

ORGANIZING AND OPERATING CORE GROUPS

Note: This handout was created for a cohousing design workshop presented by Design Coalition in 1992

From the time that a group of people begin to talk about a dream of creating cohousing to the time they are ready to commit to a focused exploration of the risks involved, a number of critical steps should be followed. These pages are designed to provide an overview of parts of the pre-development process which core groups will be wise to attend to in their early organizing. Adopting operating policies will be an important aspect of this organizing.

Communicating Values

Before any decisions are made, take the time to talk to one another in a large group setting. Establish a framework for **discussing your personal values**. Make sure that everyone has a chance to be heard. Some suggested tools include retreats, social gatherings, and round-robin discussions where individuals can talk about who they are and what is important to them in their lives,

Focus on telling each other what is important to you about community, how you work, play, feel about "family", child-rearing and your privacy. If political, spiritual or other factors are big in your life, express that too. If gun control, abortion rights, euthanasia, presidential politics, or blue-eyed people will affect your feelings about your community, express them. Get to know one another...

Defining the Project ~~ micro and macro

We believe project definition falls into two categories: micro and macro definition characteristics.

Before individuals will know whether or not they are ready to give their time to the group, they'll rightfully want to know **what the group is**. It is important to try to as much in-depth definition of your project as possible early in the process. Begin with "macro" issues that typically define a real estate project (location, owner and/or rental, target costs, number of units to be developed, new construction/rehab or combination, interest in including affordable housing in your project.) When you have achieved consensus on these items, or prioritized them to your group's satisfaction, move into more "micro" definitions.

Spend another focused period of time discussing the ("micro") designs that are really important to you in cohousing. Break this out into categories of private dwellings, common house, and common grounds. When you don't have consensus on design priorities, use a prioritization scale that allows you to see where members of the group fall on questions. For example, use a scale that goes from: "I must have this to be part of the group" to "I can live with this" to "I can't live with this". Be aware that (at least some of) these things will change before you finish your planning and feasibility process. Also realize that you need to do this initial definition to the best of your ability, so that you can **articulate a clear intention**. You will get into all of these choices in greater depth when you get into the project planning process, but you have to give the group some definition at the outset so that people can know whether or not the group matches their individual values and needs.

Then write it down!

Use these tools as a means to get to a point where you can summarize your group's intention. This can be a specific "mission statement" and a set of goals that stem from it, which will help you to have a touchstone in your planning process. Doing this will foster common understanding and help minimize conflicts later. It's also a good tool for informing new members who haven't been part of the group's early pre-development process. These discussions and early "definition" decisions will be invaluable as you move into a more detailed program design. The better able you are to define the facets of your project, the better able you will be able to evaluate their viability.

OPERATING STRUCTURE AND ADMINISTRATIVE POLICIES (Housekeeping)

These are suggestions for ‘operating ground rules’ that will help any group function more effectively. Consider the idea of asking group members to agree to formally commit to these policies early in the process. Create a climate of trust and mutual respect that will help you to make good and compassionate decisions. A written ‘contract’ can be a good tool if only to impress upon yourselves the importance of this often-overlooked cornerstone of effective groups .

Administration

Establish a **Steering Committee** which will function as an administrative oversight body. This group will oversee the whole timetable and development framework and report to the rest of the members. It plays the crucial roles of coordinating and reporting the work of other committees, and also functions as a liaison with other groups or individuals (professionals, government reps, press, network etc.,)

Establish both *standing and ad hoc working committees* so that research and decision proposals can be generated at a small-group level. Proposals can then be brought to the larger group for consideration, discussion and decision.

Examples of the kinds of committees that will be important in a cohousing development project include:

- legal
- financial
- membership
- site search
- design
- management

Discuss and decide upon the amount of time you want to spend on this project and use that as a gauge to decide on the *frequency of meeting times*, both for working and administrative committees and for the whole group. You are embarking upon a part-time job. The more time you give to it, the sooner you will know what kinds of outcomes to expect.

Decide *if you want to involve paid professionals* in your planning and/or development process. Consider what the costs will be, in both time and money. Consider and decide what you are personally willing to give to the process. Consider alternatives when choosing professional involvement (the kinds of roles you want others to play, such as developer or project manager, as well as a variety of people who could fill these roles.)

Consider whether or not a network is important to you, and if you have the time to give to it. What are the benefits? Costs?

Meeting Skills and Practices (R-E-S-P-E-C-T)

Establish operating policies for meetings and *use them all of the time*, such as:

- Commit to being good listeners and then practice!
- Identify each agenda item, denote it as a report, discussion or decision item, and set times for each part of the group's agenda.
- *Stick to your times*, or extend them if there is agreement among group members to do so.
- Create agendas for every meeting.
- Assign a facilitator for every meeting, as well as a timekeeper/secretary.
- Keep good record of notes, and record them with a central (Steering Committee?) secretary.

Decide How To Decide

Propose a number of options to the group about decision-making. This is part of a critical foundation for healthy groups, and will ease your work load if you can "agree how to agree" early in your group's evolution. Will you decide on a simple majority basis? Consensus? A mix of the two models? A modified hybrid? Please take the time to research and discuss these questions before you begin the planning process.

Suggested Next Steps

Once your group has come to agreement on the definition of your project it will be important to identify next steps to take . Please understand that, in making preliminary choices about project characteristics you have established clear intentions, but aspects of the project may change as you delve more fully into an examination of the implications of your choices.

For example, when you actually choose a site or get a better sense of the costs associated with your amenity choices the group may change elements of the project that were defined in this early stage. This is natural, and should be expected.

1. ***Establish a Steering Committee*** which will oversee the business of getting your group organized. Use the Skills Assessment Questionnaire [a separate ***Cohousing Tools*** form] as a basis for determining how your group will delegate tasks, ask and discuss important questions, and decide how to make decisions. A Steering Committee can develop several proposals for a decision making structure and present them to the larger group for discussion and resolution . Doing this will be crucial to the mental health of your group members, and will help you to make effective and respectful use of group members' time.

2. Formally ***state the definition of your project***. A written summary of the decisions made in the early phases of the project will be the basis for future tasks, including committee formation, research priorities, and group administrative details. And if your group has not yet reached fundamental agreement of this set of questions, please forego any additional planning or research until you've been able to discuss these and decide upon a basic set of defining characteristics.

3. ***Decide if you want to use outside professional assistance*** in your planning or development process. Explore your options and the roles you are willing to play individually. Consider the scope of work you are planning to tackle, and the amount of time and money you are willing to invest in this process. Make some choices so that you can get on with the business of developing cohousing.

4. ***Consider whether or not you have enough members***. If not, consider ways to do reach out to people who might want to join you. Also consider the idea of merging with other core groups in your area . If you are a relatively large group already, begin to formulate (through a committee) policies for new members. What do you need from members in terms of time and money? Be aware that these needs will change as the group develops and becomes more focused.

5. ***Create a business development plan*** so that you have an overview of the tasks to be undertaken in this pre-development stage of planning and feasibility analysis. A comprehensive plan will help your group to identify the need for committees and their research tasks, and to monitor accomplishments.

6. ***Have Fun!***