JANUARY

CASA COASTER

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January 1, 2024 | Volume III, Issue One | CasaCoaster.com

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Casa Costa

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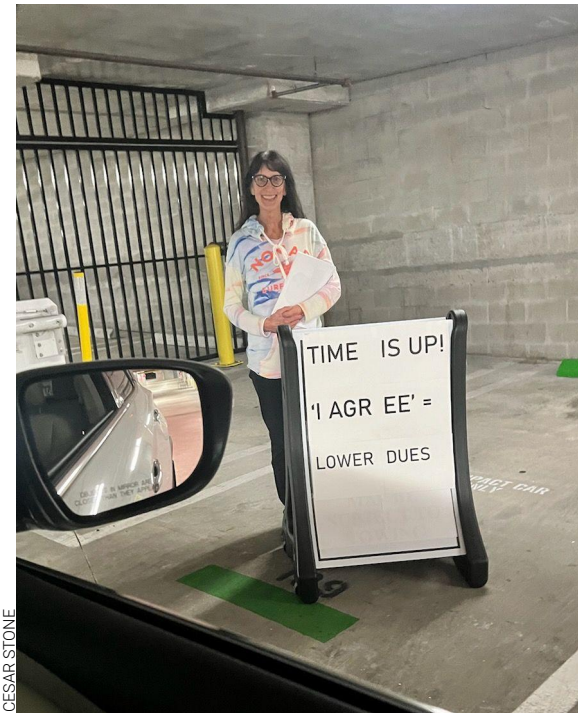
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SOUTH FLORIDA'S #1 POOLSIDE AMUSEMENT

Budget finally in rear view



CESAR STONE

CAMPAIGN STOP: Building leaders, including newly installed Susan St. John, above, launched a creative campaign to drum up votes as the budget deadline approached. A1

Board elevates newcomer as officer

Susan St. John, a resident at Casa Costa since 2019, was elected its newest board member at the annual meeting on Dec. 6, and the directors then named her vice president.

Ms. St. John and Jake Harrington won decisively among five candidates vying for two vacant seats. Mr. Harrington will continue as president through 2024.

Leslie Gladstone will continue as secretary in the second year of his latest term, along with fellow directors George Dobrinski and Yvonne Skovron. Ms. Skovron agreed to serve as interim treasurer until the board appoints a replacement. She is the longest-tenured on the board, having served continuously since 2017.

Ms. St. John convinced voters as a well-spoken practicing lawyer with knowledge of condo laws and a "property owner looking to protect my investment," she wrote in campaign materials. CC

Owners pass key budget measures

Outreach netted record voter turnout to reduce monthly fees

The second time was the charm as Casa Costa owners voted in droves to avoid a steep fee increase for this year. The last-minute meeting on Dec. 18 came after the board briefly considered the matter settled a month prior, only to be told by the association's attorney after the meeting was over that the tally was 40 votes shy of meeting a newly enacted threshold.

"In November, we'd planned on recessing

Please turn to page A4

Elevator project inches forward

With new elevator cabin interiors selected, contractors have the green light to "modernize" Casa Costa's seven elevators.

While the board picked Nouveau Elevator months ago to replace substantial system components, the property's governing documents required a membership vote to install contemporary panels, even though the engineers involved said they couldn't reuse the existing frame. At a Dec. 18 special meeting, a majority of voters approved the change. The vendor expects to begin work this month and finish by mid-October. CC

OPINION

Shut the transient cabinet

By J.T. Harrington

Since I moved in, I've kept learning about the quirks of Casa Costa. One of the more singular aspects here are the 77 so-called "transient" units on the lower floors where guests can rent by the night. Residents seem to blame anything that goes awry on these tourists, but the hotel units are not going away, so let's explore why they're here and how they can be an asset.

Today's version is certainly not what the planners envisioned. In 2010, the developer advertised "fully furnished condo-hotel suites operated by a flagship hotel manager on par with Marriott and Hyatt," according to advertisements and buyers at the time.

I've stayed in a condo-hotel. They are often part of a larger resort with room service and housekeeping. Guests are unaware that the room is owned by an individual because it's booked and maintained by professionals. Ritz-Carlton is a fancy example of this model that offers hotel amenities to long-term owners and short-term guests alike. The developers here even cited the Ritz as inspiration.

Fast-forward. We ain't the Ritz.

When Related Group acquired 323 unsold units here in late 2012, the bulk buy included all of the transient units. Rather than lining up a hotel operator, they sold the units and left each buyer to build their own business.

As best as I can determine, the 77 units are owned by 52 different people. Roughly half of them are leased to a long-term renter or occupied by the owner. Nine investors own more than one, which creates 24 competing short-term-stay businesses under one roof – decentralized and disorganized.

What they all have in common is the world's worst check-in process. Car idling, guests approach the front desk, where hopefully they are registered. They are pointed to a cabinet in a corner of the lobby to find a lockbox in the dark. After they navigate the hallway maze to find their unit, they obtain a garage gate clicker left by the owner. Then back downstairs to the car to get lost on the way to the garage. Find the assigned parking spot, which is similar but not the same as their unit number. Unpack the car and navigate the hallway maze again, this time facing the opposite way. Call the front desk to ask where the ice machine is.

Even more frustrating is that transient unit owners pay dues based on their smaller unit sizes, despite their guests consuming a disproportionate share of staff resources and equipment – at the literal and figurative expense of other owners. We painted and carpeted the transient hallways years ago because of heavier foot traffic. Housekeepers report they are spending more time there than anywhere else.

In brainstorming tweaks, I found a "concession room" in the building plans. This office is adjacent to the conference room in the north tower, and was presumably planned to be a sundry shop. It's been empty for years and is owned by all of us. It could be the hub for a reimagined short-term rental operating plan. I propose that transient owners:

- ❏ Rent and furnish the concession room.
- ❏ Hire dedicated hospitality personnel and buy a luggage cart or two.
- ❏ Hire dedicated housekeeping staff for those hallways.
- ❏ Work with the board to build a better registration process for guests.
- ❏ Limit guest fobs to access only the lower five floors.

The two or three new staff members could be under the Castle Group umbrella to reduce overhead costs, but only transient owners would pay for these roles. These owners could pay a reduced rate for existing front desk and housekeeping staff.

An improved registration system could verify the identity of guests when they book a unit and even charge a resort fee to offset costs, which I estimate to be under $200 per month if all transient units participate. Guests could book units directly without the fees on AirBnB and other sites. A dedicated staffer would walk the guests around the property, provide a map, review the rules and answer questions – all the things guests expect when checking in to a resort.

An alternative is for transient owners to hire a full-service hospitality company rather than putting the pieces together à la carte. The operator would manage furnishings and in-unit housekeeping for a piece of the revenue. They could even offer towel service or bring back a van to the beach. Either option will increase rate and guest satisfaction.

The status quo is a resort condominium in denial, the worst of both worlds for guests and owners alike. Even the term "transient" is derogatory. I'm confident that most all investors in these units would like their guests to have a smooth time checking in and out.

Various boards and committees have tried in vain to neuter the rights of transient unit owners. It seems a better step to empower them to accelerate their businesses with commonsense adjustments. Bifurcate the front desk concierge into one for residents and a newly formed, dedicated check-in person for guests of transient units.

There are countless nuances to solve, such as how to account for conventional units on the fourth floor, but let's start the dialogue by substituting "transient" for "resort guest," envision an ideal resort guest experience, and go from there.

It still won't be the Ritz, but at least they won't be fumbling in the dark.

J.T. Harrington is the publisher of the Casa Coaster and president of the board of directors, but these views are his own.

ADVERTISEMENT

Local office is No. 1 in condo sales here for 2023

Last year was a tricky year for real estate, as interest rates stayed stubbornly high and fewer homes came on the market. Uncertainty and rising condominium costs contributed to stress for buyers and sellers.

Andre Apicella and his team at Waterfront Homes and Condos have some tricks of their own. Their office sold over $10 million in real estate last year, according to data from the Multiple Listing Service. That figure includes $6 million in deals nearby – more condominiums at Casa Costa and Marina Village combined than any other office in Palm Beach county in 2023.

"Half of those transactions were over $500,000," Mr. Apicella said. "We brought the buyers for a three-bedroom in Marina Village for $1,125,000 and one in Casa Costa for $800,000."

He credits his success to several factors: local focus, a high visibility on-site office with great agents, a marketing strategy to attract a wide buyer pool, a realistic pricing strategy and a unique commission offer.

"Sellers are always looking for a way to save on commission. We offer that opportunity with our 4% total commission offer. Some of our clients have even paid as little as 3% in total commission. We try to offer the best options on commissions from a full service broker," he said. "Other agents just can't compete with the traffic from our local on-site office and we offer the opportunity for owners to benefit with reduced commissions."

The broker's transactions last year show the effectiveness of his presence, as his listings sold after an average of only 22 days on the market. Nearly half sold the week they were offered. He added, "If you're serious about making the most money on your sale, it's a no-brainer to work with the best selling office for what you own."

Waterfront Homes and Condos is located outside Casa Costa's south tower on the corner of Boynton Beach Blvd. and N. Federal Hwy.





Andre Apicella

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I first met Clemente Reyes four years ago when he started working at Casa Costa. I soon realized the depth of his work ethic and his commitment to our community. He was the one, at 7 a.m., cleaning the pool deck and rearranging chairs from the day before. I saw him throughout the day at various maintenance tasks like landscaping, groundskeeping, painting, pressure washing and anything else asked of him.

Dan, our chief engineer, quickly realized that Clemente was conscientious, smart, talented and reliable. When the position opened, Dan promoted him to Assistant Chief Engineer. As Dan's No. 2, he is enthusiastically learning every aspect of the job.

Clemente came to this country with his parents from the Dominican Republic when he was 15 years old. When he's not at Casa Costa, he is playing basketball or spending time with his wife Kellys and their five children, who range in age from three to 16. He loves cooking Dominican food and claims to be a better cook than his wife.

He is a busy man for sure. He's also a very interesting and thoughtful person. When I asked him who would be the three people he'd most like to have dinner with, he said: "My grandparents, Kobe Bryant and Juan Marichal," a Dominican pitcher who played 16 seasons in Major League Baseball from 1960 to 1975.

Clemente's favorite part of the job is learning new things. He loves working at Casa Costa and credits Dan and property manager Sue for this amazing opportunity. He is very comfortable here and loves the residents and management. He is committed to doing his job well and hopes to be here for a very long time. CC

Slimmer budget passes at the buzzer

Continued from page A1

the meeting if we needed more participation," said Jake Harrington, board president. "That way, we could try to drum up more votes without throwing away what we already had. Instead, we needed to start over."

The confusion stemmed from the higher bar now required for a condominium association to waive full funding of its reserve account. Before last year, a simple vote of the audience at a budget meeting sufficed to alter the numbers. But Florida officials are phasing in new laws that force properties to stash cash for safety's sake. A portion of the monthly fee paid by owners funds a pool of building components that is set by third-party professionals. The reserve is intended to pay for replacing big-ticket items like roofs and elevators. Last year was the first time that a majority of all owners needed to vote in favor of contributing anything less than the full amount.

According to Casa Costa's board, its reserve is bloated with unnecessary items that drive up monthly contributions and thus fees. Their proposal was to slim it down before the next study and partially fund it meanwhile, knowing items would be removed.

"We're committed to a fully funded reserve over time," Mr. Harrington said. "But with the special assessment coming up and insurance premiums pushing up dues, we wanted to save owners money by right-sizing the reserve."

At the Nov. 20 meeting, the voting was 164-43 in favor of reducing reserve funding. While nearly 80% of owners agreed with the measures, the attorney clarified later that the new threshold is at least 204 votes in favor, not a majority of 204.

In the runup to the Dec. 18 meeting, building leaders closely monitored votes coming in online, where nearly owners of over 275 units are registered. After the first weekend in December, 106 had already voted. Managers and board members contacted owners and newly elected vice president Susan St. John stood in the parking garage with a sign and proxy forms the week before the deadline.

In the end, the measures passed overwhelmingly among the 247 that voted, with one garnering 95.9% support. The effort empowered the board immediately to approve a budget for 2024 that increases monthly dues approximately 11%, rather than nearly triple that increase. CC





LT HARRINGTON

Winter audition

The morning of Dec. 12, a crew from Valcourt completed an emergency repair of the south tower's facia. The workers used glue and screws to secure back into place a 6-ft. piece of galvanized steel that fell onto the pool deck during high winds. Residents were banned from the south pool area and south tower balconies facing it for nearly a month as managers feared other pieces could fall and scrambled to find a contractor who would attempt the dangerous repair.

Valcourt used a swing stage and 8,000 pounds of counterweights on the roof to lift the men into position. Building the contraption took four days. They were the only company among four interviewed that agreed to the job.

Valcourt is a finalist for the upcoming $6 million job of plaster repair, concrete restoration and painting.

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Resolved: How residents ring in the new year



Mister B's Neighborhood

I never much liked New Year's Eve, especially when I was younger because there was a lot of pressure to celebrate in style. The anticipation of what I had planned never lived up to what happened on the actual night, but I planned something every year until the last decade, when a quiet dinner at home with friends became our favorite New Year's Eve plan. New Year's Eve is a time to celebrate the past year and look forward to the next one. Every year I did make resolutions, even though I rarely kept them.

New Year's resolutions are a common practice around the world, where people make promises or set goals for themselves at the start of a new year. But where did this tradition come from and how has it evolved over time?

The origin of New Year's resolutions can be traced back to ancient civilizations, such as the Babylonians and the Romans. The Babylonians celebrated the new year in mid-March, during a 12-day festival called Akitu. During this festival, they made promises to their gods to pay their debts, return borrowed objects and to be loyal to the king. They believed that by keeping these promises, they would earn the favor of the gods and have a prosperous year.

The Romans also celebrated the new year in March, until Julius Caesar changed the calendar and established January 1 as the first day of the year in 46 BC. January was named after Janus, the god of beginnings and endings. Janus has two faces, looking back and forward in time. The Romans offered sacrifices to Janus and made vows of good conduct for the coming year.

Today, New Year's resolutions are more secular and personal, and often focus on health, fitness, career or lifestyle changes. According to a survey by YouGov, a market research company, the most common resolutions for Americans in 2021 were to exercise more, to save money, to eat healthier and to lose weight. However, keeping these resolutions is not easy, as studies have shown that only about 8% of people achieve their goals by the end of the year.

New Year's resolutions are a tradition that has a long and rich history, and that can help us start the new year with a positive and hopeful attitude. Whether we make them or not, and whether we keep them or not, the important thing is to always strive to be better versions of ourselves and to make the most of the opportunities that life offers us. I went around Casa Costa and asked our neighbors and friends what their New Year' resolutions were this year.

Mike, my outstanding barber who works at Qure, the barbershop downstairs, told me that he makes both a personal and professional resolution every year. This time, his personal resolution is to build muscle mass by eating healthier meals throughout the day and hitting the gym two or three times a week. His professional resolution is to attract more customers by using social media like his Instagram account @moneymikekutzzz to showcase his skills as a barber.

Alex, our day concierge, makes a New Year's resolution every year. This year it's to get his real estate licence and for his career to explode.

Tami, a six-year Casa Costa resident, doesn't usually make New Year's resolutions. "I make goals throughout the year," she told me. "It's not about a time frame or the new year, it's about when I need to make positive changes in my life."

Elaine, who has been living at Casa Costa for nine new yearses, told me that her resolution is to accept that there are things that she cannot change. She said: "We should keep our side of the street clean and not worry about the other side."

Resolutions remind us that we're in charge of our destinies. They're the starting point of a journey toward personal growth, offering us opportunities to learn, evolve and chase our dreams.

* * *

The *Casa Coaster* is now over a year old. This time last year the board was fighting about whether it should exist at all. I am grateful it survived. Nearly 50 people can't wait each month and subscribe to have the paper dropped at their doorstep!

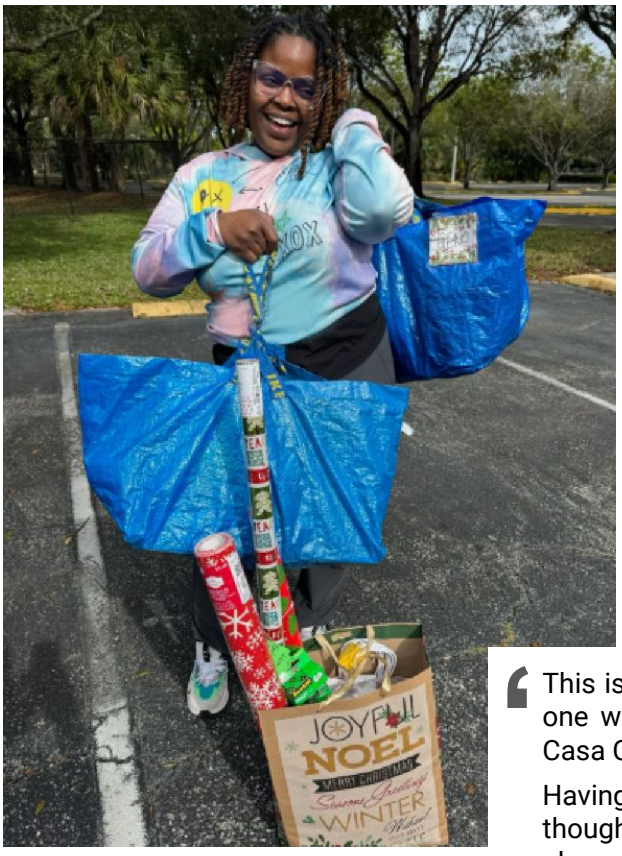
I shared in November about the joy I have found in reigniting my desire to give back to the community by volunteering for a charity that assists the needy with one-time help paying for housing or meals. I was so proud that the Casa Costa community gave so generously, providing Christmas gifts for a single mother who couldn't do it alone.

Writing for this little newspaper gives me joy too. I get to share stories about people and places (and food!). Frankly, it's more work than I signed up for, but I urge you to contribute too. The whole idea is that the paper represents everyone, so don't be shy. *CC*

Residents set donation records



JOHN BATTISTA



BELIEVE: Two single mothers called a trunkful of donated gifts a miracle.

Holiday staff fund increases 30%, toys overflow in the lobby, program of gifts for a needy family ends up with enough for another

Casa Costa residents opened their hearts and wallets last month.

Not considering anything given by residents directly to individual employees, the holiday fund raised over $20,000 that was divided among an extended staff of 20 people, including the valets and long-time postal carrier. That sum is a record for the community.

The board presented Castle Group employees with cards and cash at a breakfast on Dec. 15.

Contributing to the fund was voluntary, but 130 people contributed. In 2022, 106 residents gave $16,000. The Social & Welcoming Committee opened up its website to process payments by credit card, where residents charged over 60% of the fund.

An annual toy drive held by Castle Group netted two large boxes of toys for local Boys & Girls Clubs. In a sign of the times, a QR code on the boxes linked donors to an Amazon shopping list of toy requests from hopeful recipients.



J.T. HARRINGTON

Local Boys & Girls Clubs provided toy requests.

John Battista announced at the Thanksgiving Kickoff how the Social & Welcoming Committee was "adopting" a needy family that he'd met during his work with the local chapter of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

He asked the single mother of three to compile a wishlist of gifts that he displayed on a "giving tree" during the Nov. 19 dinner.

"Not only did our neighbors bring back every wish on the giving tree, but we received so much extra stuff that we were able to help another family," Mr. Battista said. "The second family is a single mother and 5-year-old daughter who were recently living out of her car. She now will be able to provide gifts for Christmas thanks to all of you. The Casa Costa community is so wonderfully generous. We feel blessed to live here." *CC*

> This is the answer to my prayers. I was getting to the point where I thought no one was listening – and then this happened! Thank you with all my heart to Casa Costa.
>
> Having happy boys at Christmas is not something I've had in the past and I thought the disappointment would happen again this year. As a mother, it always broke my heart. I would have taken no gifts just to see them smile. Finally, happy tears at Christmas. Thank you, thank you, thank you."



COASTER WELCOME WAGON



In November, **Bruno and Francesca D'Ascanio**, from Westchester, N.Y., settled into the south tower. Their frequent visits to Delray Beach and Boynton Beach over the years prompted them to search for a residence. Renting here allowed them to explore the community's offerings, leading them to buy their own place.

Bruno, a wine distributor, and Francesca, a hair colorist in Manhattan, are eager to embrace the South Florida weather.



John and Lori Michaels, of Cooperstown, N.Y., made their move to the south tower two months ago.

Lori, a traveling physical therapist, had a work opportunity in the vicinity.

They both recognized Casa Costa as their new home the moment they laid eyes on it.

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