

FEATURED GUIDE · 18 PAGES

The Complete Property Manager's Guide to Modern Access Control

Everything you need to know before choosing a platform — from QR entry vs. video intercom to retrofit vs. new installation.

18 pages · 22 min read · PDF

What's Inside

01	Introduction — Why Access Control Matters Now	3
02	How Modern Access Control Actually Works	4
03	QR Entry vs. Video Intercom — When Each Makes Sense	6
04	The Real Cost of Legacy Systems	8
05	How to Evaluate Vendors Without Getting Sold To	10
06	The 8 Questions to Ask Before Signing Any Contract	11
07	Retrofit vs. New Installation — Which Does Your Building Need?	13
08	How to Present the Business Case to Your HOA Board	15
09	Conclusion & Next Steps	17
10	Get Started With Vivo Control	18

WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR

Property managers, HOA board members, portfolio operators, and anyone evaluating access control for a gated community, apartment building, or multifamily property.

Why Access Control Matters Now

Access control used to be a simple decision: a lock, a key, maybe a guard at the gate. That world is gone. Residents now expect the same convenience at their front gate that they get from every other app on their phone. Boards and owners expect measurable security and a clear paper trail. And insurers, lenders, and legal counsel expect documented access logs the moment anything goes wrong.

At the same time, the cost of doing nothing keeps climbing. Guard staffing is one of the largest controllable line items in a property budget. Lost keys and fobs generate recurring locksmith calls. And every unmonitored entry point is a liability question waiting to be asked in a deposition.

This shift has created a crowded, confusing market. Every vendor claims to be the modern solution, every sales deck looks the same, and most property managers are asked to make a five-figure, multi-year decision without a technical background to evaluate the claims.

WHAT THIS GUIDE DOES

This guide strips away the sales language and gives you a straight, vendor-neutral framework for understanding how modern access control works, what it should cost, how to compare QR entry against video intercom, and exactly what to ask before you sign anything. By the end, you'll be able to walk into a board meeting or a vendor call and ask better questions than the person pitching you.

Whether you manage a single gated community, a high-rise, or a portfolio of properties across multiple markets, the fundamentals in this guide apply the same way. Let's start with how these systems actually work under the hood.

How Modern Access Control Actually Works

Modern access control is built around three layers working together: the credential (how someone proves they belong), the hardware (what physically opens the gate or door), and the cloud platform (what manages, logs, and reports on everything). Understanding these three layers is the fastest way to see through a vendor's marketing and evaluate what you're actually being sold.

Layer 1 — The Credential

This is how a resident, visitor, or staff member proves they have permission to enter. In a modern system, this can be a mobile app credential, a time-limited QR code sent by text or email, a face-verified video call to a resident, or a traditional keycard or fob for people who prefer it. The best systems support several credential types at once, because no single method works for every resident, visitor, and vendor scenario.

Layer 2 — The Hardware

This is the physical device at the gate, door, or elevator: a reader, a printed QR plaque, a video intercom panel, or a gate operator relay. The critical difference between legacy and modern hardware is dependency. Legacy systems typically require a dedicated panel and wiring at every single access point. Modern QR-based systems can operate at secondary gates and visitor lanes with a printed plaque and no panel at all — which changes the entire cost equation for multi-gate properties.

Layer 3 — The Cloud Platform

This is the dashboard that ties everything together: who has access, when they used it, which gate, and what happened. It's also where a property manager grants or revokes access remotely, reviews footage, and pulls reports for an owner, insurer, or board member. This is the layer that legacy systems handle poorly — most rely on standalone panels with no centralized log, which means "who opened Gate 3 at 2am" becomes a phone call and a guesswork exercise instead of a two-minute dashboard search.

Legacy vs. Modern — Side by Side

Category	Legacy System	Modern Cloud System
Entry method	Physical key, fob, or proximity card	Mobile credential, QR code, video call, or card
Guest access	Guard call, buzzer, or manual gate list	Time-limited QR code sent by text or email
Lost credential	Rekey or replace hardware — days of exposure	Revoked instantly from the dashboard
Monitoring	Standalone panel, no central log	Centralized access log, timestamped, searchable
Multi-gate properties	Panel + wiring required at every point	QR plaques at secondary points — no new wiring
Reporting to owners/ board	Manual, guard-dependent, inconsistent	Automated reports, exportable on demand

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR YOUR BUILDING

The biggest gap isn't the entry experience — residents will adapt to almost anything. It's what happens after an incident. When something goes wrong at 2am, the question your board, your insurer, or your attorney will ask is: "who had access, and can you prove it?" A centralized, timestamped log is the difference between a five-minute answer and a liability exposure.

A Note on Integration

If you manage more than one property, or you use a property management software platform such as Yardi, RealPage, or Entrata, ask any vendor directly whether their system integrates or is API-compatible. Bulk onboarding, portfolio-level reporting, and single sign-on across communities are the features that separate a system built for one building from a system built for a portfolio.

QR Entry vs. Video Intercom — When Each Makes Sense

This is the single most common point of confusion for property managers evaluating access control, mostly because vendors tend to sell whichever one they specialize in as the universal answer. In reality, QR entry and video intercom solve different problems, and most well-run properties end up using both.

When QR Entry Makes Sense

QR entry works best anywhere speed and low cost matter more than face-to-face verification: secondary vehicle gates, pedestrian side entrances, visitor and delivery lanes, and any retrofit location where running new wiring would be expensive or disruptive. A visitor receives a time-limited code by text or email, scans a printed plaque, and is through in seconds — no app download, no hardware panel required at that point.

When Video Intercom Makes Sense

Video intercom earns its cost at the points where verification matters most: the primary lobby, the main gated entrance, or any location where a resident or guard genuinely needs to see and speak with the person requesting entry before granting access. It's slower and requires hardware and often wiring, but for high-traffic or high-security entrances, that extra step is the point.

THE HYBRID APPROACH

Most gated communities and multifamily properties get the best result from a hybrid deployment: video intercom at the main entrance, QR entry at every secondary gate and visitor lane. This gets you the security of face verification where it matters and eliminates unnecessary hardware cost everywhere else.

Decision Matrix

Scenario	Recommended Approach
Main lobby or primary gated entrance	Video intercom — face verification matters most here
Secondary vehicle or pedestrian gate	QR entry — no panel or wiring needed
Visitor and delivery lane	QR entry — time-limited codes, no app required
Retrofit building with poor existing wiring	QR entry at as many points as possible to control cost
High-security commercial or amenity entrance	Video intercom, or intercom plus QR as backup
Guard booth replacement or augmentation	Video intercom integrated with guard workflow, QR for routine visitor traffic

A Word on Cost

Video intercom hardware, wiring, and per-door licensing add up quickly on a property with more than one or two access points. QR entry's biggest financial advantage is exactly here: because it requires no panel and minimal hardware at secondary points, a property with five gates can deploy video intercom at the one that matters and QR everywhere else — instead of paying for hardware at all five.

Tip: When a vendor quotes you a price, always ask them to break it out by access point. A single blended number makes it hard to see where your money is actually going.

The Real Cost of Legacy Systems

"We already have a system, why change it?" is the most common objection a board will raise — and it's a fair question. The answer is that legacy systems rarely show their true cost on a single line item. Instead, that cost is spread across guard payroll, locksmith invoices, resident complaints, and insurance premiums, which makes it easy to underestimate what the status quo is actually costing you every year.

Guard Labor

Manually verifying every visitor, buzzing gates, and managing a paper or clipboard visitor log is one of the largest controllable costs in a property budget. Every hour a guard spends on routine visitor verification is an hour not spent on patrol, incident response, or resident service — and that labor cost recurs every single day, indefinitely.

Locksmith and Rekeying Costs

Every lost key, stolen fob, or resident turnover with a physical credential system creates a rekeying event. On a property with meaningful turnover, this becomes a recurring, unpredictable line item — and it's a cost that disappears almost entirely with a mobile or QR-based credential system, since access is revoked instantly and there's no physical hardware to replace.

Liability Exposure

This is the cost that doesn't show up until something goes wrong — and by then it's too late to fix cheaply. An unauthorized entry, an incident involving a visitor who shouldn't have had access, or simply the inability to answer "who was on the property at that time" can turn into a legal and insurance exposure that dwarfs whatever you saved by not upgrading.

Cost Comparison at a Glance

Cost Category	Legacy System	Modern System
Visitor verification labor	Ongoing guard hours, every day	Automated via QR / resident app
Lost key or fob event	Rekey or hardware replacement cost	Instant remote revocation, no hardware cost
Multi-gate hardware	Panel + wiring at every point	QR plaques at secondary points only
Incident investigation	Manual, guard memory, unreliable	Timestamped digital log, exportable
Reporting for insurance/ board	Manual compilation, hours of staff time	Automated export in minutes

HOW TO BUILD YOUR OWN NUMBERS

Before your next board meeting, pull three numbers: your trailing-twelve-month locksmith and rekeying spend, an estimate of guard hours spent on routine visitor verification, and the number of access-related incidents or complaints in the last year. Those three figures, more than any vendor's ROI slide, will tell you what the status quo is actually costing your property.

How to Evaluate Vendors Without Getting Sold To

Every access control vendor's demo looks impressive. That's the point of a demo. The way to see past the pitch is to change what you ask for and how you evaluate the answers.

- ✓ **Ask for reference customers with a similar property type** — not just a logo wall. A gated community with five vehicle gates has different needs than a single-entrance mid-rise. Ask to speak with a property manager whose situation matches yours.
- ✓ **Request a live, unscripted demo** — not just a slide deck. Ask the vendor to walk through revoking a resident's access, pulling an incident report, and adding a new gate to the dashboard, live.
- ✓ **Get the total cost of ownership, not the sticker price** — hardware, per-door software fees, installation labor, and support costs over a full contract term, not just the up-front number.
- ✓ **Verify the installation timeline against a real reference** — ask a past customer how long installation actually took versus what they were promised.
- ✓ **Confirm bilingual or multi-language support if relevant** — for properties with a Spanish-dominant or otherwise non-English-speaking resident base, ask specifically whether the resident-facing app and support are natively bilingual, not translated after the fact.
- ✓ **Ask about data retention and security policy** — how long is video and access-log data stored, who can access it, and what happens to your data if you cancel.
- ✓ **Confirm integration with your property management software** — Yardi, RealPage, Entrata, or whatever platform you already run on.
- ✓ **Ask directly about support response time and where support is based** — a support team in a different time zone with no local presence is a real operational risk if something breaks at a gate on a Friday night.

The 8 Questions to Ask Before Signing Any Contract

Use this list in your next vendor call. If a salesperson can't answer these clearly and specifically, that's information too.

1 What is the true all-in cost?

Get hardware, per-door software fees, installation labor, and ongoing support costs itemized separately — not blended into one number.

2 What happens if internet or power goes down?

Ask specifically about offline fallback behavior at the gate. A system that fails closed — or fails open — with no notice is a serious operational and safety risk.

3 How long is installation, and how disruptive is it to residents?

Ask for a realistic day-by-day timeline, and ask a reference customer to confirm it matched reality.

4 Does it integrate with our property management software?

Confirm compatibility with Yardi, RealPage, Entrata, or your specific platform — and ask what breaks if that integration isn't native.

5

Is the resident experience fully available in every language our residents speak?

Ask whether the app and support are natively bilingual or translated after the fact — the difference shows up in daily friction.

6

What is the data retention and privacy policy?

Ask how long video and access logs are stored, who can access that data, and what happens to it if you cancel the contract.

7

What is the contract term, and how do we exit if we're unsatisfied?

Understand cancellation terms, hardware ownership after cancellation, and any penalties before you sign — not after.

8

Who provides local support, and how fast is response time?

Ask for a guaranteed response-time commitment in writing, and confirm whether support is local to your market or a distant call center.

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Bring these eight questions to your next vendor call, board meeting, or RFP. A vendor confident in their product will welcome them.

Retrofit vs. New Installation — Which Does Your Building Need?

One of the biggest cost variables in any access control project isn't the platform you choose — it's whether your building requires a retrofit or a new installation, and most property managers don't know which category they fall into until a vendor tells them, often after a site visit that was supposed to be free.

What "Retrofit" Means

A retrofit uses your building's existing wiring, gate operators, and infrastructure wherever possible, layering new credentials and cloud management on top. This is almost always faster and less expensive, but it depends heavily on the condition of what's already in the wall or in the gate operator cabinet.

What "New Installation" Means

A new installation means running new wiring, replacing gate operators or panels, or building access infrastructure at points that never had any. This is the right call when existing wiring is degraded, undocumented, or simply doesn't exist — but it costs more and takes longer.

THE QR ADVANTAGE IN RETROFIT SCENARIOS

QR-based entry at secondary points is often the deciding factor between an affordable retrofit and an expensive new build, because a printed QR plaque requires no wiring at all. Many properties that would otherwise need a costly new installation at every secondary gate can retrofit the primary entrance and deploy QR everywhere else.

Decision Checklist

Factor	Leans Retrofit	Leans New Installation
Existing wiring condition	Intact, documented, functional	Degraded, undocumented, or absent
Building age	Recently updated infrastructure	Original infrastructure, decades old
Number of entry points	Few primary points, several secondary	Many points needing full new infrastructure
Budget and timeline	Limited budget, need fast deployment	Larger capital project, longer runway
Gate operator condition	Functional, compatible relay access	Failing or incompatible with modern controls

In practice, most properties end up somewhere in the middle: a retrofit at the main entrance where existing infrastructure is workable, and new, wiring-free QR deployment at every secondary point. Ask any vendor to walk your property in person, point by point, before quoting a blanket "retrofit" or "new installation" price — a single number for the whole property usually means someone hasn't actually looked closely at every gate.

How to Present the Business Case to Your HOA Board

Even the right access control decision can stall if it's presented poorly to a board. Boards respond to a clear problem statement, a small number of vetted options, a specific number, and a defined timeline — not a vendor's glossy brochure.

Structure Your Proposal in Five Parts

- ✓ **The problem, in the board's language.** Frame it around safety, liability, and resident complaints — not technical specs. "We had three unauthorized entry incidents last year and cannot produce a reliable access log" lands harder than "our system lacks centralized logging."
- ✓ **The options you considered.** Show the board you evaluated more than one vendor. Two or three options, compared on the same criteria, builds credibility that a single recommendation doesn't.
- ✓ **Your recommendation, with the number.** State the total cost of ownership over the contract term, not just year one — and be ready to show the math behind it.
- ✓ **The return on investment.** Translate guard-hour savings, reduced rekeying costs, and lower liability exposure into a dollar comparison against the current system's real, fully-loaded cost.
- ✓ **A specific implementation timeline and the ask.** Tell the board exactly what you need approved — budget, contract signature, or a pilot period — and by what date, to avoid an open-ended discussion that stalls for months.

Sample Talking Points for the Meeting

OPENING THE DISCUSSION

"Our current system cannot tell us who accessed the property or when, which is both a safety gap and a liability exposure. I've evaluated three alternatives against our budget and our residents' needs, and I have a specific recommendation with a clear cost and timeline."

ADDRESSING THE "WHY NOW" QUESTION

"Every year we delay, we continue to pay for guard hours and rekeying that a modern system would largely eliminate — and we remain exposed if an access-related incident happens and we can't produce a log."

CLOSING THE ASK

"I'm asking the board to approve a budget of [amount] for a [retrofit / new installation] to be completed within [timeframe], with a pilot period at [location] to confirm resident satisfaction before full rollout."

Adapt the bracketed language to your property's specific numbers before the meeting — boards respond to specificity, not templates.

Bringing It All Together

Access control is no longer a one-time hardware purchase — it's an ongoing operational decision that touches security, resident satisfaction, staff labor, and legal exposure all at once. The property managers who get the best outcomes aren't the ones who move fastest; they're the ones who ask sharper questions before they sign anything.

Key Takeaways Checklist

- ✓ Modern access control has three layers: credential, hardware, and cloud platform — evaluate all three, not just the resident-facing app.
- ✓ QR entry and video intercom solve different problems. Most properties get the best result from using both, in the right places.
- ✓ The real cost of a legacy system is spread across guard labor, rekeying, and liability exposure — pull your own numbers before your next board meeting.
- ✓ Evaluate vendors on reference customers, live demos, total cost of ownership, and integration compatibility — not the sales deck.
- ✓ Ask the 8 questions in Chapter 5 before you sign anything.
- ✓ Confirm whether your building needs a retrofit, a new installation, or a hybrid of both — a proper site visit should tell you, point by point.
- ✓ Structure your board proposal around the problem, the options considered, your recommendation, the ROI, and a specific ask.

VIVO CONTROL

See a Modern Access Control Platform in Action

Vivo Control combines QR entry, video intercom, mobile access, amenity booking, and cloud CCTV in one platform — with no new wiring required at secondary access points, and a fully bilingual resident experience.

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