

IS COHOUSING RIGHT FOR YOU?

This article is originally from the [Portland Parent](#), July 1997, with some changes to reflect the situation at Wasatch Commons.

Charles Maclean, a spokesperson for the [Trillium Hollow](#) project, readily admits that, while the cohousing arrangement may sound ideal, "it's not for everybody." In fact, most satisfied cohousing members share a number of what might be termed "personality traits." "Are You a Cohousing Person?" a checklist developed by Trillium Hollow, highlights five characteristics required of most cohousing residents:

- A willingness to think and act for the good of the whole.
- Tolerance for different points of view.
- A willingness to work out conflicts and not hold grudges.
- An adventurous and courageous spirit.
- A generally social nature, but this is not strictly necessary. introverted individuals can also benefit from and contribute to a cohousing community.

Here are some additional questions to ask yourself and your family before signing on the dotted line:

Are you extremely introverted?

"If you're extremely introverted and need lots and lots of private time, it may not be for you," notes Kelly Scott of Trillium Hollow

Are you extremely extroverted?

"Extroverts have a problem because they don't know how to protect their privacy," explains Chris Hanson, Trillium Hollow project manager. "They take a while to adjust."

Do you subscribe to the core cohousing values?

According to Maclean, those values often involve voluntary simplicity, "living lightly on the land," safety and security issues, and intergenerational diversity.

Do you abhor meetings?

Maclean recalls someone saying, "Cohousing would be great if it didn't take so many meetings. "In fairness to the cohousing concept, most experts point out that once the projects are built, meeting schedules become less frantic. Still, meetings are at the heart of cohousing life.

Do you crave ample private space?

"Those who want a large house with a big lawn around it ... cohousing aren't for them," notes George Stone from Cascadia Commons.

WHAT IS COHOUSING?

(From www.cohousing.org)

Cohousing is a type of collaborative housing in which residents actively participate in the design and operation of their own neighborhoods.

Cohousing residents are consciously committed to living as a community. The physical design encourages both social contact and individual space. Private homes contain all the features of conventional homes, but residents also have access to common facilities such as open space, courtyards, a playground and a common house.

OLD-FASHIONED SENSE OF NEIGHBORHOOD

Cohousing communities are usually designed as attached or single-family homes along one or more pedestrian streets or clustered around a courtyard. They range in size from 7 to 67 residences, the majority of them housing 20 to 40 households. Regardless of the size of the community, there are many opportunities for casual meetings between neighbors, as well as for deliberate gatherings such as celebrations, clubs and business meetings.

The common house is the social center of a community, with a large dining room and kitchen, lounge, recreational facilities, children's spaces, and frequently a guest room, workshop and laundry room. Communities usually serve optional group meals in the common house at least two or three times a week.

The need for community members to take care of common property builds a sense of working together, trust and support. Because neighbors hold a commitment to a relationship with one another, almost all cohousing communities use consensus as the basis for group decision-making.

WHAT MAKES COHOUSING COMMUNITIES UNIQUE

The cohousing idea originated in Denmark, and was promoted in the U.S. by architects Kathryn Mccamant and Charles Durrett in the early 1980s. The Danish concept of "living community" has spread quickly.

Worldwide, there are now hundreds of cohousing communities, expanding from Denmark into the U.S., Canada, Australia, Sweden, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Belgium, Austria and elsewhere.

In a cohousing community, you know who lives six houses down because you eat common meals with them, decide how to allocate homeowners dues and gratefully accept a ride from them when your car's in the shop. You begin to trust them enough to leave your 4-year-old with them. You listen to what they have to say, even if you don't agree with them at first, and you sense that you, too, are being heard.

Cohousing residents generally aspire to "improve the world, one neighborhood at a time. "This desire to make a difference often becomes a stated mission, as the websites of many communities demonstrate. For example, at Sunward Cohousing near Ann Arbor, MI, the goal is to create a place "where lives are simplified, the earth is respected, diversity is welcomed, children play together in safety, and living in community with neighbors comes naturally. "At Winslow Cohousing near Seattle, the aim is to have "a minimal impact on the earth and create a place in which all residents are equally valued as part of the community." At EcoVillage at Ithaca, NY, the site of two adjoining cohousing neighborhoods, the goal is "to explore and model innovative approaches to ecological and social sustainability."

Many other communities have visions that focus specifically on the value of building community. Sonora Cohousing in Tucson, AZ, seeks "a diversity of backgrounds, ages and opinions, with our one shared value being the commitment to working out our problems and finding consensus solutions that satisfy all members." Tierra Nueva Cohousing in Oceana, CA, exists "because each of us desires a greater sense of community, as well as strong interaction with and support from our neighbors."

Commonly Asked Questions about the Cohousing Concept

What follows are some of the frequently asked questions and answers about cohousing.

Until people have experienced life in a cohousing community, they often have questions and concerns about the details of daily living, but once they have moved in, they find their concerns mitigated by the trust, respect and commitment neighbors feel for one another. In this atmosphere, long discussions of policy give way to human interactions.

Is there a screening process?

Who decides who lives there?

Most cohousing communities do not screen new residents. If potential residents understand the nature of the community and their expectations for their own participation, they will be able to choose whether or not the community meets their needs.

Does everyone have to eat in the common house?

Participation in common meals is voluntary; residents take part as often or as seldom as they want.

How does resale work?

When cohousing homes are owned as condominiums, resale is handled by the individual. When the development is owned as a cooperative, the community is more involved in resale. In Europe, homes in existing cohousing communities are highly prized--buyers receive the benefits without all the development work!

What about sweat equity? Can it save a lot of money?

In most cases, it is not financially beneficial for residents to do much building themselves. Construction schedules as well as insurance requirements make resident labor impractical. However, residents can often save money by installing landscaping and completing some interior finish work.

What has been the response of planners and city officials?

Most are enthusiastic about the cohousing concept once they understand it fully. Some cities that were initially skeptical are now proud to be cohousing pioneers. Future resi-

dents must provide thorough and ongoing education to city planners in order to pave the way for obtaining planning approvals.

What is the ideal size of a cohousing community?

Anywhere from 12 up to 36 households seems to work best if a community is any smaller, its smooth operation depends too much on specific individuals; if larger, some of the sense of community can be lost.

What about pets?

Each community must decide its own policy based on the size of the site, etc. Most communities are happy to accommodate pets.

How does the community deal with differences in food tastes and requirements?

Again, each community creates its own policy based on the specific needs of its residents. It is usually fairly easy to work with a variety of requirements, especially since residents are not dependent on common meals.

How is a community managed?

Residents manage their communities through a homeowners' association (for condominiums) or a board of directors (for cooperatives). Residents form committees to carry out the work of the community.

How much participation is required?

Each community must decide for itself. A minimum level typically includes cooking dinner in the common house once per month and participating on a work committee or two.

Does cohousing mean attending meetings for the rest of my life?

After the hard work of the planning stage and the transitional first months after moving in, most communities need to meet formally only once a month. The planning process acts as "time in the bank," making residents' lives more convenient later.

What about rentals?

Cohousing rentals are not yet widely available. Few cohousing households can afford to own a second unit, especially if the monthly costs cannot be covered by the rental income. Several communities have had a few rental units, owned by residents who intend to move in later or who are away for a period of time. Most residents agree that rental units are a positive addition to a community.

Are cohousing homes more affordable than other types of housing?

At this point, not typically. Land, construction, consultant, and financing costs are similar in any new development. Residents can save money by doing their own landscaping or taking on some development tasks. However, they may incur extra expenses owing to a more lengthy design and approval process, numerous possible delays or setbacks. Without some type of outside subsidies, cohousing homes are usually comparably priced with other homes in the area.

What if I don't like someone in the group?

It is essential for everyone in a cohousing community to like each other. In fact, a variety of personalities adds interest to community life. Cohousing residents need only share a similar goal of making their lives more efficient and enjoyable through cooperating with their neighbors.

Questions and Answers from Appendix of *COHOUSING: A. Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*. Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, 1994.