

Getting Started: The first 7 steps

By Rob Sandelin. © Community Resource Guide 1997. Reproduction and distribution of this material for profit, without the permission of the author, is prohibited. Contact the author at Floriferous@msn.com

These are some of the elements to consider working on in the first months you spend together. This assumes you have a core group of at least 2-3 households.

1. A vision/goals statement which defines the intentions and directions of the community.

This should clearly state what you hope to achieve as a group. Give it to every future member.

2. A group decision and communications process. You need to answer the following questions:

- **Who are members?** What is the process and qualifications to become a member? Most communities require people to attend a minimum number of functions and be approved by the members. Some communities have found that Investment = commitment and require a non-refundable investment to weed out the "just looking" folks from the serious. \$100 will clearly identify the real committed from the onlookers. If members will need to invest several thousand dollars eventually, a hundred bucks is really not very much money. Make this a non-refundable investment.
- **How are decisions made?** Who gets to make them? Start with a 3/4 majority vote. Learn about consensus before you commit your group decision making to it. Allow only members to vote but allow anyone to offer ideas and opinions.
- **How will meetings be run?** Who gets to talk, when? Having someone hold the role of facilitator helps enormously. [The meeting resources page](#) has some good books which illustrate and teach about facilitation.
- **How will conflicts be handled/resolved?** When we don't agree how will we work it out? Holding lots of parties and rituals together will grow bonds and make conflicts easier. Family counselors could be a mediator in a dispute, or identify other people in advance who could help the group make a tough decision.
- **How will records be kept?** Who takes notes, how are they distributed and to whom. Start by taking turns taking notes, and encourage those that are good at it. At the end of the meeting be sure to assign any tasks to specific volunteers with dates due and read quickly through the notes about any decisions made so what is in the notes is accurate and agreed to.
- **How will new members be brought up to speed?** Record your decisions in a decision document and hand it out to new members. When you get to about a dozen people assign new members a "buddy" who explains the processes and history.

3. A financial structure. You should have answers to the following questions:

- How will expenses get paid?
- Who will keep records of what has been paid?
- Is there a membership fee? How much?
- Will payments be refunded? If so, how?

4. Incorporate. It costs very little to incorporate and this protects your personal assets. Being incorporated also lends legitimacy to your organization in the eyes of banks and other agencies.

5. Based on the decisions made in number 2, write them down as bylaws for your organization. These will be changed several times - the purpose is to write down your agreements so you don't forget them and to create a record you can refer to.

6. Get a bank account. Once you incorporate you will be able to get a tax ID number and a corporate bank account. Use this for all expenditures and put someone responsible in charge of keeping track. Remember, once you start spending peoples money you are a legal entity in the eyes of the courts and the tax man. Lots of communities have gotten in trouble from bad accounting.

7. Collect assessments from members. Start with a small sum, like \$20 a month. Along with an initial \$100 investment this will identify those who are committed and also painlessly raise some startup capital for mailing, legal paperwork, advertising, etc.

Resources

The Northwest Intentional Communities association. Informal association of intentional communities in Washington and Oregon. Publishes Community Resources newsletter which has community listings, information practical aspects of community, cohousing updates on local groups. Also twice annual gatherings of community are organized. Meets monthly in Seattle area. E-mail nica@ic.org

Cohousing Magazine National newsletter for, of and about cohousing. Includes regional contacts and articles as well as general interest. Quarterly. \$60 per year. The Cohousing Network www.cohousing.org

Communities Magazine: Journal of Cooperative Living Now published by the Fellowship for Intentional Community, recent issues focus on leadership, community updates, women in community. An excellent forum of communities, for communities, by communities. Quarterly, \$20 yr. Back issues available. Communities magazine FIC 138-CM Twin Oaks Rd. Louisa, VA 23093 phone 800-462-8240