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BUSINESS NEWS

Group Informs Owner Associations

A local attorney and longtime advocate has created a network to aid community associations.

BY JULIE LEVIN
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With nearly 51,000 community associations in Florida looking out for residents, who is the voice for community associations?

A Plantation attorney has created the nonprofit Community Advocacy Network to do just that.

"My goal was to get the silent majority informed on issues and give them the opportunity to play a role," said Donna DiMaggio Berger, who created the network last year.

The idea is to educate and organize the thousands of community association members living in Florida's common-interest communities. By informing them, Berger said she is giving them the tools to have more clout before the state lawmakers who make decisions about their communities.

"I started realizing these folks had never been organized to let Tallahassee and their public policymakers know what they need and how associations run," said Berger, a partner with the law firm



Founder: Plantation attorney Donna DiMaggio Berger is behind a statewide advocacy initiative to be a voice for community associations.

of Katzman & Korr who has more than 14 years of experience advocating for community associations.

Already more than 1,000 community associations have joined the Community Advocacy Network, or CAN.

The group focuses on education, outreach and advocacy services for all

community associations in the state, including condominiums, cooperatives, homeowner associations, mobile home communities and time shares.

Berger and her staff work to educate both people serving on boards and residents about their rights and responsibilities in an association.

"If you are going to serve on a board, you have to be educated and informed and realize you're in a leadership position," she said.

CAN offers free board "boot camps," where they teach board members about everything from budgeting procedures to how to conduct an association meeting.

The group also operates an interactive website where member associations can find a wide range of information, including tips on how to save money, streamline operations in their communities, up-to-date rules and proposals that affect residents, and pending legislation.

One link allows members to correspond with state and local politicians.

"The goal was to make CAN a clearinghouse of information so you don't have to track this stuff all over the state," Berger said.

CAN also provides an "Affinity Program" offering access to discounts and services from participating vendors, such as banks, insurance agencies, property management services and accountants.

CAN also is spearheaded by community association attorney Leigh Katzman and Tallahassee attorney Peter Dunbar, who serves as lobbyist for the organization and is the author of six books on common-interest ownership communities.

"The benefits of joining are having a place to get informed, having a place to play a role before it is too late," Berger said. "If these people get organized, they can actually determine the outcome of a lot of bills."

There is a \$150 annual fee to join CAN. Group discounts are available for umbrella organizations. For information, visit www.canfl.com.