their neighbors and may be less invested in the community.

Influence in an HOA

There are three primary ways in which residents can influence their HOA:

1. Voting to influence who will represent them on the board, as well as how money will be spent each year
2. Attending meetings to voice their opinions, impact decisions and ask questions
3. Volunteering as a board member, on a committee or at an event to personally affect the success of the community

The HOA influences residents by establishing rules and regulations that residents must follow. Abiding by these rules helps the HOA to function smoothly and cohesively.



Fulfillment of Residents' Needs

Residents as a whole must believe their HOA is meeting their needs in order to feel a sense of community, but meeting the needs of all residents can be the trickiest condition for a community association to navigate. Your HOA board of directors will be more successful if you first identify the values that residents share. Chances are these will be reflected in your lifestyle offerings. For example, is your community lifestyle geared to active seniors or families? Does it boast a golf course? Or is it the luxury amenities that draw residents? Making sure that these aspects of your community are functioning at their best will go a long way toward keeping all the residents happy.

You will also find clues to residents' shared values in your CC&Rs. Strict guidelines regarding what residents can do with their individual properties indicate that aesthetics and consistency are important to members of the community. On the other hand, if residents have a lot of leeway in deciding what they can put on their balconies, how they can paint their front doors or what they can plant in their yards, they probably place a high value on personal freedom.

Remember that a board that is committed to successfully managing the HOA's operations will also contribute significantly to the sense of community that residents experience. A well-run community will leave residents feeling privileged to live there.

Neighbor-to-Neighbor Connections

A close-knit community in which neighbors care about each other can provide a great deal of emotional satisfaction. Not surprisingly, having a history together is important as well. The longer residents live in a community, the more likely they are to have a common history, and the closer they will feel to each other because of it.

However, having a shared history doesn't necessarily require longevity; it can exist even in a relatively new HOA. For example, knowing that you and your neighbors moved in during the first phase of development can create a kind of bond among early residents. Or perhaps there is a story about the property or its location that has taken on a legendary quality. Residents should be reminded periodically of any such shared history as a way to reinforce their emotional connections.

It's also important to create opportunities for residents to get together so that they can form friendships. Events and social activities—anything from simple potluck dinners and game nights to elaborate parties and group trips—can serve this goal.

Your board will be more successful in meeting everyone's needs if you first identify the values that residents share. These will be reflected in your lifestyle offerings and in your CC&Rs.



THE ROLE OF YOUR BOARD

Board members wear many hats. As a group (and much like a tribal council), you are at the helm of your association, setting policies and making sure that operations run smoothly. One of the roles that may get lost in the shuffle of to-do lists, however, is the part that your board plays in creating a sense of community. Prioritizing this role requires that board members recognize how much it can contribute to the stability of your association. Promoting a sense of community makes residents more willing to follow the rules, reduces heated disputes, encourages volunteerism and increases attendance at meetings.

To evaluate whether your board is doing enough to create a sense of community, consider the following questions:

- How well is your HOA functioning?
- How effective is the communication among residents, board members and your community management company?
- Does your HOA offer the right amount and the right types of social events and lifestyle programs? How well attended are these activities?
- Are a large number of residents involved in the community? Or is it primarily a small group of people who always volunteer?
- How do you bring renters “into the fold”? What is the relationship between renters and homeowners?
- All in all, are residents proud of their community?

Even if your board is doing a fair amount in the name of community spirit, there is always more that can be done.

How You Run Your HOA

Without a doubt, the better your community association is functioning, the better residents will feel about where they live. As a board member, you have a fiduciary responsibility to every member of your association. You must be committed to running the HOA in a way that protects their best interests, preserves the value of their homes and improves their quality of life. This starts with making sure the HOA is financially sound and well maintained—but it doesn't end there. How you conduct business and interact with each other, with residents and with your community management company impacts your success as well.



Board Member Guidelines:

Contributing to Community Spirit with a Well-run HOA

1

Develop an in-depth knowledge of your governing documents.

It is crucial for board members to understand the responsibilities of the association, how the association is required to operate and the rules and regulations every resident must follow. You should also have some familiarity with Nevada laws (especially NRS 116, the Uniform Common-Interest Ownership Act) and local ordinances that impact your association. Your community manager, as well as your legal counsel, can provide training and guidance to help you better understand your association's documents and applicable laws.



2

Share your association knowledge.

Make a point of asking new homeowners to read the information contained in the CC&Rs. Let them know that you are available to answer any questions they may have. Ask homeowners who are renting out their properties to share the CC&Rs with their tenants, too, and make yourself available to answer tenants' questions as well.



3

Conduct productive meetings.

Have an agenda, and assign a meeting chairperson (usually the board president) to keep the meeting on track and to rein in irrelevant discussions. Make sure that voting strictly follows Nevada law and procedures described in your bylaws.



4

Maintain a culture of transparency.

Executive (or closed) meetings are essential, but as per NRS 116.31085, you may only use them for specific purposes, such as to consult with an attorney regarding litigation or to discuss a violation. Be open with residents, and above all, avoid any behind-the-scenes deals or decision making.



5

Display integrity.

Avoid making association decisions that could benefit you personally. Even the appearance of a conflict of interest could hurt your ability to do your job, so it's important to be aware of these and to reveal potential conflicts up front. Also refrain from talking badly about other board members or disclosing information that you know about a resident because of your position on the board.



Communication

When residents know what is going on in their community, they are more likely to feel like they are an integral part. Go beyond the bare minimum of notifying them of meetings and sharing meeting minutes by providing weekly updates about events in and around the community. Use a variety of channels so that you are sure that everyone gets the latest news. Community newsletters, emails, direct mail and social media are all great ways to get the word out.

You also need to keep a finger on the pulse of the community to gauge what really matters to residents. Communication is a two-way street, so listen to what residents have to say. Make sure you provide easy ways for residents to make suggestions, voice their concerns, weigh in on potential projects or activities and offer feedback about recent events.

Not surprisingly, 83 percent of HOA residents who responded to a survey by the Community Associations Institute (CAI) said that face-to-face interactions are the most common way that they communicate with other residents. Therefore, you may also want to find ways to increase opportunities for these interactions. One way to do this is to allow residents to post ads on a community website. This enables them to meet other neighbors who: share similar interests (for example, playing tennis); want to buy, sell or swap items; or are willing to watch their pets while they are away.

A good community management company will be able to provide you with the right technology tools to make communication easier. For example, communities that are managed by FirstService Residential can use its proprietary community management software, FSRConnect™. Among other things, FSRConnect allows residents to communicate with each other, with board members and with their community manager. It also enables communities to access important information in one convenient location.





“A successful event creates conversation among owners and, potentially, the greater area. That can lead to an increase in home sales for an association.”

Community Events and Lifestyle Programs

Everyone loves a well-planned get-together, and your residents are no exception. Bringing neighbors together in a social setting not only gives them something to look forward to, but it is also one of the best ways to achieve community spirit.

“Community events and lifestyle programs provide great opportunities for residents to get to know each other and to share common interests,” says Melissa Ramsey, northern Nevada vice president of community and lifestyle services at FirstService Residential. “They also help increase the sense of community and pride that residents feel.” Additionally, Ramsey points out that “a successful event creates conversation among owners and, potentially, the greater area. That can lead to an increase in home sales for an association.”

Ramsey says that establishing at least one annual staple event that grows each year is a good way to create anticipation and, ultimately, community spirit. This can revolve around a holiday or a particular theme. However, she warns that you should not underestimate the amount of work it takes to host a community event. “It’s a good idea to start planning as much as six months out,” she says. “This way you’ll have enough time to determine your budget, get all your approvals and line up vendors and caterers.” Ramsey also suggests sharing the workload by creating an event committee (as well as subcommittees, if necessary) and assigning specific tasks to each committee member.

How will you know if your event was a success? Ramsey recommends determining your objective up front and sending out surveys afterwards to see if you met those objectives. “This combination gives you a concrete way to measure success but of course, there’s nothing like seeing residents laughing and smiling to know you’ve done a good job.” Sustain the good feeling created at the event by providing a recap on your website, in your community newsletter and at your next board meeting. And don’t forget to post pictures on social media!

Lifestyle programs that utilize existing onsite space or local offsite facilities are another way to bring residents together. For example, you could use your clubhouse to hold game nights, movie nights or classes. You could start a walking, running or biking club using community or neighborhood trails. Or you could plan a community night out at a local restaurant, theater or comedy club.

Reno's Somerset Prides Itself on a Robust Schedule of Events and Lifestyle Programs

Somerset, a master-planned golf community in Reno that is managed by FirstService Residential, offers a wide range of events for its residents throughout the year. To oversee the Somerset's active schedule requires full-time help. That's where Callie Froese of FirstService Residential comes in. As the Somerset's club manager, Froese oversees large and more modest events. "Some of our so-called 'small' events include an Easter Eggstravaganza, potlucks, pool parties, a summer luau, golf events and a community Olympics event," she says. "We also do some pretty elaborate events that attract a lot of residents year after year."

Major events at the Somerset include:

Music on the Green. This is an annual summer event that is hosted on Hole 1 of the Somerset golf course. It is an evening when residents get to enjoy friends, neighbors, family, food trucks and live entertainment.

Sip N Shop. In November, the Somerset hosts a variety of local vendors for its holiday craft fair. What's with the name? The community offers a cash bar so residents can sip while they shop!

Touch-A-Truck Fall Festival. Every October, the community brings in a variety of trucks, such as snow plows, street sweepers, fire trucks and police cars (okay, not just trucks!) for kids to enjoy. Children can "touch" the trucks for a true hands-on experience, as well as have their pictures taken with their favorite trucks. And what would a fall festival be without hay rides and a pumpkin patch?



MC Believe in Education 5K and Fun Run. For four years in a row, Somerset has hosted this popular event to honor one of its former residents, Michelle Cervantes (hence, the "MC" in its name). Proceeds go toward a scholarship for a graduate of the local McQueen High School.

Volunteering

Volunteers are the life blood of every community association. Without them, your HOA cannot meet its full potential. Nevertheless, most HOA boards find it difficult to get residents involved. According to a survey conducted by the Foundation for Community Association Research, 45 percent of residents who live in community associations say they either never volunteer or only volunteer once a year⁶. So how can you encourage more residents to volunteer?



Two factors that are key to increasing volunteerism in your community are communication and personal relationships. Residents do not generally make inquiries about volunteer positions unless they know that there is a specific position that matches their skills and interests. Use your various communication channels to advertise your volunteer openings, and post these positions often so that residents have a constant reminder of the association's needs. Be sure to make announcements about these positions at meetings and social gatherings as well.

Make a point of learning a little bit about as many residents as possible. That way, you will know where to find a finance pro to run for board treasurer or a biking enthusiast to form a cycling club. Another way to get more involvement is to ask residents for ideas and suggestions about activities and events they would like the community to sponsor. Residents are more inspired to volunteer if the event is something that is close to their heart. They may even be willing to chair a committee!

In addition, always make a point of thanking volunteers personally, as well as recognizing them at social events and meetings. Let's face it—everyone likes to be appreciated, so a pat on the back is a small gesture that will go a long way. Other residents may also feel more inclined to give their time if they see that their efforts will be recognized.

Renters

The way your board regards renters, as reflected in your policies, is likely to trickle down to the rest of your HOA membership. Treat them as outsiders and so will other homeowners, leaving renters feeling alienated. Make them feel like part of the community and they are more likely to share your values and want the community to thrive. They could even turn out to be some of your community's greatest cheerleaders when it comes to promoting it to potential buyers.

Some community associations impose strict rental policies that exclude renters from social functions or from accessing certain amenities. They may think they are protecting the HOA by doing this, but these types of policies often fragment the community. If your HOA allows members to rent out their homes, it behooves your board to make renters feel welcome. One way to do this—while also ensuring that they follow your HOA rules and regulations—is to include a provision in your rental policy that requires them to attend an orientation. Your community management company can help you craft appropriate language.

Remember that today's renters could be tomorrow's owners. Although they may not be able to purchase a home in your HOA yet, how much they feel at home as renters could determine whether or not they choose to buy in your community down the road.



Community Pride

One of the reasons homebuyers choose a certain community is because of what it represents—its “brand.” That brand must be reinforced through your actions and through both your internal and external marketing in order for residents to feel proud of their community. Factors that serve to reinforce your brand include:

- The experiences you create for residents
- The amenities you offer
- Your communications to current and prospective residents
- Residents’ interactions with your employees

If, for example, your community is branded as providing an exclusive, luxury lifestyle, everything you do should support that. Your events should be classy, your staff should be ultra-professional and even your mailings should be on higher-quality paper. If you are geared to families, a significant portion of your events should be family friendly, and your staff should recognize children when they enter the lobby or clubhouse and treat them kindly.

Residents also have more pride when everyone complies with your CC&Rs. These documents establish policies that serve as a kind of code of conduct to make the community more pleasant for everyone. For example, they might include rules about leashing pets and cleaning up after them, putting away unsightly trash bins and not parking unregistered vehicle on the street. Make sure that your policies serve their intended purpose—to maintain a more attractive and safe environment. If they don’t, consider making revisions. Also remember that if you are not working with a community management company, the responsibility for enforcing your CC&Rs belongs to the board.

Another way to increase community pride is to encourage residents to take part in some type of group project. Some possibilities include:

- Creating a children’s garden within the community
- Holding a fundraiser and inviting people outside the community to attend
- Having a food or clothing drive in which different parts of the community compete to see who can donate the most (i.e., different floors in a high-rise, different streets in a single-family community or different buildings in a condo community), and following it up with a community party

Anything that makes residents feel good about themselves as a group will also help them to feel good about their community.



NEIGHBORHOOD AWARENESS

You are probably familiar with Neighborhood Watch programs that are designed to encourage neighbors to keep an eye out to help prevent crime in the community. It is certainly a good idea to establish a Neighborhood Watch program if you do not already have one. Your town or city government can provide you with information and assistance to do this.

Aside from watching the neighborhood to prevent crime, residents should also have a general awareness of their neighbors' normal activities, as well as the "rhythm" of the community. This does not mean invading your neighbors' privacy, but rather, being aware of routines. It can be as easy as saying hello to your neighbors while you are out walking your dog (an activity that 83 percent of HOA residents cite as one of the primary ways they get to know their neighbors⁷). Consider, for example, an elderly neighbor who lives alone. She walks her dog at the same time every morning; however, one day she is not out at her usual time. In a community where residents are aware of the neighborhood routines, someone is more likely to notice and check up on her right away. (See this [video](#) to learn what can happen without this kind of community awareness. Spoiler alert: Everything turned out fine. Other community residents didn't notice that the woman hadn't left her home, but the community manager did!)

Another benefit of having residents pay attention to the activities around them is to prevent or remove unauthorized tenants—"squatters"—in your community. Squatters can leave community members feeling afraid, disempowered and unhappy about where they live, and they can put a blemish on the community as a whole. However, vigilant neighbors can inform the local police before a squatter gains access or soon after they take possession, preventing extensive damage to the home and protecting the safety of the neighborhood.

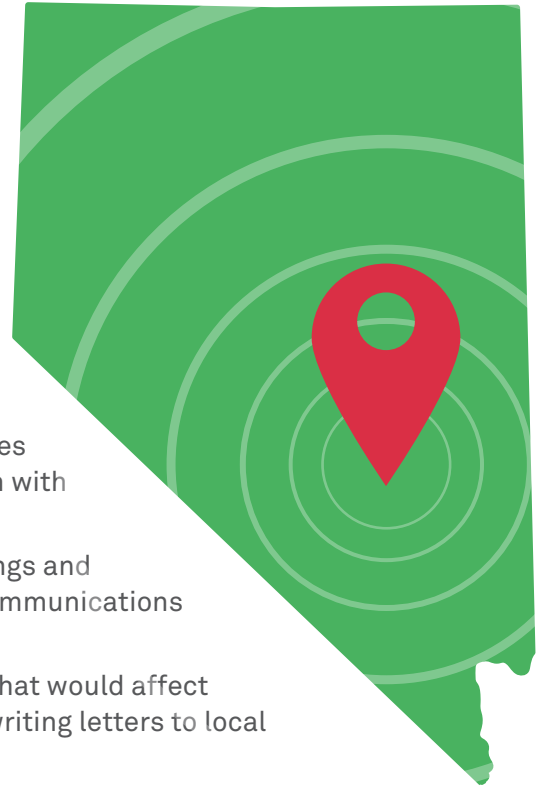
Your board can do its part to encourage neighborhood awareness. Find out if residents would be willing to have their phone numbers on a community directory, and discuss the possibility of a "buddy" system, especially for disabled or elderly residents. Your board may even want to ask for volunteers to head up a "Neighbor to Neighbor" committee in charge of establishing awareness programs. You can also remind residents regularly whom they should contact when they are in need of help. A community management company like FirstService Residential has a customer care center available 24 hours a day. However, residents should know that 911 is the appropriate number to call for emergencies.



The HOA Tribe as Part of the Larger Community

As important as it is for residents to feel good about their own HOA tribe, it is also crucial to remember that your HOA is part of a larger community. Your board can do a lot to help residents feel like active members of their town or city and even to feel like they make a difference in their state government. Here are a few suggestions.

- 1. Inform residents about local happenings.** Let HOA members know what is going in your local government, schools and businesses:
 - Get on your town or city's email lists so you are aware of issues that impact the residents in your HOA. Share this information with residents through your regular communication channels.
 - Have designated residents attend city or town council meetings and report back their findings. Include this information in your communications as well.
 - If changes to local policies or ordinances are on the horizon that would affect your HOA directly, encourage all residents to participate by writing letters to local politicians and newspapers and by attending hearings.
 - Ask residents to provide information in your HOA newsletter or on your website about local events. For example, parents could highlight events at their children's school, or a resident who recently tried a new restaurant or other business in town could write a review.
 - Invite new businesses in town to do a presentation to your residents.
 - Hold a "trade show" where local businesses can present their offerings to the community.
- 2. Make your HOA matter on the state level.** Nevada has some of the most stringent laws in the country with regard to community associations, so it is important that state legislators hear from you. FirstService Residential organizes a "Day at the Capitol" event during each legislative session to enable board members to have their voices heard by Nevada legislators. Board members who participate have an opportunity to visit Carson City, attend hearings and speak with their legislators.
- 3. Encourage residents to give back locally.** Your HOA's residents will feel more like a part of their larger community if they get involved in local events. September 28 is National Good Neighbor Day, so this could be a great time to do some kind of charitable activity. Doing this as a group can add to residents' sense of community within the association, too. For example, your HOA could sponsor a community team to participate in a local fundraising walk or run. Additionally, having the name of your association linked to charitable activities in the larger community is good public relations and shines a positive light on your HOA.
- 4. Promote features of the larger community to prospective buyers.** Is it easy to walk to some of your city's features from your building or community? Are the schools highly rated? Is there good public transportation? What other specific advantages are there to living in your town or city? Be sure to highlight these in your marketing materials and on your website.



**September 28 is
National Good
Neighbor Day**

CONCLUSION

There is tremendous value in establishing a sense of community in your HOA. Having residents feel an emotional attachment to their HOA creates deeper attachments and lasting relationships. When people care about each other, they are more likely to work cooperatively to maintain a happy community and to do what is necessary to make your HOA successful.

But like any tribe, your HOA community depends on great leadership in order to function at its best. Your HOA board can have a huge impact on how deeply residents connect, get involved and sincerely care about each other. Being a “tribal leader” may not be an easy job, but it can certainly be a very rewarding one, especially when you see your community come together. Use the guidelines in this paper, and you’ll be able to enhance the quality of life for your residents by pointing your HOA toward the kind of community spirit every association hopes to have.

About FirstService Residential

FirstService Residential is North America’s largest manager of residential communities and the preferred partner of HOAs, community associations and strata corporations in the U.S. and Canada. FirstService Residential’s managed communities include low-, mid- and high-rise condominiums and cooperatives, single-family homes, master-planned, lifestyle and active adult communities, and rental and commercial properties.

With an unmatched combination of deep industry experience, local market expertise and personalized attention, FirstService Residential delivers proven solutions and exceptional service that add value, enhance lifestyles and make a difference, every day, for every resident and community it manages. FirstService Residential is a subsidiary of FirstService Corporation, a North American leader in the property services sector.

In Nevada, FirstService Residential has worked hard for more than 25 years to provide outstanding service to homeowners and unit owners in the Las Vegas and Reno metropolitan areas. Today, it is recognized as the leading community management company in those dynamic cities and throughout the state.

Find out how an experienced community management company can help you create a sense of community in your Nevada HOA. [Contact FirstService Residential today.](#)

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