

Gated Communities – Do Gates Reduce Crime? by Chris E McGoey, CPP, CSP, CAM

More and more people want to reside in gated residential communities. Because of this, gated residential communities and garden apartments across the country are being built at record rates.

In the 1970s there were approximately 2000 gated communities nationwide. In the early 2000s, there were over 50,000 gated properties with more being built every year. That equates to about seven million households or 6% of the national total behind walls or fences. About four million of the total is in communities where access is controlled by gates, entry codes, key cards or security guards (1). Gated communities offer some benefits and some drawbacks depending whether you are a resident or in property management. I will discuss both sides of the issue in this article.

All gated and fenced residential communities have several things in common. Gates and fences provide the perception of security, safety, and privacy. In affluent residential neighborhoods, privacy means exclusivity and therefore increased property values. Adding an attractive automatic entry gate system can easily add \$50,000 or more to single family home values within some communities regardless of whether it has any effect on crime.

Gates as an Amenity

Large apartment properties often add gate systems as an amenity to attract new residents. Gated communities are desirable to most prospective residents and to most property managers because they can charge a premium for rent. The main purpose of a gate, on a low-crime property, is not to deter or prevent crime but to provide the perception of security and exclusivity. Let's face it, everyone wants to feel good about where they live and a gated community is like a private club where access privileges are required. Any real benefits of crime prevention are a plus.

Still, other apartment communities add gate systems as a barrier to keep criminals off the property and away from rent paying residents. In this setting, the intention is to reduce crime and retain residents by erecting a significant barrier to unauthorized foot and vehicle traffic. Gates are often considered as a cheaper alternative to hiring and managing security guards. Gate installation companies promote this in their marketing and stress the added benefit of liability protection. That is not always sound advice. Gates can also be a barrier to emergency services like the police or fire departments. It is extremely important to have a system in place that allows quick access to them. Most communities use a "Knox Box" key system but there are also universal keypad codes, and restricted radio frequency access. Check with your local police and Fire Marshall.

Do Gates Reduce Crime?

This is the most common question that is asked. The answer is always a qualified, yes. Fences and working gates definitely reduce unauthorized vehicle and foot traffic on a property especially late at night and early in the morning. For many properties, traffic reduction alone is enough to reduce much of the parking lot and street crime. Note my emphasis on "working" gates. Swinging gates in a volatile community will have problems being operational 24-hours per day due to abuse and vandalism.

The effectiveness of gates and fencing depends on the nature of the property and the management controls in place. Gates and fencing works best on a stable property with non-criminal, mature residents. If you manage a property that caters to college students it can be a nightmare to maintain an effective gate system. If you intend to install a gate system on a high-crime property that is full of criminal types, drug dealers, and gang members the gated system will be waste of money until you clear the bad element out.

Formidable fencing and gates, by design, restrict access and therefore provide both a physical and psychological barrier for criminals. Good signage is necessary to announce that this is private property and to post your no trespassing policy. Sure, one can tailgate onto a property behind someone else but this requires effort and exposes the criminal to a potential witness. Criminals want to come onto an apartment property anonymously and blend into the community of strangers. Criminals like quick escape routes and don't want to become trapped behind fences or gates should they be discovered. Many criminals will bypass a gated community for one that is not gated simply because of the restricted access.

Gated communities should not claim to be able to prevent all crimes. Gates and fences are just another tool to help a property manager fight crime. More tools are usually required to do the complete job. Support by the residents and management is required to maintain an effective gate system. Management needs to educate the residents how to properly use the gate system and how to report abuse and damage. Management needs to screen residents and enforce community rules to prevent criminal types from residing on the inside. Residents need to report or challenge unauthorized persons using the gates and not give out gate codes unnecessarily. Management needs to periodically change the master gate code to screen out former repair vendors, a zillion pizza delivery companies, and former residents.

Video System Support

Video surveillance systems work well in support of access control gates. A well-placed video camera can keep an eye on the gated entry areas 24-hours a day and never blink once. Video cameras should be placed in such a manner to be able to identify the vehicle makes and license plates of anyone who approaches. This is a great deterrent to vandalism and is positive proof should a gate be damaged by a careless driver. Because they operate 24-hours a day, a video camera must be protected from the weather and vandalism by a weatherproof housing. The video lens must adjust automatically to the changing lighting conditions for best picture quality. A well-placed sign should announce to all that they are under video surveillance. Of course to capture these images, a commercial grade time-lapse video recorder is required in an environmentally protective enclosure.

Video systems can be integrated with the gate intercom system and allow homeowners to view who is at the gate seeking permission to enter. Technically, video signals from a gate on a west coast property can be monitored by a security firm on the east coast due to the advent of digital and broadband technologies. They can even carry on a conversation with the person desiring access and open the gate remotely for them.

How Should Gates be Explained?

There is a trend in the multi-housing industry not to use the word SECURITY when referring to pedestrian and vehicle gates. Gate systems have been called security gates, limited access gates, controlled access portals, and many others. The multi-housing industry erroneously

believes that if it doesn't say that fences and access gates are for "security purposes" then it will be protected from civil liability. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

I say, "If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it's probably a duck." Call them what you will but the function of fencing and gates will define their real purpose. The design is to keep unauthorized people out. There is nothing wrong with believing that having a formidable barrier around your property will help prevent crime - you just can't guarantee it.

Which Gate Type is Best?

The best gate type depends on the purpose and property types. Swinging gates look the best and are selected more often for private single family residential communities. The downside is the cost and maintenance expense. Two gate operators are required to open each wing of each gate set, which doubles the expense and requires twice the maintenance. Swinging gates also get damaged more often as anxious drivers hit them as they enter the property with their cars. Swinging gates are a nightmare to maintain on a high-traffic apartment property filled with young people.

Gates that slide horizontally are less attractive, but are cheaper to purchase and maintain. Only one gate operator is required and it has fewer vulnerable parts to break. When a car clips a sliding gate, the usual result is getting knocked off the track as opposed to bending or breaking a control arm or weld point.

With any type of gate system, in-ground loop-detectors are required to automatically signal when a car is present so the automatic gate operator will function accordingly. Loop detectors are required to prevent the gates from crashing into a car and to allowing free egress from inside the property. Loop detectors are not designed to prevent tailgating and should not be circumvented to prevent this.

How to Prevent Tailgating

Tailgating is the practice of following an authorized resident vehicle through the open gates before it closes. Tailgating is common practice at all gated communities and the cause of some of the damage to the gate systems. Tailgating is most common during rush hours. Tailgating is only considered bad when unauthorized persons infiltrate the property. On a large property it is impossible to know who is authorized to tailgate and who is not. Some properties educate their residents to stop and wait for the gate to close behind their car before proceeding. This can be effective on small, low-volume properties where resident cars are recognizable.

On a large property, vehicle identity is not so easy. The only way to be sure, other than posting a guard, is to force each vehicle to enter their access code, card, or remote to gain entry. Adding a high-speed swing-arm between the gate keypad and the gate typically does the trick. However, there must be enough front-end real estate for this modification. The swing-arm has to be synchronized to open and close behind each car before the main gate opens. Sometimes a speed bump is necessary, just before the swing arm, to slow down the traffic through this portal and to prevent crashing into the arms. This system works, but will radically slow down the throughput into the property and is suitable only on low-volume access points.

On exit-only gates, in-ground collapsible traffic-teeth have proved very effective in preventing wrong-way vehicles access. Highly visible signs are necessary to prevent tire damage. These can be circumvented by clever thieves but work well enough to deter most drivers.

Disclosure to Residents

It is a good practice to always notify the community residents in writing about the function of the gates. Since access gates are an amenity, any change in service needs to be explained so residents can decide what to do next. If the management of a gated community decides to leave the gates open during daylight hours, this policy change should be stated in writing and published to the residents. Residents who disagree with this perceived reduction in services should be allowed to move out or be compensated in some manner. If a gate becomes damaged and requires weeks to repair, you should so notify your residents. If management decides not to repair the gates it is better to remove them altogether than to leave them there in disrepair. Don't forget to notify the residents of the decision to permanently remove this amenity.

The decision to install gates on a property creates a love-hate relationship. Residents love those gates but can be a pain for management to maintain. Gates can help increase occupancy but also can wreak havoc to a community maintenance budget. The net financial effect may be a wash but the difference may be made up in resident retention, the reduction of crime, police calls for service, and property damage. I like gates...but I don't like the problems associated with them. You decide.

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