



# It's Project Time...

## Do You Know Where Your Engineer Is?

by Joshua Porter, PE

**T**here comes a time in every association's life when the need for outside expertise arises. Projects of varying importance arise now and then and a community of owners is left searching for answers, or worse, arguing about what to do. Like the proverbial husband who is lost and refuses to stop for directions, we sometimes don't like the idea of having to ask someone else for advice, but as our better half knows, it can save a lot of time and headache.

Engineers in Florida serve many roles for community associations. From simple building assessments to analyzing severe structural damage,

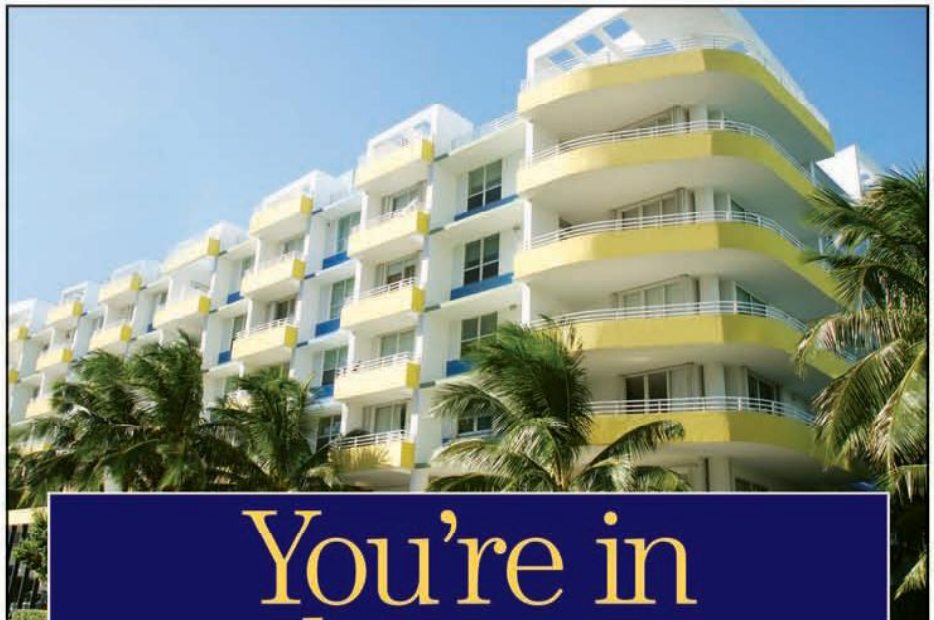
engineers are the ones communities should be able to rely on for consistent and reliable consultation. All too often, however, communities are unclear as to the role of the engineer and how it relates to them.

### **Do You Really Need an Engineer?**

The most common misconception regarding engineering firms is that they are out to usurp the property manager's role or override the board's decision-making process and drive up costs. This myth has cost communities millions of dollars as they make uninformed decisions and have to live with the consequences.

Construction in Florida has become more and more regulated over the last decade. Every three years, new building codes are adopted. Product approvals are added, updated, and revised on a yearly basis. Materials change and new technologies emerge all the time. The task of understanding it all has begun to exceed even the most astute property owner.

In one example, an association knew it was time to replace their roof and had the property manager call three different contractors to bid the job. Each had their own system they specialized in, and the association went with the lowest bidder who also had the best presentation. The roof installation went smoothly and it looked great when it was completed. Ten years later, the roof had multiple problems. The top membrane had separated from the base of the product.



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The material beneath was literally dissolving in the rainwater that had accumulated in the dips and swales of the roof. And the association had been chasing leaks for the previous five years. The money they saved in choosing that system was lost in extra maintenance. Its reduced life meant that special assessments were needed to augment the insufficient funds in the reserve. Ultimately, the relationship between the association and its property manager was strained beyond repair. What hasn't been said yet was that the year the roof was installed, most engineers and construction professionals knew the system had some inherent flaws which required special attention. Had the association utilized an engineering firm to oversee the technical side of the roofing project, this problem would have more than likely been avoided, and the cost of retaining the engineer's services would have been regained in lower maintenance costs and extended product life.

**Choosing an Engineering Firm**

First and foremost, you should look for an engineering firm that has experience dealing with structures in Florida. Of all the states, Florida has one of the most aggressive climates. Most people think of Florida's infamous hurricanes, but a lot of people do not understand that the heat and high humidity combined with large concentrations of salts in the air accelerate the aging process of concrete and can

literally corrode steel until it is gone. An experienced engineering firm will understand these challenges and know how to deal with them.

Ask around and see what experiences others have had with local engineering firms. Property managers are a good starting point. If they are unsure or are dissatisfied with their current engineer, have them contact other property managers to find out whom they use and if they are satisfied. Another great source is your attorney. Attorneys dealing with community associations are often familiar with most of the consulting engineering firms in your area and could provide names of engineering firms based on their experience.

Avoid engineering firms that have active or past contracts with the developers and builders that built your facilities. This ensures that you are getting unbiased advice and avoiding a conflict of interest in the future.

Looking exclusively at cost when choosing an engineering

firm may not guarantee the expertise your specific project requires. Engineering fees typically make up a small percentage of the total project cost. So choosing an engineer that is a few dollars lower will have little impact on your overall project budget. Choose the one that is the most knowledgeable and will communicate the best with your association, property manager, legal counsel, and contractor.

Request proposals from several engineering firms and ask companies to come to your property and review your issues. Most consulting engineering firms will give free proposals and even review them with your board should you request it. Be sure to get a list of other associations and projects the firm has done work for. Ask for references from other property managers and community associations. The more confident you feel about the engineer you choose, the better the relationship will be.

### Communication and Engineering Go Hand in Hand

Open communication is the key to building a lasting relationship with your engineer. The consulting engineer is the liaison between the contractor and the association. It is not enough for your engineer to be a good communicator with you, but they must also be able to communicate the issues to the contractor and draft the necessary documents needed to obtain bids and permits. Circumventing or minimizing this aspect of the relationship greatly increases the potential for contractor, engineer, and client disputes and, ultimately, increases the cost of the project.

While communication is the key to building relationships, technical thoroughness is the skill required to run a project smoothly and eventually bring it to completion. An engineering firm that undersells their services up front, provides boilerplate specifications and details, and then leans on the contractor to offset their technical shortcomings, always costs the association more. These actions may motivate the contractor to cut corners in an effort to avoid losing profits. One local contractor said it like this, "...the project engineer is the director of the project and depending upon his or her skill level, to a large extent, determines the successful outcome of the project."

*Joshua Porter is a professional engineer with LCM Engineering in Fort Myers. For more information, visit [www.lcm.com](http://www.lcm.com).* ■



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