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The Niles Company: Management and maintenance backed by many years of experience

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Those of us who lived through the historically heavy rains that hit the Boston area last spring vividly recall the flooding that ensued. The city of Quincy, Mass., was among the towns that were hardest hit by the storms. And the Furnace Brook Condo association in Quincy was a victim of that flooding.

"Our building is in a low spot, and the parking lot in the lower level was completely flooded," reveals Tom Feenan, a unit owner in the commercial condo association. "We had 10 to 12 feet of water."

As a result of the flooding, the building lost heat and electrical power, and the city "shut us down," says Feenan. For him, the timing couldn't have been worse. He is a financial advisor, and it was the middle of tax season. Getting back into his office as quickly as possible was critical.

Staying Around by Staying Young

Fortunately, his property management company, The Niles Company, had the resources to respond immediately to the crisis. Founded in 1907, Niles offers an array of real estate services - from rentals and investment sales to consulting and financial reporting. But property management and project supervision have always been at the heart of their business.

Niles has been able to remain vibrant and thriving throughout this long history by listening to its clients and evolving to meet their needs. It is by continually innovating - for example, by offering a new interactive website - that Niles has been able to expand its operations, even during these difficult times for the housing industry. Over the past year or so, the company has added a dozen new properties to its management portfolio, bringing the total number of units in its care to roughly 7,000. It also has hired an additional property manager to help handle the added responsibility.

Introducing Niles Contracting Services LLC

Hand in hand with this new growth has been an uptick in demand for physical maintenance, repair and renovation among the properties the company serves. While Niles has always provided for the physical requirements of the properties in its portfolio, "The expansion of our portfolio created a growing demand for these services," explains James T. Collins, CPM, executive vice president of Niles. "At the same time, it became increasingly difficult to find people who do this kind of work, who are reliable and insured. It's best to have these services in-house, where we can be better assured of the quality of the results."

That concept led to the establishment of Niles Contracting Services LLC (NCS), a wholly owned subsidiary of The Niles Company. "Our maintenance services were set up years ago to facilitate the needs and requirements of our clients," says Jerry Ragosa, CPM, president of Niles. "NCS simply formalized it. We're responsible for the management of each property and the quality of work of the vendors we hire. With NCS, we have better pricing and control."

With NCS, Niles maintains its own well-equipped, reliable staff of skilled, licensed contractors ready

to handle routine maintenance jobs or to mobilize instantly at any time in the event of an emergency. As Linda Stearns, senior vice president and executive director of NCS, puts it, "We offer 24/7 service, 365 days a year, at the highest level of quality. We're accountable to our clients, so they know we're here for the long haul."

Take the Furnace Brook flooding crisis, for example. NCS was able to respond immediately with licensed staff professionals, who took swift action to repair the damages left by the flooding, from pumping water and replacing electrical switches to negotiating with the insurance company and working with local officials to get the building reopened. "They worked night and day, around the clock," Feenan praises.

And not only did NCS handle the immediate emergency, they also took steps, such as sandbagging the area behind the parking lot, to help prevent a similar disaster in the future. "We didn't have to do a thing," says Feenan. "Niles really stepped up to the plate. I couldn't speak more highly of them."

Savings are Part of the Service

Just as important to condominium associations these days is controlling costs - and that's another area where NCS makes a big difference. Laureen A. Ballard, senior vice president and portfolio manager for Niles, explains that having one company handle a multitude of services can represent a huge savings of both money and time. "Suppose you need to change a light bulb, clean a gutter and fix a broken door," she says. "It can all be done with one phone call, without having to call in three different vendors."

"We can do any type of work and save money for our clients," adds Stearns. "Suppose a tree falls down in the parking lot. We're there; we have the tools on the truck, so we can respond immediately rather than waiting for a tree company to come in. and the unit owners are inconvenienced for as short a time as possible."

One association where that approach is very much appreciated is Magnolia Ridge I in Weymouth, Mass. Magnolia hired Niles as its property management company in October, and Linda Carrigan, a trustee of the association, was immediately impressed. "The transition was non-existent to us," she reports. "They took care of everything - our bank accounts, notifying the unit owners, everything."

They also took care of maintenance issues. "It wasn't just what we had before - a handyman," Carrigan says. "They send out the most appropriate person, whether it's a roofer or an electrician, as part of the crew."

Among the issues that were smoothly handled was a blackout that affected older residents for whom electricity was a vital necessity. They took it upon themselves to bring in generators to hook up people who had to have power," she says. In another instance, when a pipe burst at 2:00 a.m., a crew was dispatched to take care of the problem "within 20 minutes," says Carrigan, who marvels not only at the speedy response, but also at the professionalism and skill of the NCS crew.

Carrigan further appreciates the routine inspections that also are incorporated into NCS's service. "Every Friday, someone is here, walking the property, doing the small things that need to be done. And if it's not his expertise, he knows who to call."

To supplement the NCS staff, Niles maintains an extensive list of preferred vendors and contractors for various services customarily needed in the property management industry. They are all licensed and insured, and because of the volume of business they do with Niles, they are able to provide the favorable pricing and responsive service clients have come to expect from Niles.

"With our previous property management companies, we always had to call someone in, so it cost more," Carrigan says. "It's nice to be able to sit back and just have things taken care of."

Superb Customer Satisfaction - Guaranteed

Making sure clients are well taken care of is all in a day's work for Niles and NCS, both of whose commitment to service is backed by a 100% customer service guarantee. As part of this service, NCS staff is constantly monitoring properties under Niles' management. For example, Feenan praised NCS worked for making sure the flat roof of Furnace Brook Condo Association was well shoveled during the heavy snows of this past winter.

You don't even have to be a client of The Niles Company to obtain the services of NCS. According to Bob Elder, head of maintenance for NCS, the division is available for specific projects or as a substitute for onsite staff. Adds Collins, "Some properties are too small for a full-time superintendent. We're able to provide someone once a week or whenever they are needed. It's a cost-effective way to get the necessary services without full-time staff or multiple contractors."

To Ragosa, filling that void is part of the personal touch that is a hallmark of Niles. And that extends not only to board members, but also to unit owners - as the residents of Beal's Cove Village in Hingham, Mass., discovered. The staff of Niles determined that the aging complex could benefit from new windows - but they also knew that that was a decision each individual unit owner would have to make on his or her own.

"There's an office building at the front of the building," explains association trustee Leslie Bestick. "Niles came in and installed two windows in the office building so unit owners could see the difference between regular windows and energy-efficient ones. They didn't just come in and say, 'Here's what to do,' they said, 'Here are some ideas,' so people could see what they'd be getting and pick what works." So far, 63 units out of 198 have replaced their windows. "That's pretty significant," Bestick says.

NCS also made other recommendations for improvement, while remaining sensitive to budgetary concerns. For example, Stearns, who serves as the portfolio manager for Beal's Cove in addition to her responsibilities for NCS, came up with the idea of converting an old garage adjacent to the pool area into a community room for very little cost, according to Bestick. "We never would have sat down at a trustee's meeting and said, 'Let's build a community room,'" she says. "For short money, they built an amazing room. It's little stuff like that that's not so little in the end."

And now is a good time to get started. As Ragosa puts it, "After this awful winter, spring maintenance is going to be especially important. It's the perfect time to take advantage of the services offered by Niles Contracting Services."

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