WaCoHo Consensus Process & Practice

WHY CONSENSUS?

When people choose to live in community, they commit to a relationship with each other. The value of this relationship, and the energy that goes into maintaining it, is what creates community. People choose this lifestyle expressly to create and experience a sense of belonging to the group. This is the fundamental reason why almost all cohousing communities use consensus, and why it works as well as it does.

Consensus works well when people extend their relationships to each other through talking and listening. Consensus takes time and effort, honest communication and a willingness to trust the relationship. The process can become lengthy (and sometimes intense) as community members test their individual desires and boundaries against the community's best interests.

How Wasatch Commons Uses Consensus

Like most cohousing groups, Wasatch Commons Cohousing uses consensus as our primary decision making practice and All Community Meetings (ACMs) as our primary decision making vehicles. For this reason, we ask ALL adult members to attend ACMs as regularly as possible. Indeed, our bylaws require each adult community member to attend a least half of our scheduled ACMs. Meetings are designed to consider community concerns, discuss proposals and/or other business, and to catch up with neighbors.

At the ACM

All members treat each other with compassion. At meetings, we remember that our primary concern is the collective well-being, and we attempt to engage discussions with open minds and civility. ACMs usually begin with check-in; followed by announcements. Discussion follows and most meetings end with a check-out. We are committed to beginning and ending on time. Ideally, the following ACM facilitation roles rotate between members of the community.

Facilitator

Conducts the meeting, sets the tone, keeps discussion on track, and creates a space for every participant to be heard. The facilitator, ideally, should stay "empty", channeling, rather than engaging the discussion. Usually, if a person has a strong attachment to something being discussed, s/he should not take on the role of facilitator at that particular meeting.

Notetaker

Keeps minutes of important decisions made at ACM. Records attendance. Transcribes minutes and disperses them electronically to entire community. Posts minutes in Common House.

Keeper of the Heart

Pays attention to the tone of the meeting. Measures participation and emotions. Intervenes if someone is not being heard or if tension arises that prohibits the continuation of discussion.

Participants

All attendees at ACM are part of the process. Everyone should take an active role in the meeting through measuring their own comments, staying on track, and maintaining civility. Anyone can call for "Point of Process" to clarify a meeting's procedure. All members should assist with "Keeping the Heart".

FOUNDATION UPON WHICH CONSENSUS IS BUILT

Consensus supports the greater good. Each individual's commitment to honor the best interests of the group is the key element for making consensus work. Reaching consensus means that everyone present has given permission for a decision or action. Agreements made by consensus are self-enforced and rarely require anything more than reminders to ensure compliance. If you don't follow through with your agreements, you risk jeopardizing your relationships and sense of community.

For consensus to work well, the process must be conducted in an environment which promotes trust, respect, and skill sharing. The following are principles which, when valued and respected, encourage and build consensus.

Trust

Foremost is the need for trust. Without some amount of trust, there will be no cooperation or nonviolent resolution to conflict. For trust to flourish; it is desirable for individuals to be willing to examine their attitudes and be open to new ideas. Acknowledgement and appreciation of personal and cultural differences promote trust. Neither approval nor friendships are necessary for a good working relationship. By developing trust, the process of consensus encourages the intellectual and emotional development of the individuals within a group.

Respect

It is everyone's responsibility to show respect to one another. People feel respected when everyone listens, when they are not interrupted, when their ideas are taken seriously. Respect for emotional as well as logical concerns promotes the kind of environment necessary for developing consensus. To promote respect, it is important to distinguish between an action which causes a problem and the person who did the action, between the deed and the doer. We must criticize the act, not the person. Even if you think the person *is* the problem, responding that way never resolves anything.

Unity of Purpose

Unity of purpose is a basic understanding about the goals and purpose of the group. Of course, there will be varying opinions on the best way to accomplish these goals. However, there must be a unifying base, a common starting point, which is recognized and accepted by all.

Nonviolence

Nonviolent decision makers use their power to achieve goals while respecting differences and cooperating with others. In this environment, it is considered violent to use power to dominate or control the group process. It is understood that the power of revealing your truth is the maximum force allowed to persuade others to your point of view.

Self Empowerment

It is easy for people to unquestioningly rely on authorities and experts to do their thinking and decision making for them. If members of a group delegate their authority, intentionally or not, they fail to accept responsibility for the group's decisions. Consensus promotes and depends upon self-empowerment. Anyone can and should express their concerns.

Active Participation

We all have an inalienable right to express our own best thoughts. We decide for ourselves what is right and wrong. Since consensus is a process of synthesis, not competition, all sincere comments are important and valuable. If ideas are put forth as the speaker's property and individuals are strongly attached to their

opinions, consensus will be extremely difficult. Stubbornness, closedmindedness, and possessiveness lead to defensive and argumentative behavior that disrupts the process. For active participation to occur, it is necessary to promote trust by creating an atmosphere in which every contribution is considered valuable. With encouragement, each person can develop knowledge and experience, a sense of responsibility and competency, and the ability to participate.

Equal Access to Power
Because of personal differences (experience, assertiveness, social conditioning, access to information, etc.) and political disparities, some people inevitably have more effective power than others. To balance this inequity, everyone needs to consciously attempt to creatively share power, skills, and information. Avoid hierarchical structures that allow some individuals to assume undemocratic power over others. Egalitarian and accountable structures promote universal access to power.

Patience
Consensus cannot be rushed. Often, it functions smoothly, producing effective, stable results. Sometimes, when difficult situations arise, consensus requires more time to allow for the creative interplay of ideas. During these times, patience is more advantageous than tense, urgent, or aggressive behavior. Consensus is possible as long as each individual acts patiently and respectfully.

THE PROCESS OF CONSENSUS
The individual is responsible for expressing concerns; the group is responsible for resolving them. The group decides whether a concern is legitimate; the individual decides whether *to* block or stand aside.

All concerns are important and need to be resolved. It is not appropriate for a person to come to a meeting planning to block a proposal or, during discussion, to express their concerns as major objections or blocking concerns. Often, during discussion, the person learns additional information which resolves the concern. Sometimes, after expressing the concern, someone is able to creatively resolve it by thinking of something new. It often happens that a concern which seems to be extremely problematic when it is first mentioned turns out to be easily resolved. Sometimes the reverse happens and a seemingly minor concern brings forth much larger concerns. The following is a description of different types of concerns and how they affect individuals and the group.

Minor Concerns or Reservations
Concerns which can be addressed and resolved by making small changes in the proposal can be called minor concerns. The person supports the proposal, but has an idea for improvement.

When a person disagrees with the proposal in part, but consents to the overall idea, the person has a reservation. The person is not completely satisfied with the proposal, but is generally supportive. This kind of concern can usually be resolved through discussion. Sometimes, it is enough for the person to express the concern and feel that it was heard, without any actual resolution.

Larger Concerns
When a person does not agree with the proposal, the group allows that person to try and persuade it to see the wisdom of the disagreement. If the group is not persuaded or the disagreement cannot be resolved, the person might choose to stand aside and allow the group to go forward. The person and the group are agreeing to disagree, regarding each point of view with mutual respect. Occasionally, it is a concern which has no resolution; the person does not feel the need to block the decision, but wants to express the concern and lack of support for the proposal.

Blocking

A blocking concern must be based on a generally recognized principle, not personal preference, or it must be essential to the entire group's well-being. Before a concern is considered to be blocking, the group must have already accepted the validity of the concern and a reasonable attempt must have been made to resolve it. If legitimate concerns remain unresolved and the person has not agreed to stand aside, consensus is blocked.

IMPEDIMENTS TO CONSENSUS

Lack of Training

It is necessary to train people in the theory and practice of consensus. Until consensus is a common form of decision making in our society, new members will need some way of learning about the process. It is important to offer regular opportunities for training. If learning about Formal Consensus is not made easily accessible, it will limit full participation and create inequities which undermine this process. Also, training provides opportunities for people to improve their skills, particularly facilitation skills, in a setting where experimentation and role-plays can occur.

CONSENSUS INSPIRES CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

Consensus requires more creativity than majority voting, often resulting in better solutions. With majority voting, your task is to create a solution that meets the needs of the required majority.

Once the majority of voters have gained the necessary number of votes, they don't need or want further discussion or new ideas. Advocates of a particular issue often lobby group members ahead of time and know the outcome prior to the vote, so there is little point in coming to the process with a better idea. People have to get used to letting go and looking for a solution that will work for the group - then the process has the potential to be excitingly creative.