

Ex-board pres: "No good deed goes unpunished"

by Teri Karush Rogers | 12/15/09 - 2:34 PM

Dysfunctional co-op boards are nothing new, of course, and Curbed alerts us today to a Dear John letter posted by a departing UWS board president on his blog.

"Even after my first year on the board, I underestimated the ferocity of the warfare, the conspiracies it engendered and the passivity of most of the seven board members," writes the ex-president, who resigned before his two-year term had expired.

The letter depicts a board that has lost its ability to govern through consensus, a topic we've explored in *The Downside of Power Plays*.

"Some boards get into having alliances, with one group voting as a bloc, and ultimately when that happens the board loses and the building loses," Roberta Axelrod, who sits on 10 New York City-area co-op and condo boards in her role as a sponsor's representative for Time Equities, told us then. *"It becomes more about one group versus another group, more about party politics than the good of the nation."*

To "no good deed goes unpunished" (the final words of the departing board president) we would venture to add a corollary: "Nice guys finish last on co-op boards too."

It's an unfortunate fact that those in favor of governing their multimillion dollar corporations through consensus are often out-shouted (or simply filibustered into submission) by neighbors sporting assertive personalities and splintered agendas.

According to a recent *Cooperator* article, the most common personal agendas have to do with parking spots, playrooms and grudges.

One way off the battlefield is to vote in a new board that can work together better, but that assumes sufficient political will and enough neutral, qualified candidates.

Another idea, for boards who can admit there is a problem, is to invite a facilitator to board meetings to let members air their concerns and grievances and keep discussions on track. The non-profit Safe Horizon Mediation Centers will provide facilitators at no cost.

One real estate lawyer recommends that dysfunctional boards embrace hundred-year-old parliamentary rules such as those laid out in Robert's Rules of Order.

*“One of the best things is that the rules allow you to make motions,” says attorney **Adam Leitman Bailey** in the Cooperator article referenced above. “It causes you to deal with issues. Here’s what you’re going to talk about. If you want to discuss putting in new windows, you make a motion and get a second motion to discuss the issue. You end by calling a vote. It allows a group who can’t get along to get along.”*