

# HOW TO START A NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

Hints on Creating a Process That Makes Sense  
for YOU

Nancy Thompson



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## ABOUT THIS E-BOOK

This book came about because patterns of organizing a community or neighborhood association are actually quite similar, at least across the U.S. This holds true whether the neighborhood is rich or poor, scattered or dense, rural or exurban or suburban or urban, educated or uneducated, and diverse or homogeneous. The style and tone that neighborhood associations assume will be quite different, but the tensions about how structured the group needs to be are more related to personality types and previous experience than they are to other demographic characteristics. “Demographics” refers to traits such as gender, ethnicity, age, home ownership, place of residence, and so forth.

Throughout this book, almost all of the photos show one particular neighborhood, in an effort to inspire you to look, really look, for both commonalities and variety in your own surroundings. Renewing your ability to “see” your own neighborhood is essential to the success of your organizing project.

The style of the book is chatty and conversational, like our website. You may find it helpful to skip around in the book to find sub-topics and resources of particular relevance. We’ve never yet been involved in helping to form a neighborhood association where the process followed a neat ten-step pattern. Each situation is unique.

Principal author Nancy Thompson has been an urban planner, community development director, housing and code enforcement official, and community and neighborhood volunteer in many types of communities and situations. She is a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners, holds a Master’s degree in urban planning from the University of Illinois, and most recently served the Executive Director of St. Louis Association of Community Organizations, known locally as SLACO, before deciding to devote full-time to her efforts as content editor of [www.useful-community-development.org](http://www.useful-community-development.org). She also has been a leader in her neighborhoods, once was president of the League of Women Voters of St. Louis, and has been an activist in environmental, mental health, and faith-based groups. Nancy has done additional graduate work in social work and political science.

Without the steady comments and candid reactions of colleagues contributing to the website, this book would not exist. Many sections of the book first appeared on various pages of the website, but this book offers additional content and examples not available anywhere else.

Nancy’s experience is only in the U.S., so comments from elsewhere are most welcome. Comments of all types may be addressed to nancy at [useful-community-development.org](http://useful-community-development.org). Even better, your comment or question, together with website authors’ answers and reactions, can become a page on our website by inputting your question or comment at [www.useful-community-development.org/neighborhood-quality-of-life.html](http://www.useful-community-development.org/neighborhood-quality-of-life.html).

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## DECIDING WHETHER TO START A GROUP

For some reason the thought of banding together with your neighbors has crossed your mind. This book helps you decide what kind of association is needed—temporary or permanent, simple or elaborate, unstructured or structured.

Let's be honest—usually this idea comes up when someone wants to socialize more with neighbors or when problems or opportunities apply to more than one household or one tiny group of households. The problem-based organization is more common; many people do not base their social connections on geography to any great extent now in the U.S., even though in other cultures, that may be quite different.

In this book, we'll refer to the initial problem or group of problems that cause you to think of starting a neighborhood organization as the "first problem," which needs to evolve as quickly as possible into the "first issue."

Actually our friends from community organizing would say that we are using those terms too loosely. Being more disciplined, we should say that a problem is a broad area of concern, while an issue is born when a vision for a solution to a problem solidifies.

Once you see a problem, ask a few neighbors if they also think there's a problem. A problem need not be some terrible obstacle; your "problem" might be that you don't know your neighbors. If no one you talk with sees the problem, then you need to identify another problem or abandon the idea of starting a neighborhood association. Sometimes this process takes months, but it is so rewarding in the end.

While you can sometimes bring together one great meeting around discussion of a problem, if you want to organize people on a more permanent basis by forming a neighborhood group, you need an issue. We will just assume that you, and a couple of others you have talked with about starting a group, have the smarts to formulate a problem into an issue. Don't be fearful; the group can and will refine the way you frame the issue many times, so just start with a tentative issue proposal.

**Make no mistake about it: we think your first issue should be tightly focused.**

Make no mistake about it: we think your first issue should be tightly focused. Even if you live in a neighborhood that has been trashed by poverty, crime, drugs, abandonment, and disinvestment, wrap that into one issue name that represents part of the solution to your multi-faceted problem, and stay with it.

## Do You Need to Start a Neighborhood Association?

It takes plenty of energy to start a neighborhood association, so be sure you really need to do it. We suggest some key questions to determine whether a neighborhood association would be likely to succeed:

- How many people are affected by the first issue? The issue needs to impact a fairly high proportion of the residents, even if only indirectly.
- Are these people resident property owners, renters, business owners, business customers, or institutional stakeholders such as non-profit or faith-based groups? In other words, people who have a direct stake in the future of the neighborhood need to be impacted.
- How motivated would these different groups probably be to help solve the immediate problem or problems to which your group is reacting? This is a slightly different question; sometimes people who are affected by something are not motivated strongly enough to inconvenience themselves with active participation in a neighborhood association.
- If a large percentage of the residents are transient (probably anything more than 20% is a major contingent), how much effort can you expect from them? Usually the answer will be that they will not work very hard, but of course there are exceptions.
- If renters or even fast-turnover homeowners form a large component of the population, are there any special circumstances that would make them likely to help? (Examples might be that the original problem affects them more than it affects long-term residents, or perhaps the “transients” are college students at an institution with an appetite for activism.)



- How passionate about your first issue or issues are those who are likely to help (an as-yet undetermined percentage of the long-term residents plus any segment of the more transient population that might be especially motivated)?
- Are you, or is someone you know and can identify right now, able to give the new organization the time and effort it will require? The initial organizing will be quite a project for more than one person for three months to a year.
- Are you certain that no existing organization can be redirected or revived to tackle your first problem? Even if you have your doubts about an existing organization's fortitude to solve the first problem, starting a new organization is both work intensive and potentially divisive if there is an organization available that you might work within.

**Starting a new organization is both work intensive and potentially divisive if there is an organization available that you might work within.**

Estimating the time and effort that will be required is a key factor in whether your venture into creating some type of neighborhood or community organization will be time well spent. Here are the factors to consider:

- Are the people you are working with "joiners"? Do they readily belong to interest-based clubs, faith-based organizations, political groups, civic groups, sports leagues, or organized social activities? If so, your job will be easier than in those areas where "people stay pretty much to themselves."
- Do neighbors have at least a passing acquaintance with each other already? If not, the first activity needs to include a getting acquainted component, and it will take longer to get the ball rolling.
- Is there a fairly good level of trust in the community, in which case your job will be easier, or is the community divided into factions or riddled with crimes that make people suspicious of one another?
- Is the "first problem" compelling? In other words, regular gunfire may be more compelling than noise from boom boxes.
- Is the "first problem" something that people will be at least slightly optimistic about solving? People may feel totally helpless to stop regular gunfire if that activity is gang-related or drug-related, as seems likely. So they may be too cynical or too fearful to become involved, even though the issue is enormously compelling.

- Is there a history of failed attempts at starting an organization, whether temporary or permanent? If you want to start a permanent organization with a long agenda, but there have been four fizzled attempts in recent years to start a neighborhood association or launch a single-issue campaign, your chances of success are low. In this instance, look for a highly charismatic individual or two to lead, and for an approach entirely different from what has failed earlier.
- Are there multiple individuals who are capable of running a meeting and organizing an activity, or would you have to do most things yourself and have very few people capable of substituting for you? If leadership can rotate, chances of success are much better, especially if you have in mind building a permanent organization.
- Is there enough discontent to inspire loyalty to an organization? A very common problem in suburban settings that are idyllic, except for one or two annoyances, is that people are simply too content and too busy to devote energy to resolving one or two problems that seem minor or too difficult to solve to them.
- Is there a natural, comfortable, and neutral meeting place? If so, it will be easier to convince people to attend face-to-face meetings--which are still essential at the neighborhood level. If the answer is no, then of course you will need to invest some time into finding a place that will feel good to the neighbors.

## Setting Up a Second Community Organization

Now let's talk about what happens when there are rival neighborhood or community organizations in the same geography. Some of the readers of this e-book will be thinking of starting a rival organization because the existing organization does not tackle the right problems or include the right people. Perhaps the existing organization is stale and boring, and you want action. Or the existing organization has burned its bridges with City Hall, and you feel it will never be effective.

All of these are valid concerns. At least in the U.S., we never seem to feel that there are too many organizations. In the interest of efficiency and effectiveness though, do try to reform the existing organization first, if you feel there are any possibilities in that area. Try not to form a second or third organization simply because you are a personal or political rival of the leader of the other organization. Think of your community first.

If you have tried to work within the existing structure and it is not meeting the community's needs or your own need to dominate or have visibility, then you will need to start another organization.

Be as charitable as you can to the other group by defining your mission somewhat differently. Be creative about giving your organization a different purpose. The other organization will have a head start in terms of community backing and name recognition. Explain your niche and your rationale for starting another group carefully to the governments or other powerful forces in the community, such as major businesses or the press.

No matter how tempting, try not to define yourselves simply in terms of being the antithesis of the other group, unless of course the other group has done something downright illegal or fraudulent and has become a scandal.



If you are picking up the ball because of a scandal in another group, be sure to differentiate yourselves right away from the problem that caused the downfall of the other organization. For instance, if there was financial mismanagement, emphasize your financial safeguards, and even make an extra effort to assure that these measures remain in place through incorporating those provisions into bylaws or another rules or policy document.

## **A Word of Encouragement**

Now that we have tried to challenge your enthusiasm for starting a neighborhood association by pointing out the work involved, it is only fitting that we also encourage you. Organizing a neighborhood group is one of life's opportunities for fulfillment and for truly seeing the fruits of your labor in a setting you love. Most of you will consider yourselves amateurs at this work, and that's totally fine.

The word amateur in English comes from the Latin word, *amare*, to love. Loving your neighborhood is really the only qualification for becoming a neighborhood leader.

To create something requires action. If you have an idea and don't act on it, you are only showing imagination. To be creative, you need to actually do the work of trying to make something. Do something and see what happens.



## The Steering Committee Approach

Now that you have estimated whether this is an easy project or a difficult one, take a hard look in the mirror to see if you have what it takes to begin this project by yourself. If you have done something similar before, and have confidence you can do it again, then just start, enlisting an informal steering committee simultaneously with undertaking other tasks.

If you lack experience or feel shaky about organizing the association, that's when you definitely should have a committee regardless of others factors to be discussed below.

You should do a little preliminary thinking about whether you are initiating a brief campaign or a permanent organization. The longer the life of the organization you want to create, the more effort you want to exert in building potential supporters into a well-rounded and complete committee that will make the first invitation to the entire neighborhood. Even a three-person committee will produce a result more likely to resonate with the neighborhood than your own pitch.

If you are threatened with a bad development now and will need to protest in the next month or so, it is probably better to risk being perceived as egotistical to get the ball rolling quickly without thinking through all types of people who should be on the committee, contacting them, and waiting for a response.

Even in this situation, if you have a longer timeframe, try to recruit at least one teammate and if possible, a committee widely representative of the types of people you would like to see involved. You can add committee members as you go.

If you do not face an immediate threat and can afford two or three months to think about the organization, by all means take advantage of that fact. Ask acquaintances until you find one other person who is interested and motivated to help you organize, and then the two of you can brainstorm a list of people to ask to serve on a temporary steering committee. Divide up the work of making the personal appeal and come together in two to four weeks to see what happened and brainstorm again.

When you have five or six strong people, that is large enough for most circumstances. If all your people are inexperienced, a larger number is desirable. If there are multiple groups or interests that you want to see represented on this committee, continue recruiting until you fill all the niches you have in your mind. You may want to think of diversity of age, ethnicity, social class, residential or business status, geographic representation, renters and owners, and so forth. This would be especially true if the identity of the committee is to become public at some point, as it should and probably will.

If you decide to assemble a committee, figure out where and when you will meet first. If you are planning a small meeting and most of your neighbors know you, there couldn't be a better meeting place than your house. However, if the community consists mostly of "non-joiners" who don't know each other, a more public place is an easier sell than a personal residence.



A neutral meeting place might be a coffee house, park or other outdoor space if the weather is suitable, a school if open to neighborhood activity (a big “if” in the U.S. right now), a public library (often more promising than schools), or a community room that can be reserved from your municipality, a non-profit organization, or a business. Many times churches, synagogues, mosques, or other places of worship may be available, especially if your community is of uniform faith, the congregation has a reputation for being community-friendly, or a committee member is very active there.

The meeting time usually will need to be a week night or weekend, unless you are organizing a retirement community. If people are inclined to leave town on the weekends, you will need to find a week night. Friday nights usually find people wanting to change the pace of the week, and are poor choice.

The steering committee meeting should be very informal, and almost leaderless. The instigator should explain his or her motivations and then let the conversation evolve.

### **Inviting People to Participate**

Now let’s assume that your committee, if you have one, and you have come to agreement about calling a first meeting open to the general public to see who is interested.

Just like your steering committee meeting, this will need to be a week night or weekend meeting. For week nights, you will have to experiment with what time “after dinner” occurs in your neighborhood; take an informal poll. In a few neighborhoods where people keep fairly uniform working hours, you might want to have the meeting immediately after work, but if you do that be sure to provide a snack with the right mix of protein and carbs to keep the energy level up.

To invite people to the first meeting, make some flyers, knock on the doors, or put out the phone calls. State your best case first—what is the most urgent problem, keeping in mind excluding things over which people may feel completely powerless. Keep the problem statement simple; a list of 25 issues you think need to be addressed won’t attract as many people as a list of three issues that seem to you to be the most widespread and obvious in their effects.

**Keep your problem statement simple.**

When the group assembles, the list is likely to expand rapidly to the 25 issues anyway, but the people who suggest the 22 problems you did not use on your flyer already will have felt they made a contribution! And that buy-in to the process is priceless.

Certainly if you have secured firm agreement of prominent or well-known people to participate in your committee, or maybe people with organizational prestige, such as the school principal, tell everyone about that fact. This endorsement can mean instant credibility for your organizing effort.

As to which method of contact is best, that depends on the community and how large the area is. If you have 20,000 people, that rules out knocking on every door and delivering the message face to face.

But if you have 40 or 150 households, door knocking might be both feasible and the most effective contact you could dream of. However, if these households are constantly on the go taking their kids to soccer, piano lessons, birthday parties, and out to eat, you still might need to opt for the flyer method.

In the few areas where you already have everyone’s name and phone number, you may want to try phone contact if you can state your first problem and an invitation into voice mail very concisely so that everyone will know what you mean. E-mail is an option in situations when a complete list is available. Social media works when a Facebook group already is well underway and widely followed.

Just be careful not to exclude seniors or those who may not have computers at home.

If you have a local newspaper that will publish such information, by all means write a nice article telling who, what, when, where, and why you are meeting. You will understand the attention span of your neighbors, but when households are busy and calendar-driven, time the article to appear about three weeks before the meeting. Where people are less likely to have other plans, this could be two weeks ahead of time. If you are too early, people will forget, but if you are too late, they will have made other commitments.



If you have a contact at the newspaper, send your information to that person personally; otherwise, address it to Editor, or Editor of a particular section where you would like to see the article appear. If you know how, place the article in press release format, but if not, send the article anyway with a short note requesting that it be published.

In brief, to make it a press release, in the upper right hand corner, type the contact person's name, phone number on the next line, and either the phrase "For immediate release" if they can publish it as soon as they receive it, or "For release on (date)" if you want to send it in advance for some reason but don't want it published until later. Then center a headline you would like to see, and proceed with your story. At the end of each page, type and center the word "More" and at the end of the story, keyboard and center the word "End."

Most press releases are sent by e-mail, so search the newspaper for an e-mail address and attach the press release as a Word file. This allows easy editing for the lazy or stressed editor. Also paste the press release into the body of the e-mail, as a few outlets have been burned by attachments so many times that they are unwilling to open them.

If none of these are practical, flyers and posters are a great option. You may be able to succeed with posters and word-of-mouth if you have common places, such as a grocery store, coffee shop, club house, or transit stop, where almost everyone goes over the course of a week or two. To boost this strategy, combine it with making sure that leaders of faith-based organizations, store owners, and neighborhood leaders and characters know about your meeting and will spread the word.

## **XYZ Neighborhood Association**

### **FIRST ANNUAL NEIGHBORHOOD GRILL-OUT Friday, June 1, 6 p.m. Belmont Park**

**Bring meat or veggies to grill, your own plates and utensils, lawn chairs or blankets.  
Beverages, chips, and dessert furnished!**

**Questions? Call Judy at 555-1555.**

Placing a flyer on each door or car windshield is a good strategy if, and only if:

- You have sufficient person-power to distribute the flyers,
- You can design an attractive flyer on colored paper or using color printing, and
- People in your immediate area are not so accustomed to flyers, as some folks in city neighborhoods may be, that they recycle them before they even look to see what is being advertised.

If you have the budget, obviously you could do a mailer to each home. This may be the most realistic strategy in rural areas.

The mailer would be more effective if it were personally addressed and placed in an envelope rather than simply folded and addressed with a typed label directed to Resident. If you take this route, the expense means that you should go the extra mile to make sure it is perceived as semi-personal mail rather than "junk mail." This means addressing by hand if you have only 25 to 50 mailers. If the junk mail appearance is unavoidable, because you have a large number of mailers and have access to a bulk mail permit, be sure to stamp the front of the item where the return address is found with some gripping message about the first problem.

## EARLY MEETINGS

### The First Meeting

If you are brand new to leading organizations, you may want to build your confidence by reading about conducting meetings in general. There's no need to go overboard on Robert's Rules of Order and parliamentary maneuvering, but find your group's comfort level with formality or informality, and then help the group stick to the decisions it makes.

If people are generally not acquainted with each other and you expect a small turnout for the first meeting open to the whole neighborhood, going around the room inviting everyone to respond to an ice breaker question is appropriate. This question might be “How did you come to live in this neighborhood?” or “If you could wave a magic wand and change one thing about the neighborhood, what would it be?”

If the group is single-issue driven and perhaps temporary, the get acquainted question is to ask people how they feel about or how they heard about the issue.

Have an ideal outcome of the meeting in mind. Whether or not you share this outcome with the group depends on its nature. For example, if you have a process outcome, such as “Everyone will feel they have an opportunity to speak about the crime problem,” you can share that with the group at the beginning of the meeting.

If, however, you and/or the leadership team wants to see a specific decision outcome but wants it to appear that the decision percolates up from the group, obviously the leader would not share the desired outcome with the group. In that case, clear your mind of specific outcomes and expect a general positive outcome such as “the group makes the best possible decision about whether or not to fight City Hall about the speed bump issue.” More about outcomes later.

**For the first meeting and every subsequent meeting, have an ideal outcome of the meeting in mind.**

At the first meeting, be sure to discuss these three matters:

- Do others perceive the same first problem as you do? The same way that you do? If there are people who perceive it differently, make especially sure that you give them time to express themselves.

Do this for two reasons: (1) You do not want them to go away angry about the process, and (2) You might hear a different viewpoint or different information that will help to refine the definition of the problem.

Most people can bear disagreement with their opinions and perceptions, but if their sense of fairness is violated (a “process” violation), it will be hard to win them over to your cause. Indeed, you might generate a counter-group. Try to keep those who disagree within your group, because counteracting an opposition group that springs up will really dissipate your energies.

- Is this thought of as a temporary group to fight one threat or solve one relatively finite problem, or is this thought of as a permanent or somewhat permanent group requiring several years of effort? As the organizer, not only should you think about this as extensively as you can before the meeting, but you must be sensitive to what others think. (Temporary groups are discussed more extensively beginning [here](#).)

If you want a permanent organization because you see multiple issues to be addressed and values to be achieved through a permanent group, but most of the people attending the first meeting only see one problem they want solved, and they want to solve it in two months, our advice is to go with the flow, forget about electing officers and writing by-laws for the time being, and proceed to try to work effectively on the first issue.

Many community organizations were formed originally to deal with one issue and then decided to stay together to form complex plans, programs, and structures that continue for many years. By forcing structure on people who have energy for only one issue right now, you are increasing the chances of alienating people from the effort altogether. You can't afford that.

- What are the next steps? People need to go away feeling that the group decided to meet again, not to meet again, or to undertake a specific activity. Otherwise you've just held a gripe session that doesn't leave people feeling productive.

## **Agendas and Ground Rules, Including Samples**

In most situations, it will be useful to prepare an agenda for each meeting (except for the first meeting of the possible steering committee). It gives the person presiding over the meeting a bit of permission to gently move the meeting back on course if topics not ripe for discussion or decision making are brought up from the floor. See the first sample on the next page.

A group where people already know one another may need some time limits for each type of activity. Otherwise, keep the time allocation among agenda items to yourself, and just make sure the meeting moves along briskly. If spending all available time on the first item of an agenda becomes a real problem later, the agenda can assign amounts of time to each discussion item. Otherwise time allotments for each agenda item, sometimes used in a business setting, may be overkill for a community organization.

Early in the formation of the organization, you may want to allow the group to determine the agenda at the beginning of each meeting. Some groups formally approve the agenda at the beginning of a meeting, but this is probably overly formal for a community association.



## **SAMPLE AGENDA—FIRST MEETING**

Adapt to your needs

1. Opening Comments by Meeting Organizer
2. Introductions
3. Discussion of Problems or Opportunities as Presented on the Meeting Flyer (may discuss between one and three problems)
  - A. Problem 1
  - B. Problem 2
  - C. Problem 3
4. Open Comments about Type of Organization Needed, If Any
5. Decision-Making on Next Steps

The most important point about an agenda is to try to set up an accurate expectation about whether an item needs to result in a decision, or whether the agenda item is a discussion or brainstorming. Select words that say what you mean; a vague term such as Neighborhood Problems will set up a discussion in which each participant inserts his or her own concerns.

If you mean you want to follow up on the previous meeting, where four most important neighborhood problems were selected and agreed upon by consensus, word the agenda: Discussion of Next Steps on Four Most Important Problems Identified Last Month. Then list those problems, whether in outline form or in parentheses beside the agenda item.

Be as specific as you would like the discussion to be. If you want new ideas and new energy, wording could be, for example:

Discuss What Teenagers Will Be Doing This Summer  
Generate One More Idea for the Vacant Storefront Problem  
Determine an Action Plan for Finding Free Printing of the Newsletter

These are likely to generate better results than an agenda that reads:

Teens  
Vacant Stores  
Newsletter Printing

Agendas should favor specificity and accurate communication over elegance in English and parallel form.

A sample of an agenda for a neighborhood association that has been meeting long enough to have some programs started appears on the next page. Again tailor this to your own group's specific tastes and needs.

## **SAMPLE AGENDA, LATER MEETINGS**

XYZ COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

5:00 p.m., Wednesday, November 5, 2xxx

ABC Synagogue, 5555 Smith St. (enter through west door, parking south of the building)

1. Welcome and Introductions
2. Reports:
  - a. Annual Parade Committee
  - b. Treasurer's Report
  - c. Property Properties Report
3. Old Business
  - a. Discuss and Determine Next Steps from January Four Most Important Problems Selection
    - i. Problem properties
    - ii. Vacant stores
    - iii. Litter
    - iv. Commercial parking in residential area
4. New Business
5. Next Meeting
6. Announcements

You may want to post or distribute some ground rules if you think the crowd may be unruly. You might establish a ground rule that there will be no racist, sexist, or ageist remarks, or that comments that the first issue cannot be solved will be politely ruled out of bounds. Then stick to these ground rules yourself!

Following are some sample initial ground rules:

Meeting about XYZ community, November 5, 2xxxx

1. Each speaker will be limited to 3 minutes until all who wish to speak have spoken once.
2. Speakers will raise their hand to be recognized by the interim chair.
3. Only one person can speak at a time; side conversations will not be tolerated.
4. Personal attacks on leaders or community members are out of order. Negative comments should be directed toward specific actions, not people.
5. Children and pets should not be brought to the meeting.

### **Expectations for Early Meetings**

After the first meeting, now what? The second meeting typically has one of two results: (1) if your first meeting was underpublicized but the cause is popular, you will have a good percentage increase in

attendance, or (2) if you saturated the area with news of your first meeting, and you had a great attendance, the second meeting will reflect how worthwhile people felt the first meeting had been.

If your first meeting offered hope, a clear cause, and confidence that an individual could make a difference, your attendance may hold up. If your first meeting was contentious or unfocused, and many people were cynical, your attendance may well plummet.

Or if attendance was high for the first meeting, those who are less inclined to be joiners may think they can skip the second meeting with little negative impact.

This “second meeting” picture is likely to carry over from meeting to meeting for the first several meetings. Your attendance will be steady and stable only when the group is small enough that the absence of one household or individual will be noticed, when the first issue is “right-sized” in terms of being slightly challenging but not overwhelming, and/or when the socializing becomes pleasant enough that people come just to interact with neighbors.

Attendance isn’t everything. If your attendance trends lower, it is important that leaders handle that development as something to be expected. In some instances, it should even be welcomed, if the winnowing down in size has resulted in a solid committed core of people.

**Attendance isn’t everything. (But it’s something.)**

First meetings often include curiosity seekers or people who intend to calculate the advantages and disadvantages of participating. When attendance dips, consider yourself lucky to have found out quickly who you can count on.

If the decline in attendance is quite steep, such as only half as many attendees in a small group or less than 70% as many attendees in a larger group, ask those who do attend what they have heard about why people may not be participating. If the answers are conflicting events, cold and flu season, or exam season in a student neighborhood, be reassured and continue.

If negative thoughts are expressed, however gently, it is important to take those objections to heart. They are likely to be more serious than the speaker conveys. If you know the individuals who were reported as not attending for a particular reason, you may want to seek out personal conversations with them. Some people will be too nice to ever say the truth to you, but others will offer comments that turn out to be constructive.

After hearing first-hand or second-hand reports of why people are not interested, simply factor that new information into your game plan and continue on. If the worst happens, and you are the only one who still believes after the first meeting, simply consider how to reframe the issue so that there will be more widespread appeal.

If the feedback is that you are the problem—because you were boring, came off as too egotistical, talked too much, or whatever—consider whether you can fix the offending perception easily, or whether the group really is objecting to your typical style. If so, enlist and coach another supporter to lead the next meeting.

People may leave the first meeting politely without expressing any negative sentiments and then never return if you, or another speaker, bore them altogether. When this occurs, people may still support the cause, but sometimes they are simply unwilling to endure another meeting. Or they may feel that it is so unlikely that positive action will occur that it is not worth their time to meet. So be sure to obtain community feedback about whether boredom or cynicism is a factor in non-participation.

**Be sure to obtain community feedback about whether boredom or cynicism impacts meeting participation.**

Another reason for lack of attendance at the second meeting is that people left the first meeting feeling that there is a simple solution for the problem, and that a series of meetings is overkill.

For example, if someone speaks persuasively at the first meeting that all that needs to be done is to call City Hall, and the City swooped right in and solved the problem, people may feel you are making a mountain out of a molehill.

It is worth checking to see if this group assessment is correct. Occasionally, a leader wants to be a leader just to enhance his or her own prestige, visibility, or competence, and therefore mistakenly exaggerates the threat or the need for an organized approach to a problem.

This leads us to a second type of expectation that must be faced realistically: Your group needs to grapple with whether the first issue and any others that surface rapidly are based on relatively **simple problems** that can be solved in your community, or whether they are **complex, systemic problems** that depend partially on factors your neighborhood alone cannot control.

As an example, let's look at the problem that teenagers hang out on a particular vacant lot every Saturday night and make a lot of noise late into the night, much to the irritation of the senior citizens especially. Is that a simple problem or a systemic problem?

## **Does your first issue arise from a simple problem, or a complex systemic problem?**

Within our example, here are some factors that would help you answer that question:

- Is there an existing curfew law that could be enforced?
- Is so, why isn't it being enforced? Is it because the police force is preoccupied with armed robbery and murder, or is it because they do not believe the issue is all that serious and they are more interested in hanging out at the coffee shop?
- If there is no curfew, would the appropriate level of government be likely to enact one if your group presses it to do so?
- If the teenagers are forced to stop hanging out on the vacant lot, where will they likely go? Are there alternatives where young people of that age can be admitted? Can the teenagers afford the alternatives? If the answers to both of the last questions are yes, why is that alternative not being chosen right now?
- What is the real motivation behind the hanging out? Is it innocent socializing, or are drugs being dealt or used?
- What is the attitude of the parents involved? Are they supportive of you, or more inclined to protect their innocent little Johnny or Jenny, who would never behave badly in the community? Are the parent residents of the community, or are the teenagers coming in from somewhere else?

In our example, you might have a relatively simple problem if: (1) you have a curfew law the police are willing to enforce it but don't realize the extent of the problem, (2) if the young people in question live in the community and are known and can be identified, or (3) if the parents are supportive of community goals once it is pointed out that the children are part of the problem.

On the other hand, you might have a complex problem if teenagers have no alternative places of entertainment, cannot afford them, or are using the vacant lot for illegal activity that would not be tolerated in the alternate entertainment venue.

If you add in parental inattention because parents are working two jobs or mired in depression or addiction, and an overburdened law enforcement community that rightly assesses the noise problem as less serious than other things that demand their action, you definitely have a complex problem.

If you have a complex and systemic problem, gear up for a long campaign for an indefinite period of time. In this example, solutions might include not only providing an indoor entertainment venue but

also dealing with low income, drugs, and complex social problems. You are not going to resolve the problem permanently by meeting once every six months.

Don't let that discourage you. For one thing, if you have a long fight ahead of you and your community is united in wanting to address it, this is the time to explore a permanent organization early in the effort. Say candidly that this will not be resolved overnight, this problem has been gathering steam for quite a while and is not easily solved by appeal to authority, multiple factors contribute to this problem, and we have work to do. Do not allow the energy of the first meeting or two to lure you or the group into false optimism that everything will be all right in a couple of months.

### **Essentials of a Good Meeting**

First, let's put your mind to rest about whether your style will be appropriate for neighborhood meetings. If your personality and that of your community leads toward an unstructured approach, understand that unstructured does not mean undisciplined. Informality is perfectly fine and in fact normal, although some neighborhood groups will adopt a surprising degree of formality in the tone of their meetings as well. Either is perfectly satisfactory. Just try to stick to the agenda, which should either be posted where everyone can read it or distributed on individual pieces of paper.



Be sure that the meetings are conducted in an orderly fashion, whether or not you heed our advice to have an agenda.

Presiding. It needs to be clear who will preside over the meeting. Thus far we assumed that you, the organizer of this event or organization, will preside over the meeting(s). Of course this may not be the case. If you do not feel comfortable doing this, or have no experience and are going into a situation in which there will be a lot of passion and many opinions, you may be better off picking someone else as a moderator.

If you do so, make sure the moderator understands and agrees with the perspectives that are critical to you. Don't select a puppet moderator, who asks you at every juncture what should happen next. That irritates some participants and in the end may make the moderator resent you. If a community leader volunteers his or her services to lead the meeting and becomes engaged in the first problem, it is often the best of all worlds. Just be aware of that person's reputation in the community before allowing that to occur.

The presiding person needs to encourage and enforce only one person speaking at a time and discourage side conversations. Absent a printed agenda for everyone, the person presiding should indicate some likely flow of the meeting. The person presiding also should command enough respect to call an end to the unproductive discussions by postponing them to a future time, simply saying that enough discussion has occurred and calling for a vote, or assigning the matter to a committee or a committee to be appointed later or comprised of volunteers.

In these next sections, we still assume that you will be the person in the front of the room, but that is not always the best solution.

**The first couple of meetings may be plenty exciting as people share their frustrations and vision for the future.**

Lively Meetings. The first couple of meetings may be plenty exciting as people share their frustrations and vision for the future. But after a few times, that gets old. If you fear that a full evening of discussion will be unproductive because there really is very little new to say, you could use one of these common techniques to enliven a meeting in a productive way:

- Invite an expert to come speak. An expert may simply be someone in the adjacent neighborhood who has solved the same problem you are facing. It might be someone from the city government or extension office, or a respected community leader who can articulate the problem and offer possible solutions with a certain amount of eloquence. Maybe one of your

own residents knows some detailed neighborhood history, or perhaps a local business or non-profit does some intriguing work.

- Tell your personal story. Explain in a personal and self-revealing way why you feel so strongly about this issue and why you need help in solving it. It is not necessary and usually not helpful to explain every nuance of how you propose to solve the problem. That approach gives people the opportunity to polarize for or against your solution. It also sends the message that all you need from the group is for them to serve as your cheering squad. Don't get carried away by making this a long speech though.
- Find resources on the Internet and distribute them or summarize them in a simple way.
- In neighborhoods with many professionals, do a PowerPoint or Prezi.
- Display photographs if you think the problem is one that can be illustrated, and that some in the neighborhood may not realize how severe the problem is. If you can find the projector, project them onto a wall or screen rather than simply pass snapshot-size photos around.
- In a more structured way than before, ask people for their insight into (a) defining the first problem, and then (b) their ideas about how to shape the problem into an issue. You may think you know the correct answers to both, but the purpose of this exercise is at least partially to build the organization. You have already determined that you cannot resolve this problem alone, or choose not to do so, so give other people the opportunity to speak. Of course this only serves to enliven the meeting if it has been several meetings since you did something similar. Let's talk more about how to do that.

**At the front of the room, print the essence of key points that people make.**

Focused Group Participation. It is very effective to write in large print at the front of the room the essence of the points that people make, using a flip chart, blackboard, large piece of paper, or whatever you have at your disposal. This list serves as a ready reference to participants, allows them to suggest combinations of items, points out contradictions in what people think, and generally prevents rambling when you can point out that a particular topic already is listed.

If you can tape up all the flip chart sheets (or use the Post-It version of a flip chart) so all can be seen, so much the better.

This is also the time to exercise your best "active listening" skills. This means that without any hint of judgment, you simply paraphrase in very brief terms what was just said. This accomplishes three things: (a) it makes the person feel heard, which is an incredibly important factor in retention of interest, (b) it allows any misinterpretations on your part to be clarified, and (c) it allows the participant to refine or solidify his or her own thinking.



**This is the time to use your best  
“active listening” skills.**

It is not uncommon for someone, upon hearing someone paraphrase what he or she just said, to react with a slight shift in position or self-correction. Anything from “I guess that sounds racist” to “I’m really talking about only on weekend nights” may be a follow-up comment after your initial paraphrase. These self-corrections are valuable.

If you are making a list on a flip chart at the front of the room, try to avoid inserting your own personal opinions into the mix. If you think this will be a problem for you, establish ground rules just for yourself! If you are really passionate about the topic, it may be difficult for you to remain as objective as you need to be. How objective you need to be varies widely according to the situation. If your group is organized around an “anti” or “pro” cause, you need to treat opposition viewpoints expressed respectfully, write them on the flip chart, but then ignore them and go back to your main theme.

If you think your community needs a broader agenda than most people are seeing and if you hope for a permanent organization, it is wise to keep a few opinions to yourself. Allow the group to broaden its perspective as it gains experience. If you know you should stay quiet about certain topics or that you might insult people who could be important in meeting your objectives, make a ground rule for yourself that you will not make Point X or discuss Topic Y.

You might need to enlist a friend beforehand to help you stay on track. Maybe the friend gives you a sign when you are treading on thin ice, or maybe you simply make a pact with the friend that you will adhere to the ground rule and that if not, you are going to be held accountable when you go for a cup of coffee afterward.

The picture changes completely if the first issue is that you want to organize to remove a certain person or faction from power. In that case, here are some useful guidelines:

- If you have this objective, you can insult ideas—not persons—to your heart’s content. Even in this situation, though, it is better not to appear too hostile.
- If you are trying to oust someone, make a clear and concise list of reasons why you think that should happen, state them forcefully at the beginning of the meeting, and then stick to your main points using the “broken record” technique. In “broken record,” you state the same thing over and over again, varying the wording only slightly. Of course if you plan to use the broken record technique, be sure of your facts.
- Avoid attacks based on personal characteristics, such as personality, race, age, or religion. Think about the long-term future of your community, and avoid alienating anyone with overly confrontational techniques. Fight with a few well-researched facts about public actions and statements, and not with attacks on someone’s loyalty, motives, intelligence, or personality.

Refreshments. Food and drink certainly help attract a crowd. It seems a ridiculous premise in the U.S. where nearly everyone has enough to eat and drink, but our experience is that modest refreshments boost attendance, social bonding, and general satisfaction with the meeting. Keep the first meeting's refreshments moderate in order not to raise expectations beyond what can be provided at each meeting. There will be time enough to splurge or throw a real party. Avoid setting up the expectation that each meeting will be an extravaganza.

On the other hand, if it is worth having refreshments, don't make them an after-thought. If you offer cookies, don't go with the stale vanilla wafers. Adults deserve lemonade, juice, or soda and not a powdered drink mix. If it is beer, make it cold. If it is soda and you are outdoors in the summer, people in the U.S. expect ice. If you cannot afford quality, it will be better to offer no food or drink.

Meeting Length. Keep the meeting a reasonable length. If there is great enthusiasm for a multi-purpose and permanent community organization, you may get by with a well-structured two-hour meeting. Even then do not allow any one person, even the guest expert, to speak too long.

An hour and a half is sufficient for every other situation, and an hour will be better if people are outdoors, overcrowded, or in any way uncomfortable or inconvenienced by the meeting. If you announce the end time in advance and stick to it, you will earn appreciation. Let people linger afterward to socialize though; try to arrange with the venue a generous amount of time for this.

Domination. Consistently in community organizations, one or two people want to dominate the meeting. Sometimes this is well received, if the person is a true repository of local knowledge and history, or a respected professional in some type of community work.



However, often others resent this tendency toward domination. As the meeting organizer, you must pay careful attention to such situations. But if the potential dominator has a minority opinion, be wary of the perception that you are silencing that person because of her or his views.

When the dominator comes up for a breath, say quickly, “And what do the rest of you think?” If you know the dominator well, try the direct approach of asking him or her to allow others to speak now. If you feel that others are really becoming restless or that the focus of the meeting is beginning to stray, simply announce that it is time to move to the next topic or say loudly and with a smile, “Thank you for those comments.”

Commonly some people just love to hear themselves talk, whether or not they are being repetitious or not really saying much of value. Try to allow the group to handle this situation.

If domination is a problem over more than one meeting, and others are finding it irritating, you may find it necessary to set ground rules on talking. One great approach is a timekeeper to limit each person to two minutes, until everyone who wants to speak has spoken. At your discretion, you could then allow a second round of two minutes, with fewer people probably speaking this time.

**You may find it necessary to set ground rules for talking.**

Of course adjust this time limit to the number of people in attendance and the complexity of the situation. It does not make a lot of sense to enforce a two-minute time limit when your group is formed around a single simple topic and only five people are in attendance.

If you dislike the idea of a timekeeper breaking in, you can also try the talking stick approach, in which you have an actual stick or other object and ask that it be passed around. Only the person in possession of the talking stick may speak. While this does not prevent one person from talking a long time, it prevents one person from making a rejoinder to every comment that someone else makes. It also short-circuits the problem of several different conversations breaking out in the room at the same time.

Another simple technique is not to allow a person to speak for a second time on a particular topic until everyone else who wants to speak has spoken once.

## Sample Outcomes

Try to pre-define the outcome for each meeting. Make sure it represents a tiny step forward. Setting the next meeting really should not count as your progress step, although you should always be ready to announce the next meeting time at the end of each meeting, or be ready to allow the participants to determine that through discussion.

In terms of an outcome for the meeting, here are some examples:

- Next month (week, quarter, or whatever interval you want) we will each bring a list of the three most important issues we think our neighborhood faces.
- Before the next meeting we will have sent flyers to the Church Down the Street and the Businessman's Breakfast Club to try to bring their members to the meeting.
- By next month we will have finished our volunteer assignments of asking City Hall for the traffic counts and the crime statistics.
- By next quarter we will have asked the state whether there are any free resources for stocking our lake and replacing the trees taken out by the tornado.
- Before the next meeting we will have finished the bake sale, and we will have a report on our earnings.
- At the next meeting Trudy and Ben will tell us about their trip to Washington DC and the WeCar program in action there.
- By next meeting let's all put our placards against the street widening in our windows.
- By the next meeting everyone will be responsible for trying to find a business or organization that will print our newsletter.
- Next time we will distribute the voluntary e-mail notification list.

## TYPES OF GROUPS

### Issue Campaign Groups

Organizations that are thought to be temporary at the time of their founding deserve a bit more attention. There are two sub-types in this group:

- Organizations where external events impose a presumed deadline. We will use an example in which you organize to oppose a rezoning or other development-related proposal, and the City Council schedule determines when the decision is likely to be made.
- Organizations without a definite timeline. In our example, you may want to reduce the amount of noise on a Saturday night by shutting down a particular night club. You will not know in advance how long this will take, and whether to measure that time in weeks, months, or years.

Note that the examples discussed below may be useful to those forming a permanent neighborhood association as well. You can [skip ahead here](#) if you like.

Presumed Deadline. In the case of the presumed deadline groups, this is the perfect time to practice a technique known as backward planning. In the example, with the help of city staff members you can determine the earliest possible date for the decisive City Council vote. Then ask the date of public hearings by the Council and typically before that, by the planning commission. Before that you will have to plan your own projects to educate the neighborhood and figure out how to present yourselves at the

various meetings and hearings. Actually calculating these dates will prevent the frustration of arriving too late to the party.

Let us expand on this rezoning example, since it is by far the most typical reason for a temporary organization to be established. You should plan by the time of the City Council vote to have your own Council person(s) firmly on your side. Sometimes, in a form of exaggerated courtesy between members of a governing body, that will be sufficient in and of itself. In other words, the entire Council will not vote in opposition to the position of the geographic representative.

In a few jurisdictions the Council districts are not geographic, so then your job becomes more difficult. In that case, you need at least one assertive, effective champion on the Council who will argue your case as if his or her home were at stake.

Either way, you must have a vocal champion on your side. Then you can ask your champion whether or not that will be sufficient, or how many other people you must line up to be able to have the decision go your way.



To keep that person or persons willing to extend their reputations on your behalf, you need to have some sub-goals. You need to make their position look respectable and logical to keep them comfortable in fighting for you. In our example, there are two ways to do this:

- Help them build a solid record of citizen support for your position. Your new organization writing a letter of support will not be enough. Your members need to physically attend any and all meetings at which the matter will be discussed.

Make sure that the City Council can identify your supporters, if not everyone is allowed to speak due to limits on number of speakers on a topic or on time that can be taken on a topic. Usually you accomplish this by having your first or strongest speaker ask people in support of your position to raise their hands or stand up. Ask City staff to guess the likelihood of time limits being imposed.

Try to enlist the help of other citizens who live outside the neighborhood but see the justice of your cause. This is particularly important if you live in an area where representation is not geographic.

- Make sure that official advisors to the City Council understand and agree with your position, to the extent possible.

In the rezoning example, typically that would include either a city staff member or a paid consultant who regularly works with the planning commission and/or City Council on such matters. A very small town may not have any such employee or consultant, but larger towns and cities certainly will. Usually you can contact them, talk about their analysis of the situation, and try to convince them of your position. Try to make a very civil approach to this public servant or hired consultant; they can be a great asset if they agree with your position.

If you learn they oppose your position, remain respectful and treat them as you would like to be treated. On the next issue, they will be much more likely to be helpful if you have acted in a cordial manner.

Often they write a formal report, and in most jurisdictions you have a right to obtain a copy of it. By all means learn their position, both through interviewing them and reading what they write.

If their position is hostile to yours but you see why as professionals they are taking this stance, show them great respect, but revert to the “broken record” technique of simply stating your position over and over again. In this case especially, it is important to show your numbers, and implicitly, the number of voters who are on your side.

Most places that have zoning also have a planning commission. In all but a few cases, their action on a rezoning proposal is only advisory. Learn whether this is true in your community, but also inquire about whether typically the City Council or other governing body follows their advice or ignores it. Certainly a show of widespread support will be helpful with the planning commission, although be warned that planning commissions are not as susceptible to public pressure as are City Councils. After all, the planning commission is a body appointed by some elected official or grouping of them, and they do not stand for election.

Typically your City Council must be elected, and therefore is easier to influence through the strength of your organization. So certainly organize your group to have as many people as possible attend the planning commission meeting, but also forewarn your group that the planning commission is not as likely to respond to numbers as is the City Council. You want your group to keep its enthusiasm even if the planning commission recommendation is contrary to what you want.

If your neighborhood is small enough that you can canvass everyone to tell them about the rezoning proposal and discuss its negative effects with them, that will be great. Since we are assuming in this example that you are just organizing your group, by all means, follow up even a personal contact with a meeting. This makes people more interested in and excited about the issue at hand than simply talking with them one-on-one.

You need your group feeling highly motivated. Only in that way will the group stay together long enough to overcome any feelings of discouragement if the professional advice is against your position and if the planning commission recommendation is contrary to your position.

In this example, you may want at least two meetings—one before the planning commission meeting and one after the planning commission recommendation is known but before the first City Council meeting. Sometimes after the planning commission meeting, or even before it, the developer or other person seeking a rezoning will contact your group to try to discuss the matter and reach agreement, or to “buy you off” by giving you something you want.

The proposal may be altered substantially over the course of the deliberations, which often occurs if the proposal is complex or if the planning commission recommends favorably only if modifications are made.

In this case, you may need more meetings, one each time there is a significantly different proposal to react to. Do not allow the core members of your group to appear uninformed about the current nature of the proposal; this makes it easier for decision makers to discount their input.

In the example of the group organized to fight a rezoning, use your backward planning (described fully [here](#), if you aren't familiar with the term) to prepare for the fastest possible timetable. Even though a proposal may appear quite controversial to you, it may appear routine to the decision makers, and they may not be prepared to postpone making a decision while you do your organizing work.

**Temporary groups should prepare for the fastest possible timetable.**

In most jurisdictions, it is theoretically possible to complete a rezoning in six to eight weeks. Simpler types of proposals that do not require receiving a recommendation from an advisory body may move even faster.

That does not give you a lot of time to organize a group from zero, so concentrate on understanding your facts and the process you face as rapidly as possible. Quickly identify one or two leaders from among your group, preferably someone who is well respected in the community and/or well versed in development matters. Designate these people as the chief spokespeople, and do not dissipate any energy on the other organizational matters discussed in this book.

If you need money because in your jurisdiction, groups need to hire attorneys to represent them if they hope to oppose a zoning proposal, pass the hat for donations and report the results. If you suspect that people can donate more money than they did, keep passing the hat and reporting the results until you have enough. Of course in this event, keep people informed about how you arrived at the amount of money you will need, and if you feel sure the money will not be needed later, offer to refund the unused money on a fair basis.

The one organizational matter you might want to try to address even within the 6-8 week timeline is a name for the organization. Somehow it seems more fearsome to the City Council if they face a group that is so organized that they have determined that their name is Citizens Against Bix Boxes. If you have time and money for T-shirts for CABB, you can have some made quickly either through seeking donations or a good rate from a local screen printer. The City Council may rightly fear that if you are so organized that you have a name for your group, you will stay together even after the rezoning proposal is passed or defeated.





It cannot be emphasized enough that the leaders of this type of group need to stay constantly informed about the process and the timing of the movement of the rezoning proposal through the system. You do not want to “peak too soon,” so that your group is tired of going to meetings just as you approach the final meeting, which is the important one for decision making.

Even if you attend a City Council meeting, making a strong show of force, and go away feeling as though you surely will win, be sure to show an equal number of people at the next meeting if no vote occurred. Sometimes a City Council will decide to postpone their vote, hoping that the people will forget to come to the next meeting and they can vote then with less public scrutiny. Keep going to meetings until the decision is final.

Even then, watch for the developer or other proponent to resurface. Be sure you keep names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses you have accumulated during the campaign. Sometimes a rezoning or other development proposal will recur with only slightly different facts, and you want your second round of organizing to be much easier than the first.

Indefinite Deadline. In facing an indefinite deadline for a single-issue temporary group, you will not find the backward planning technique to be as useful. You need to begin by exploring the causes that contribute to your single issue. If these are well-known or self-evident, proceed to making a game plan and executing it aggressively and quickly.

Let’s take as our example a noisy nightclub. In this case and many others, confront the problem directly. Do not assume that the owner is unwilling to do something about the situation. Business owners may not be on the premises frequently or during all hours of operation, so it is possible that they are not even aware of the situation. Politely request a meeting to discuss the noise, and during the meeting, mention that you are forming a group to address the issue and that you do not plan to back down.

### **Confront the problem directly.**

Of course, the business owner has the right to refuse to meet with you, to fail to return your phone calls, or to send his attorney or his brother to meet with you instead. Be prepared for all those possibilities.

If you do succeed in having a conversation or a meeting, have firm goals in mind. In this example, decide before you ever make contact what would make your group happy. Does the owner need to close down the nightclub entirely? If so, then you might facilitate matters by offering to help the owner find another location. We know that would be the last thing you would like to spend your time doing, but it might be what it takes to accomplish the goal.

If the nightclub does not need to close down entirely, what would make it more acceptable to your group? Does it need to provide more on-site parking so that cars are not blocking your driveways? Does it need to provide more sound insulation? Should it close down the live music by midnight? Does it need to be more careful that people are not extremely inebriated when they leave? Should it build an

outside entrance with another set of doors to prevent the sound from leaving the building when every patron calls it a night? Does it need trash cans for litter control?

So while you should try to resolve the problem directly with the owner, that does not mean that your first action is to contact him or her. You should get your group together for a meeting, just as described elsewhere in this book, and then decide what your goal is.

It may be that you are unable to decide on your goal without more information. Probably it is best to dispatch a team of researchers from among your group to determine how the place operates, rather than relying on the owner to convey accurate information. When you approach that owner, know your facts, including as much as is feasible about the operation, procedures, zoning, and other city, county, or state rules applying to noise, land use, and liquor licenses.

In this example, be sure to signal to participants in your first meeting that there is potential for a campaign of indefinite length, indefinite process, and indefinite results. Gauge how likely people are to stay with this group for the long haul, and factor that into what you decide to do. You do not yet know all the facts, and you do not yet know how the owner will react when presented with an organization rather than perhaps a few scattered individual complaints. However, set up an idealistic timeline, explaining that it is indeed optimistic and may slip.

For instance, ideally you would say our research into all applicable laws and how to contact the owner takes no more than four weeks, setting up and holding a face-to-face meeting will take two weeks, hearing a result from the meeting requires two weeks, and then you get what you want. People probably would react to this prediction with a smile, so part of your work is already done. If it goes this smoothly, everyone will be pleased and no one will think you were lacking in ambition in forming your organization.

For the indefinite timeframe campaign, take a little while at the beginning to forge strong bonds and maybe even give people a little time for socializing if they do not know one another. You do not know what sacrifices you will be asking people to make, so invest a little in their having a satisfying experience.

**You do not know what sacrifices you will be asking people to make, so invest a little in their having a satisfying experience.**

Another reason for putting more time and effort into the organizational aspects of the indefinite timeframe single-issue campaign is that if it takes too long to resolve the issue, frequently more issues are brought to the group, and suddenly your single-issue campaign is morphing toward a multi-issue permanent organization. Be prepared for how you the leader will react to this eventuality. If you have a personal limit on how much time and effort you can contribute, be ready to state that honestly when the question arises.

## A More Permanent Organization

Many of you expect to form an enduring neighborhood association. If so you may have myriad questions about officers, by-laws, rules, parliamentary procedure, agendas, memberships, incorporation, mission statements, and such. Those are discussed in the [Organizational Questions](#) section below. Still later we look at “Early Success” Projects and The Five Big Challenges for neighborhood associations.

Most of this book is aimed at you, so right now we just mention that permanent associations are part of the full spectrum of neighborhood organizing activities.

## Negative and Positive Organizations

Negativity is either your goal or your foe, depending on the type of group you aspire to have. It is said that individuals organize themselves either according to what they are for, or what they are against. It may be the same in organizations.

Frequently community groups are easier to organize if they are against something. Passions run higher, and if you are in the USA or many other democratic countries, protest is recognized as a civic right. So if



you have been thinking of starting a neighborhood association for a long time, and the dreaded Wal-Mart proposal shows up on the scene, now is your moment.

However, consider carefully if your group is primarily for something or against something. If you are against something, that gives you instant focus and unless the thing you oppose goes away completely and permanently, you have a long-running community organization on your hands. If you are for something, you have a long-term task in most cases, but you have to work harder to establish an initial focus and keep up the excitement.

Think carefully about forming a negative organization if you must depend on the people in the governmental level above you for many things. If you are an anti-crime group, for example, it will not be long before the sheriff or the police department feels criticized, whether or not that is your intent. People are naturally defensive of their turf and resistant to change, so having a group of upstart citizens suddenly playing on their field may be a bit of an unwelcome surprise.

So if your citizens are poor, uneducated, and easy to ignore, think twice about making City Hall really angry. On the other hand, if your citizens enjoy considerable clout as individuals in the community, and you have bankers, educational leaders, and doctors on your team, a negative group could make quite an impact on City Hall quickly.

Strangely, some of the same problems are true of positive organizations. If you are a neighborhood and you start a neighborhood improvement association, someone at City Hall may feel threatened. Someone at the county government may say, "Well, weren't we taking good enough care of you?"



If this happens, simply explain that your group is not focused on changing them, but rather on contributing the time and attention of volunteers to making things better. It is difficult for most governments to refute the argument that you are just enthusiastic volunteers. But if you detect a little resentment or defensiveness, be sure to invite representatives of the government to meetings and try to reassure them that nothing secretive or political is happening.

Indeed, the most successful groups often ask certain governmental officials, commonly a city councilperson or police official, to attend meetings regularly and make reports. Be sure to thank them profusely when something improves, even if you pressured them to do it!

Over the years, an organization that tries to remain positive most of the time will have more impact than a negative one. If you want people to work to make the community better, recruitment is easier if you haven't just spent the last half hour explaining why the community is all messed up. Surely in tackling community issues, building on strengths is almost always the best policy.

Even if you feel that your community is deeply troubled, consider the approach of the Asset Based Community Development Institute in Chicago, based at Northwestern University (see Resources at the end of the book). Even for the most desolate of neighborhoods, their proposed approach is to look at what the assets are, and to take a "think outside the box" approach to what is an asset. They call the process of identifying assets "asset mapping," and it is a wonderful exercise for both existing and new organizations. (Our [website page](#) on this gives more detail.)

Almost every liability can also be considered an asset. If you have vacant lots, great, think of the possibilities. If you have vacant houses, great, look at the architectural quality. If you have barrels spewing orange stuff all over the ground, look at the opportunity to get a government grant to figure out what it is and what should be done about it. If you have an abundance of church buildings sitting empty from Monday through Saturday, but no community center, your churches are a weekday asset.

If your people are unemployed, they have a lot of time to work in the food pantry. If you live on the side of a mountain, you have a great view. If you just had a forest fire, you can make a fresh start and create the community you want, with some use of insurance funds and governmental assistance.

***Almost every liability can also be considered an asset.***

## **Overlaps between a Home Owner's Association and a Neighborhood Organization**

Where the neighborhood is in fact a subdivision or a condo development, your neighborhood may or may not already have a legal, functioning homeowner's association, which might be called a property owner association.

Usually the legal type of homeowner's association set up by the developer has prescribed duties relating to common areas and building exteriors, but typically exercises little control over more social issues such as a litter problem, crime problem, or unemployment problem. Many homeowner associations are administered by a board, with minimal interaction with all property owners.

If you can define broader purposes for your prospective group, including socializing, it is fine to think about forming another organization to allow broad participation. Consider carefully [the earlier discussion](#) of forming a second group in the same geography. Here's a checklist of situations you might face if you think you want to proceed:

1. On our website, we do hear from property owners that their homeowners association was never formed or ceased to function. In that case, most of this book can be helpful in forming an ad hoc neighborhood association, which clearly would be useful. Consult an attorney if you want to assume duties beyond the typical neighborhood association scope.
2. If you have a legal homeowner's association and you want change, turn your attention to describing how you feel that group is not doing its job or why you really must form an additional organization—which is your privilege.
3. In many places CC and R's are established for new subdivision, standing for codes, conditions, and restrictions. These items would be recorded in your deed (sometimes called a master deed). If you want to go beyond the CC and R's you may well need another organization, although you certainly will want to investigate both the legalities of adding to the mission and the willingness of the current trustees to do so.

Some problems could conceivably be resolved by establishing new deed restrictions on all the properties after they are occupied, but this might be a long and complex process. If you have a functioning homeowner's association, its board legally must be involved in this process. The first step would be consulting an attorney—ideally the legal counsel that set up the CC and R's.

Let's say that you have explored the options thoroughly and want to proceed with forming a neighborhood association in a development with an active homeowner association or homeowner association board. Be sure to brief the board of directors face to face on why this is being done. You need to minimize their sense of threat. If your common ground in your subdivision is maintained by the subdivision or condo development, and you pay an assessment or tax or free of some sort, you already have the rudiments of an organization in most cases. If you have been diplomatic and courteous with your homeowner association board, ask them to share that information with you. Proceed as discussed in this book. If information is withheld, generate your own publicity.

**Your new organization might function as a homeowner's association, or vice versa.**

## ORGANIZATIONAL QUESTIONS

Although the organizational matters we discuss in this section will be decided by a group over the course of weeks or months, we know that some readers are anxious about these things and will want to think through their own concepts of how the group might work. Many neighbors will ask these questions now, even though in truth the decisions do not really need to be made immediately. All in all, this section is written to help you anticipate questions.

We urge that you read and contemplate the entire section at the same time. The decisions don't usually follow in a neat sequence!

### Naming and Branding Your Organization

You need a temporary or permanent name for your organization. Even single-issue campaigns do best with a name. Sometimes this is straightforward. If the name of your neighborhood is well-established, you should probably use "XYZ Neighborhood Association." If you want a little more pizzazz, conduct a brainstorming session with the entire group, but our advice is to retain the words neighborhood association and add another word somewhere. The phrase XYZ Neighborhood Improvement Association is common.

Our advice for permanent organizations is to keep it simple and straightforward, rather than trying to be clever with wonderful names such as XYZ Progress, XYZ Rising, or New XYZ. These names may be a great rallying cry, but they can confuse new residents and the governments, officials, and non-profits with whom you need relationships.

Sometimes though the organization's name needs to reflect a point of view, especially when the organization begins as a campaign about an issue. Examples are Southern Heights Residents Against the Landfill, Southern Heights Transit Supporters, or Southern Heights Quiet Streets. Sometimes for the short-term organization, you want to leave your agenda intentionally vague. That's when you contemplate names such as Southern Heights Redeveloping, Southern Heights Progress, Southern Heights Revitalization Association, Southern Heights Preservation Organization, Southern Heights United for Community Progress, or Southern Heights Against Annexation.

If the name of your neighborhood is not established and people call it different things or have never conceived of your particular boundaries as a neighborhood, your problem is more difficult. First work on finding a name for the neighborhood. Sometimes there is an official name, but it is not widely known or used—or perhaps not recognized widely in the metro area outside your neighborhood. A prospective leader could gauge whether there is neighborhood recognition by using a search engine to find the neighborhood name.

If you have a neighborhood name dilemma, ask many people what it is called. See if consensus emerges. If one name sounds much more pleasant than the other, choose the better image. For example, if half the people say you live in Armpit and half the people say you live in Roseville, which would you choose?

The strongest neighborhoods usually are those with clear geographical boundaries, including major institutions, major highways, railroads, rivers, or other barriers to crossing. If the boundaries of your neighborhood are much less clear, spend some time considering where there is a community of common interest. The website contains an entire article on defining [neighborhood boundaries](#).

Usually but not always, go with an area of similar housing stock and similar demographics. A prominent exception to the general rule occurs when your first issue is stemming from a geographic area outside the boundaries of where the organizers live. If residents of or visitors to an adjacent group of streets cause your first problem, you should consider including that area in your neighborhood boundaries.

If you want your organization to address matters within a particular boundary, and those boundaries will not be self-evident, you should find or generate a simple map showing the boundary streets or other feature. This map will need to become an element in your flyers or any other communications.

It is also feasible for a temporary group to disregard the issue of boundaries altogether and to simply name the group according to its driving passion and see who comes.

The neighborhood boundaries page on our website linked a couple of paragraphs above provides much more detail. If you are in an ambiguous situation, or one where opinions really differ, sometimes neighborhood definition can become a good first project for an organization. In the long run, clear boundaries, established artificially through public relations or physical changes if necessary, will benefit your organization.

With boundaries established or purposefully left ambiguous, you are ready to brainstorm the name of the organization. To brainstorm on this or any other topic, it is important that you follow the two principles of brainstorming: (1) no idea is evaluated or responded to as it is generated, and (2) the more ideas, the better. In other words, record every idea that is advanced and do not allow discussion between items.

Rarely, a clarifying question might be allowed, but usually just refrain from comment yourself and strongly discourage all reactions until new additions to the list are no longer being suggested. After you brainstorm, then begin discussing and evaluating. This encourages creativity and allows people to put forth ideas that may not be completely on-target, but which can be rescued and refined by others.





Before you settle on a name, check on what the initials would spell, and make sure you are pleased with that impression. Make sure you have an acronym (initials) that can be spoken and written without sounding obscene!

## Membership

At some point the question of membership will be raised. Will everyone who lives in the community automatically be a member, or will they have to sign up?

You can offer free memberships, if your goal is simply to have names, addresses, e-mails, or phone numbers so you can communicate better. In this event, feel free to ask households for demographic or other types of information about themselves that would be useful to the community, and be sure to give them a membership card or some other token of appreciation for joining. If you can offer a perk, such as a discount or freebie at a local business, so much the better.

**Membership may be free and automatic, or may require dues or service.**

If you want to offer memberships with dues or a requirement for service or some other type of non-monetary contribution, that certainly is legitimate as well. At first simply establish the dues by discussion, and ideally by a vote. Decide in advance what you are going to do if someone who is serving quite well in the organization cannot or will not pay his or her dues.

Our opinion is that if dues are required, those who do not pay should not receive membership services, out of courtesy to those who do pay. If you anticipate problems with interested people not being able to afford membership, set up in advance a way for people to contribute service in lieu of dues.

If you want to offer memberships with dues or a requirement for service or other non-monetary contribution, that certainly is reasonable. You might have an associate membership for those who won't pay dues for your neighborhood association.

## Founder of the Group

What about the delicate problem of how to treat the originator of the group? That might be you, and you might want to continue to be its leader. Often people will allow this to happen out of courtesy or inertia.

However, at some point you probably will be challenged for leadership, and you need to know in advance what you want to do about the challenge. For most people in most circumstances, your own



reputation and the good of the group dictate that you should be gracious about offering to either share leadership or allow leaders to be elected without your controlling the process. Otherwise you risk rebellion and having people dislike you, which is probably more than you bargained for when you started the group.

In some circumstances you may have reasons—in addition to ego—for wanting to remain a leader in the organization. You might have started the group in the first place partly for business reasons if you are a business owner or professional who needs the visibility. You might be planning to run for political office.

In these cases, try to gently argue for a continuation of your leadership by indicating your willingness to serve and pointing offhandedly to your accomplishments. Offer to share the power though. If you have been the only leader and you have these business or visibility reasons for wanting to remain at the helm, quickly offer to appoint committee chairs and let those chairpersons choose and recruit their own committee members. This way you can have a cabinet. If it works, you may be able to retain the power of the gavel. If you sense resistance though, think carefully about your image.

Let's say you have a different motive for resisting election of officers and possibly losing your leader role. You might be the most educated or trained in community problem-solving, and others do not recognize the depth of your qualifications. Try to explain carefully your qualifications. If your popularity is of little importance to you, maybe you just try to stay in office "by any means necessary" for the good of the group, even though they are not understanding that at the time.

But if you are the initiator of the organization, and the most important thing to you is that the organization thrive, see if you cannot be big-hearted about the possibility that others would be chosen instead of you in an election. After all, people need to like and respect their leader, and if they want to follow someone other than you, try to line up graciously behind the new person.

Often leadership will revert to the originator of the idea if someone more charismatic or well-known in the neighborhood takes the reins and then tires of the responsibility in a year or two.

More detail about officers and leadership follows.

## **Board and Officers**

The specific officers needed will vary widely depending on the organization's needs. You can defer electing officers for two or three months, unless you want to incorporate immediately.

When you're ready, you need a president or chairperson, or co-presidents if you want to split the work. If you choose shared leadership, make sure the two persons like each other and that there is a clear division of duties. Otherwise you will end up with half a president instead of two.

Whether you need a vice-president, secretary, and treasurer right now depends on your game plan. Barring the desire to incorporate immediately, you don't need a treasurer until you have money. You don't need a secretary until you want to write letters or take minutes. Sometimes the secretary is called the recorder. If you did not elect a vice-president and the president needs to be absent, you can either change the meeting date or ask someone to substitute on a one-time basis. Just think before you elect officers automatically.

Consider the terms of office carefully too. If you are a new organization, you may want to ask for only a six-month commitment, which allows the new officers to bow out gracefully if they do not like the direction of the organization. It also allows those whose enthusiasm cools after a month or two to be replaced tactfully. If a job title goes to someone's head, short defined terms can provide the organization a means to remove a non-performing or power-mad officer.

You may want to consider a two-year term for a president, treasurer, or other key officer, especially if there is a lot to learn to function effectively.

The officers as a group may serve as and be called the "executive committee." When you have by-laws, the officers who comprise the members of the executive committee should be spelled out there, as should the powers of the executive committee.

**If you have a large group and several tasks, you may need committees.**

If you have a large group and several tasks, you may need committees. In this instance, the complete success of the committee depends on finding a chairperson who will actually call a meeting and insist that people attend, participate, or assist as appropriate.

So drawing up an organizational chart naming the committees is a fine idea, but before you activate a committee and thereby assume that a certain issue will be addressed, make sure you have a committed chair. Nothing is worse than delegating parts of the job to committees, only to find that a critical committee is not functioning.

Depending on the complexity of the work to be done, you may want a board of directors. A board of directors is required for incorporation, but their duties might be confined to one annual meeting usually required by states, and their powers might be severely limited by the by-laws if that is your intention.

The board typically is authorized to conduct the business of the organization, namely authorize purchases, set dues, and pass resolutions or motions that describe the policy of the organization.

The board of directors sometimes consists only of the officers and the committee chairs, but also might include others. If you anticipate the need to raise a substantial amount of money, consider board members such as business leaders, wealthy individuals, or known fund raisers simply for their potential to leverage financial resources.

In urban neighborhoods, it is often very effective to have a block-level structure under the main neighborhood organization.

These block captains, as they frequently are called, can be a point of contact for the neighbors who have questions about the organization, complaints that the organization might take up, or intelligence for the group. They also can distribute information or rally the neighbors for attendance, donations, votes, or whatever may be required to carry out your program.

Sometimes block captains literally distribute newsletters or flyers to save postage, or they can serve as a collection point for donated items. Usually you will find block captains for some blocks and not for others. Our opinion is that this should not deter you from appointing or electing block captains where people are available. Some organization is better than none.

## **Budgets**

By all means, avoid setting up a dues structure and collecting dues for two or three years without spending any of the money on serving your constituency or promoting your cause. This will result in membership dropping off in most situations. Have a clear idea of how you will spend or save the money, and formalize it in a budget.

You can be strict about observing your budget or regard it only as a guideline or spending plan, but you should have at least a simple one if you have dues. Until you have a budget, have the membership vote on all expenditures.

Don't be scared to prepare a budget, even if you haven't written an organizational budget before. It's mostly common sense. We've given you some examples and categories to consider on the next page.

Sample Simple Budget Categories, No Office/No Staff

Refreshments for meetings  
Printing of meeting flyers  
Annual parade:  
    Prizes  
    Newspaper ad  
    City permit  
Donation to church where meetings are held  
Advertisement in city directory

Sample Budget Categories for Organization with Office Space

Rent  
Utilities  
Computer hardware and software  
Furnishings  
Office supplies  
Internet service  
Telephone  
Postage  
Printing  
Advertising  
Salaries  
Benefits  
Payroll taxes  
Unemployment insurance, worker's compensation  
Accounting service  
Meeting expenses  
Event expenses

Additional budget categories to consider

Paid website or social media consulting  
Auditing  
Accounting services  
Legal expenses  
Extra janitorial help  
Office machinery  
Directors and officers insurance  
Liability insurance  
Expenditures and income from any known grants

## By-Laws

Sooner or later, someone will suggest writing by-laws, and they will be required prior to incorporation. The major challenge for the leadership is deciding whether the group is mature enough to determine what the by-laws should be. If the leaders decide it is not, they may either stand firm and say no, explaining why this is a waste of effort right now. If they wish to defer to majority opinion, they might specify that the first by-laws should be simple, easily written and amended, and not necessarily up to standards for legal incorporation.

**By-laws may be useful, whether or not you plan to incorporate.**

At the most basic level, by-laws state the name and purpose of the organization, possibly its mailing address, list of officers (not by name, by office), how the officers are selected, length of terms, and the duties and powers of each office. If there is a board of directors, by-laws control the number of directors (or commonly, the maximum number of directors), how they are selected, how long they serve, and whether their terms are staggered.

A staggered term system means that at least two different election time tables are specified, and that therefore two or more different expiration dates for board membership are in effect at any given time. The advantage of staggered terms is that complete board turnover, and therefore a real loss of organizational memory, is avoided.

By-laws also describe how one becomes a member (automatically by virtue of residence within what boundary, or through what action), and whether or not organizations can become members. They also may clarify whether or not one must be a member to vote, if membership voting is contemplated, and whether one must be a member to attend meetings or particular functions. We like establishing membership for the purpose of voting, but allowing meetings to be open to the public, including visitors and people moving into the neighborhood or thinking of such a move.

If there are to be dues, the by-laws may say the dues are set by the organization or by the board, and how often they may be changed. The by-laws may state how often meetings are held or a minimum number of meetings per year to keep the organization intact. At a more elaborate level, the by-laws may describe what happens to any property the organization may accumulate if it disbands at some point in the future. It may endorse or prohibit partnerships with certain other types of organizations, endorse or prohibit political activity, and such.

An organization can function quite efficiently without by-laws, as long as these matters are generally understood among the membership. But by-laws address potentially awkward future situations, such as the inability of a particular officer to serve, before they happen.

One reason that drives many organizations to write or revise their by-laws is the desire to incorporate. As we said, incorporation usually requires by-laws.

Just below, we are showing sample by-laws, which are fairly simple and may be below the standards of some states for incorporation. If you are not interested in reading the sample, [skip over to p. 52](#).

SAMPLE INITIAL BY-LAWS OF THE  
XYZ NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

ARTICLE I  
OFFICES

The principal office of the XYZ Neighborhood Association in the State of \_\_\_\_\_ shall be located at \_\_\_\_\_ (Address) in \_\_\_\_\_ (City), or such other location within City as the Board of Directors may determine. The organization may have such other offices within the State of \_\_\_\_\_ as the Board of Directors may determine from time to time.

ARTICLE II  
PURPOSES

The purposes of the organization shall be:

- (1) Non-profit purposes as determined by those setting up the organization
- (2)
- (3)
- (4)

ARTICLE III  
BOUNDARIES

The boundaries of XYZ Neighborhood Association shall be \_\_\_\_\_ Street on the north, \_\_\_\_\_ Street on the south, \_\_\_\_\_ Street on the west, and \_\_\_\_\_ Street on the east, as shown on the map attached as Exhibit A.

ARTICLE IV  
MEMBERSHIP

Section 1. Membership Eligibility.

Only persons over the age of 18 years who (a) reside within the boundaries as stated in Article III, (b) own real estate within the boundaries as stated in Article III, or (c) own at least 50 percent of a business whose physical offices lie within the boundaries stated in Article III shall be permitted to be members of the XYZ Neighborhood Association.

Section 2. Membership Requirements.

Only eligible persons who have paid required dues by January 15 of each year shall be considered members. If the Board of Directors does not impose any dues for the year, each person falling within the Membership Eligibility criteria shown in Section IV shall become a member of the XYZ Association upon attending one meeting during the year.

ARTICLE V  
BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Section 1. Composition of the Board of Directors.

The Board of Directors shall consist of all of the Officers as shown below in Article V, and additional Directors elected by the membership not to exceed five (5) additional Directors.

Section 2. Powers.

The property, treasury, and affairs of XYZ Neighborhood Association shall be managed by the Board of Directors. The Board of Directors is vested with all powers and authorities, except as may be expressly limited by law, the Articles of Incorporation of the corporation if the XYZ Neighborhood Association becomes incorporated, or these By-Laws, to supervise, control, direct and manage the property, affairs and activities of the corporation, to determine the general policies of the organization and to make decisions on behalf of the membership when, in the judgment of a majority of the Board of Directors, a full vote of the membership is not possible or feasible within the time constraints of when action must be taken, provided, however, that:

- (a) The Board of Directors shall not authorize or permit the organization to engage in any activity not permitted to be transacted by the Articles of Incorporation, if any, or by local, state, or federal law;
- (b) None of the powers of the corporation shall be exercised to carry on activities, otherwise than as an insubstantial part of its activities, which are not in themselves in furtherance of the purposes of the organization; and
- (c) All income and the property of the organization shall be applied exclusively for its nonprofit purposes. No part of the net earnings or other assets of the corporation shall inure to the benefit of any director, officer, contributor or any other private individual having, directly or indirectly, a personal or private interest in the activities of the organization.

Section 3. Qualifications.

The Board of Directors shall be representative of the neighborhood. No person shall be elected or appointed to the Board of Directors unless he or she shall have resided in the neighborhood, owned property in the neighborhood, or held at least a 50% ownership interest in a business physically located within the neighborhood for at least six months prior to election.

ARTICLE VI  
OFFICERS

Section 1. Officers.

The officers of the corporation shall be a President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer. The Board of Directors may elect or appoint such other officers, including one or more Assistant



Secretaries and one or more Assistant Treasurers, as it shall deem desirable, such officers having the duty to substitute for the elected Secretary or Treasurer as directed by the Board of Directors because of the absence, illness, or incapacity of the elected officer.

#### Section 2. Term of Office.

Each officer shall serve for a one (1) year term, except that the Treasurer shall serve for two (2) years. No officer shall serve more than four (4) successive terms.

#### Section 3. Removal.

The Board of Directors may initiate action that may lead to the removal of an officer whenever in its judgment the best interests of the corporation would be served thereby. Any officer may be removed only by a two-thirds vote of the members attending the next general meeting held at least 30 (thirty) days after the Board of Directors has made a good faith effort to notify all members of the impending action.

#### Section 4. Vacancies.

A vacancy in any office because of death, resignation, removal, or disqualification may be filled by the membership at the next general membership meeting if the vacancy occurs on or before June 30 of each year. If the vacancy occurs on or after July 1 of each year, the Board of Directors shall appoint an officer for the remainder of the unexpired term.

#### Section 5. President.

The President shall be the chief executive officer of the organization and shall in general supervise and control its business and affairs. The President shall preside at all meetings of the Board of Directors and all meetings of the general membership. The President may sign, with the Secretary or any other proper officer of the corporation authorized by the Board of Directors, any contracts or other legal documents that the Board of Directors has authorized to be executed, except in cases where the signing and execution thereof shall be expressly delegated by the Board of Directors, these By-Laws, or by ordinance or statute to some other officer or agent. The President shall be authorized to sign letters and other official communications of the organization on behalf of the membership and Board of Directors.

#### Section 6. Vice President.

In the absence of the President or in event of his or her inability or refusal to act, the Vice President shall perform the duties of the President. Any Vice President shall perform such other duties as from time to time may be assigned to him or by the President or by the Board.

#### Section 7. Treasurer.

The Treasurer shall have charge and custody of and be responsible for all funds of the organization, receive and give receipts for moneys received from any source whatsoever, and deposit all such moneys in a bank or other depository designated by the Board of Directors. The Treasurer also shall give whatever surety or bond is required by the Board of Directors, and perform other duties as assigned by the Board of Directors.

#### Section 8. Secretary.

The Secretary shall keep the minutes of the meetings of the Board of Directors in one or more books provided for the purpose, see that all notices are duly given in accordance with the provisions of these By-Laws or as required by law, be custodian of the corporate records if the organization is incorporated, keep a register of the post office address of each Director which shall be furnished to the Secretary by such Director, and in general perform all duties incident to the office of Secretary and such other duties as from time to time may be assigned to him or her by the President or by the Board of Directors.

## ARTICLE VII ELECTIONS

### Section 1. Timing of the Elections.

Election of officers and members of the Board of Directors shall occur during the last regularly scheduled meeting of the general membership during a year. At least 45 (forty-five) days prior to the scheduled date of the meeting, the President shall have appointed a Nominating Committee. The Nominating Committee shall furnish the President and Secretary with a slate of nominees at least thirty (30) days prior to the scheduled date of the meeting. The Secretary will cause these nominees to be publicized to the membership as soon as practical, but not more than seven (7) days after receipt of the list of nominations. The Secretary shall make a good faith effort to notify all members, but failure of the notice to reach a member shall not invalidate the election or its results.

### Section 2. Commencement of Term.

Officers and the Board of Directors shall take office on January 1 following the election.

### Section 3. Procedure for Waiving the Timing Requirements in Section 1.

In the event of inclement weather, natural disaster, civil unrest, or other unforeseen conditions, these time limits may be waived by an e-mail, telephone, or meeting vote of a majority of the Board of Directors.

## ARTICLE VIII MEETINGS OF BOARD OF DIRECTORS

### Section 1. Annual Meeting and Regular Meetings.

The annual meeting of the Board of Directors for the purpose of adopting an annual budget and such other business as may be necessary shall be held on the second Friday of January of each year, at 5:30 PM, unless otherwise scheduled by act of a majority of the directors. The dates of regular meetings of the board shall be established by a calendar set at the annual meeting and may be held without notice to the membership at such time of day and place as shall from time to time be determined by the board, provided that each member of the Board of Directors shall be given at least 48 hours notice of the exact meeting time and place. The Secretary shall make a good faith effort at notification, but failure of an officer or member of the Board of Directors to receive the meeting notice shall not invalidate any actions taken at the meeting.

### Section 2. Special Meetings.

Special meetings of the Board of Directors may be called by or at the request of the President or any two Directors. Special meetings shall require advance notice to the members of the purpose of the meeting, as well as the exact time and place, at least 48 hours in advance of the meeting or two (2) business days, whichever is more.

Section 4. Quorum.

The presence of a majority of the whole Board of Directors shall be requisite for, and shall constitute a quorum for, the transaction of business at all meetings of the Board of Directors. The Board of Directors may from time to time approve its own rules for electronic voting or voting from remote locations or through proxies.

Section 5. Voting.

Each Director present at any meeting shall be entitled to cast one vote on each matter coming before such meeting for vote of the Directors.

ARTICLE IX  
COMMITTEES

Section 1. Executive Committee.

The Board of Directors shall by vote of a majority of all directors in office designate an Executive Committee which shall have the authority to meet and discuss potential actions between meetings of the Board of Directors; provided, however, that the Executive Committee shall not take any official action on behalf of the organization at such meetings.

Section 2. Other Committees.

The Board of Directors may adopt resolutions from time to time authorizing a standing committee that shall be envisioned as a permanent committee of the organization until such time as the need for such a committee has ceased. The President shall have the authority to appoint any ad hoc committees for temporary needs as the President sees fit.

Section 3. Committee Officers.

The President may appoint the Chair of each standing and ad hoc committee, providing that for standing committee Chairs, the President provides the Board of Directors with at least ten (10) days' advance notice of intent to appoint.

ARTICLE X  
FISCAL AUTHORITY

Section 1. Checks: Drafts Etc.

All checks, drafts or orders for the payment of money, notes or other evidences of indebtedness issued in the name of the association, shall be signed by such officer or officers, agent or agents of the association and in such manner as shall from time to time be determined by resolution of the Board of Directors. In the absence of such determination by the Board of Directors, such instruments shall be signed by the Treasurer or an Assistant Treasurer and countersigned by the President or a Vice-President of the association.

Section 2. Deposits.

All funds of the association shall be deposited from time to time to the credit of the association in such banks, trust companies or other depositories as the Board of Directors may select.

Section 3. Gifts.

The Board of Directors may accept on behalf of the association any contribution, gift, bequest or devise for the general purposes or for any special purpose of the organization.

Section 4. Prohibited Loans and Investments.

The organization shall not make any loan to any business, or to any resident or officer or director of the corporation. The organization shall not invest in any local enterprise.

Section 5. Budget.

An annual budget shall be prepared at the direction of the President for approval by the Board of Directors at its annual meeting.

Section 6. Fiscal Year.

The fiscal year shall be the calendar year, unless shall be determined by a vote of at least two-thirds of the Board of Directors.

Section 7. Financial Records.

The Board of Directors shall be responsible for seeing that the Treasurer keeps complete and correct and complete books account. All books and records of the organization may be inspected by any Director, or his agent or attorney, for any proper purpose at any reasonable time.

ARTICLE XI  
CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Whenever any member of the Board of Directors determines that he or she has or may have a conflict of interest, that member shall promptly disclose the nature and degree of such conflict or possible conflict, physically leave any meeting during the time at which the matter at hand is discussed, and refrain from voting on such matter. A conflict of interest exists or may exist when the Board of Directors member, or a member of his or her immediate family, siblings, parents, or adult children might profit financially from an action of the Board of Directors, other than the general sense in which all neighborhood property owners might be expected to profit from improvements in general conditions within the neighborhood.

ARTICLE XII  
DISSOLUTION OF THE ORGANIZATION

The Board of Directors may recommend to the full membership that the organization be abolished and that any real property that it owns may be distribution to non-profit organizations as the Board recommends. The Secretary shall attempt to notify each member of the upcoming vote on the proposed dissolution of the organization. A vote of at least two-thirds of the membership in attendance at the next general meeting shall be required for abolition.

ARTICLE XIII  
AMENDMENTS

These by-laws may be amended from time to time, upon the recommendation of the Board of Directors. Any member may propose amendment of the by-laws at a general meeting. If a majority of those present at that meeting vote in favor of the proposed amendment, the Board shall discuss the recommended amendment at its next meeting and make a recommendation to the full membership at the next meeting.

**SIGNATURE BLOCK AND WITNESSES**

[End of Sample By-Laws]

**Incorporation**

Making a neighborhood organization into a corporation implies a certain expectation of permanence. Most community associations will be non-profit corporations.

This does not mean that the group cannot make a profit on an individual activity; it does mean that the purpose of the association is not to make a profit. Profits can be held indefinitely and allowed to grow through investments, but the non-profit purpose must be stated clearly in the articles of incorporation.



Just to complicate matters further, a non-profit corporation also may set up a for-profit subsidiary corporation that it owns, which is particularly justified if the for-profit is related in subject matter to the non-profit. A common example would be a historic association that runs a gift shop. In rare instances neighborhood associations are situated to take advantage of such opportunities.

Both states in the U.S. and the IRS, the federal taxing agency in the U.S., have rules about how non-profit corporations have to handle money and behave. Those rules should be carefully followed. Incorporation does not automatically exempt the organization from taxes; an organization must apply to the federal IRS for an official status.

The application forms currently are called Package 1024, Application for Recognition of Exemption, and the process is described in the IRS publication 5557, Tax Exempt Status for Your Organization. Sometimes this status is called 501(c)(3), named for the portion of the federal statute that creates it. This common non-profit status allows for charitable, scientific, and educational purposes. Setting up a corporation is usually quick and can be accomplished by amateurs who read directions. But save yourselves much time and frustration by finding an experienced attorney to apply for IRA tax-exempt status.

By the way, don't let anyone tell you that a neighborhood association is not charitable if it does not give away money to poor people. Your neighborhood association is charitable unless you are running it as a business.

**An association can exist for a long time without incorporating, but incorporation offers the same advantages to community associations that it offers to businesses.**

While the appropriate federal IRS designation exempts the organization from taxes, a tax form still must be filed annually reporting certain types of income, officers, and so forth. Organizations that want to engage in lobbying, including exerting political influence on a city or county government, should choose instead to become 501(c)(4) organizations. A few neighborhood associations would fall within this category. Let's say it again: Consult someone who is experienced in preparing the applications for these designations; they are not at all good "do it yourself" projects.

An association can exist for a long time without incorporation, but incorporating offers the same advantages to community associations that it offers to a business: officers probably will not be sued as

individuals, if you have a non-profit corporation your “profits” from a carnival cannot be taxed, donations can be tax deductible for individuals and for-profit corporations, and so forth.

## Establishing a Bank Account

In most states that you can have a bank account without being incorporated, but that implication should be checked in your locale. When you’re ready, interview an officer at the bank that will be most convenient for the treasurer or other person who will handle deposits to determine exact requirements. If you are going in person to the bank and hope to establish the account in one visit, then take the persons whose signatures will be allowed on checks with you.

It is wise to require at least two signatures on checks of a certain size, if you expect to be writing any large checks—or perhaps especially if you do not anticipate writing checks over a certain amount! But if two signatures are required on all checks, it will be wise to establish a pool of more than two people who can sign checks.

Often organizations will establish three possible signers and require two. Or two signers commonly are required only for larger checks. Again, keep in mind the rules of the particular bank where you will be doing business. You may want to always require the president’s or treasurer’s signature, or both.



Even if you choose not to be incorporated at first or at all, once you have a bank account, you may want to have an EIN, the business equivalent of a social security number in the U.S. This Employer Identification Number is issued by the Internal Revenue Service, and you can download Form SS-4 from [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov) to apply for the number. This easy and relatively fast process prevents the possible scenario of an officer who uses her or his social security number to open the bank account from being questioned about the organization's income as if it were the officer's income.

## Mission Statements and Vision Statements

Somewhere in the process of figuring out officers, membership, by-laws, and incorporation, if your group includes members of the business community, someone surely will suggest that the group needs a formal mission statement or vision statement, or both.

Some experts try to distinguish between a mission statement and a vision statement, but for neighborhoods, the two might even be synonymous. A mission statement might start with "To serve the neighborhood through providing..." whereas a vision statement commonly describes a desired state of being: "The neighborhood offers diverse housing stock suitable for annual household income levels of \$35,000 to \$200,000..."

It is usually not worth the effort to argue with someone who has a strong preference for which one you have, and strong ideas about which is which.

A good galvanizing mission statement is one that is specific about what is to be done and when. For example, "to put a man on the moon in this decade and return him safely to the earth." Or "to reduce violent crime by two-thirds in the next two years." Or "to convince City Hall to install a rain garden in every block."

**Do not allow the discussion of a mission statement to bore people silly!**

While sometimes the discussion about a mission or vision statement results in clarifying the mission or vision, try to keep that discussion productive and illuminating, rather than arguing about semantics (words). If you start down the road of writing a mission statement and see that the discussion is becoming divisive or trivial (the latter being more likely), either abandon the idea of the vision or mission statement if possible, or delegate the matter to a committee to report back to the whole once they have the prospective mission statement hammered out. Then let the membership vote on the committee's recommended statement or choices of statements. Limit the time that these can be debated.



Do not allow the discussion of a mission statement to become so boring that people don't return to the meetings!

If you are enthusiastic about the idea of a mission or vision statement and want to compose it as a group, first have people brainstorm the key words or phrases they think should describe the organization. Then worry about the connecting verbs and the relationships of the nouns. If agreement about the key words and phrases is strong, but the statement is not coming together quickly, this is the time to assign the final wordsmithing to a committee.

Just to start the process, in the box below we show some common words or phrases that could stimulate brainstorming.

#### Sample Phrases for a Mission or Vision Statement:

Safe places to walk  
All income levels  
Without regard to race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation  
Increases diversity  
Preserves historic character  
Maintains the street grid  
Increases the beauty and functionality  
Diversifies shopping opportunities  
Increases employment opportunities  
Enhance business prosperity  
Encourage cleanliness  
Nurture children  
Increase levels of trust  
Unique advantages  
Provide social and economic opportunities  
Promote our brand  
Strengthen boundaries and gateways  
Support the development of new guidelines  
Establish leadership in  
Build on assets  
Contribute toward  
Shared values

## **“EARLY SUCCESS” PROJECTS**

You need to set some short-term projects with visible outcomes that your group can control. It is almost a cliché in community development work that you need a success or two early in the game. But it is so true. Just as individuals who improve their lives succeed when they conceive of the needed change as a series of small steps, each of which improves their confidence in being able to solve a problem, so groups benefit from a “small steps” approach.

Some will want to downgrade the importance of small steps, but hold steadfast in your belief that progress is made one small step at a time. Make sure the achievement of a small step is celebrated, if only with a hearty cheer at your meeting.

In this section we give you some of the easiest examples of “early win” projects.

## Clean-up Activities

A clean-up activity is riveting because it is a one-day activity involving potential for minimal planning, maximum opportunity for participation by young and old, and visible results. You may clean alleys, parks, business districts, creeks, parking lots, vacant lots, a particular problem lot, or simply any outdoor space you can find.

Some groups also encourage residents to clean out certain types of materials that they may not have disposed of. This is good if there is a tendency toward junk cars, old tires, and so forth in individual back yards. A clean-up day takes the stigma out of addressing the problem. You may need to arrange for certain fees to be waived.



Take abundant photos of the neighbors working and of the mounds of trash accumulated. Have a party or celebration of some type at the end of the day, or award workers with T-shirts.

Our website gives more details on [cleaning up a neighborhood park](#).

## **Planting Flowers or Trees**

In a similar vein, planting flowers or trees is a good, one-day early project with visible season-long or permanent results. A common color scheme and list of plantings is especially effective if you are intending to plant flowers all over the neighborhood or at a number of locations. If you want color through flowers, tilt toward perennials that only improve year after year for several years at a time. That can be less work than planting annuals.

Look for public parks and oddly shaped pieces of public land as area for a potential pop of color. Organize homeowners to allow a common front yard planting scheme, in return for help with the actual planting process. Schools and businesses may be glad for assistance in beautifying their immediate areas.

Local nurseries may be delighted to sponsor your event, in return for great publicity of course. Give it to them. Otherwise look into economies of buying in bulk. Don't buy cheap stuff from a big box store unless you are aware of the quality of that particular store's usual offerings. The cheap stuff will cost some money, but often deliver disappointing results.

## **Block Party**

Having a block party is a good early project if one of the goals is for the neighbors to become more acquainted with each other. If suspicion levels are high, buy inexpensive fast food rather than have people afraid to eat one another's potluck dishes. Otherwise the potluck offers multiple benefits and provides a focus for conversation.

Food is essential, whether that is simply homemade ice cream, chips and dips, fresh lemonade, barbecue, a potluck, or a full gourmet spread.

In many cities, there is a provision for temporarily blocking off traffic so that the street itself can be used as the party space, with people bringing tables and chairs. Otherwise you may use a back yard or park.

If you can afford to pay for entertainment, this is the time to do so. If not, look to a talented person on the block to play the guitar for dancing or singing, or simply set up games for the kids and watch. Balloons on street poles can add decoration, and ask people to bring fresh flowers from their gardens.

This works very well in a small town, where instead of a block the whole community may come to the downtown area, which is barricaded from traffic. Feature the name and agenda of your new organization prominently. This one-day event can without too much preparation, clean-up, or expense.

## Paint-Up Day

In neighborhoods where there are frame houses and lower income folks, a paint-up day may be a real hit. If the association can choose a few houses to paint, based on homeowner application, almost everyone can help. Recruit volunteers and find funding in advance, so that you don't promise more houses or porches to paint than can actually be accomplished. Your local hardware store or big box home store may be a sponsor or donor of materials. Like the clean-up, Paint-Ups offer instant visual gratification. Again, take lots of photos and celebrate at the end of the day, if only with flowers and balloons and high-fives.

A public facility, such as a park shelter, also might need paint.

**Take lots of photos and celebrate at the end of the day, if only with flowers and balloons and high-fives.**

## Web Site or Facebook Page

If neighbors are severely isolated from one another, there are not many acquaintanceships already established, or there is fear of recrimination if your neighborhood association "goes public," then your first project could be establishing a web site where people can get in touch with one another.

This is advisable if, and ONLY IF, you have a talented webmaster in your midst who could put up a simple website without breaking a sweat. Otherwise, you face a long and sometimes contentious process of disagreeing on design, content, and features. The webmaster needs to either understand that what he or she is doing is strictly temporary, or be willing to accept the assistance and supervision of a committee appointed by the president or board.

The web site might allow anonymous contributions of opinions that help leaders learn about community interests before stepping out with a platform. In many instances, a web site should wait. Less intense options include a list serve or working within an established web-based platform such as [NextDoor](#).

Establishing a Facebook Page or Group is often much easier, especially when the primary purpose is internal communication. In this case too, you must have a person in charge. Aggressive management of posts and privacy settings is essential to making sure your neighborhood presents and reinforces a positive image. Excess anger and strong language often cause people to withdraw from use, so approach Facebook and all social media cautiously. A strong moderator can change a potential minus into a plus.

**Neighborhood Tour or House Tour**

Neighborhoods wanting to inspire more interest in their housing market may want to have a neighborhood tour, historic tour, or house tour to spur city-wide interest. Show off your best assets, open something to the public that normally is not accessible, or interpret the history of something that is familiar or slightly familiar in a new way.

Make a party out of it by adding music, flowers, balloons, clowns, jugglers, street theater, or anything at your disposal. Keep the first event relatively simple; the logistics of having 10 private homes on tour are more difficult than you first imagine. You want fresh flowers, you need some sort of handout, you need to explain parking, you'll need signs to assure people they are in the right place, you need an assigned host if the owner does not want to be in the house (it's a good idea for the owner to go shopping that day, by the way), and some owners will want special concessions such as floor runners.

Try to avoid having to print brochures commercially if you can. More than the internally-oriented events described above, this one will require interaction with the press and a wider area to accomplish its goals. But if a neighborhood is united, enthusiastic, and multi-talented, it is a feasible first project, provided it is kept as simple but interesting as possible.



**Event Targeting Businesses or Investors**

Communities wanting to attract specific businesses or types of businesses may want to have a very targeted event, inviting specific people they would like to see investing in their neighborhood.

Begin by issuing the invitation in person or at least by phone, thereby establishing at least a bit of interest. Start the event by asking representatives of your existing businesses or institutions to describe how happy they are in your community, but how much they would like to have a particular business of Type X, or how their customers are always asking where they can buy Product or Service Y.

This might be done at a breakfast meeting at your best venue, or even in a private home. Put your very best foot forward in terms of appearance of the community, friendliness and cooperation of the neighbors.

Make a great story—individuals contributed dollars to buy this wonderful food because they want to see business come into the neighborhood so much. Establish a group dynamic, if you can, by inviting several non-competing but compatible businesses at a time. It is a great strategy to invite 10 non-chain businesses that would be compatible with each other, and with your existing business base, to come and see your three vacant storefronts at the same time. It sets up a bit of a competition as to who can sign first, and also lets them make “I will come if you will come” pacts with one another.

If your situation is more that you have three prospects who are at least willing to see the properties, but you have ten properties, target their attention to the most strategic property to fill while mentioning that you have others. If the residential component of your neighborhood is good-looking, make sure that you tour prospective business owners through the streets. If targeting retail or restaurant uses, remember to accentuate institutions such as manufacturers, large offices, or places of worship that generate traffic in the community only at specific times of the week or day.

### **Neighborhood Walk or March**

For communities facing the worst of drug, addiction, and poverty problems, the way to address this first may be by establishing a regular neighborhood walk so that people begin to get to know each other, and that good people begin to band together and learn to trust one another. It also lets the people engaging in the anti-social behavior know that they are out-numbered.

Create a simple sign or placard on colored poster board for a person at the front of the march to carry. You want neighbors to see you and understand your cause. If you are taking our suggestion and trying to create a regular weekly event, be sure that the sign explains how to join next week, as in “Every Friday at 6 p.m., Conway Park shelter.”

**A regular neighborhood walk will help people begin to know each other and develop trust.**

## Picnic

Slightly more complex is a picnic event with a celebrity speaker or attraction. This can be a potluck, or a catered affair. The association may buy the food, if there is a treasury already. More likely, everyone will need to pay. In any event, really try to collect reservations so that food money is not wasted. This can be a great opportunity to get the mayor to take notice, to entice a well-known community figure to join your cause, and to stimulate enthusiasm.

## Health Fair or Jobs Fair

Do not try a health fair or jobs fair as an early event all by yourselves. These are viable early wins if and only if you can inspire a large and experienced institution such as a hospital to come into the neighborhood and essentially put on the event with minimal help from you. If so, that could be a great boost. But such events are too complex to organize on your own as a first event; your volunteers will be exhausted and the organization likely will fall apart.

On a side note, if your small step disappears in a few weeks or months, immediately re-address it. In groups, as in individuals, the tendency toward denial of a problem is strong, so if you celebrated a success and then notice that the graffiti, the gunfire, the traffic, the noise, the litter, or the cattle rustlers returned, immediately focus the group's attention again on the original goal. Learn something from the first regression if you can, but if not, simply try again. Most types of unruly human behavior can only be calmed through repeated efforts.

**If the positive impact of your “small step” disappears in a few weeks or months, immediately re-address it.**

## THE FIVE BIG CHALLENGES

### Fund Raising

Your group may decide initially or at some point in the process of forming and being an organization that it needs money.



Some groups need money quickly, such as those who need to buy advertising, or hire a consultant or attorney. Other groups just gradually slide toward the need for money, as they develop the desire to offer prizes at their annual parade or the wish to advertise for members in a small newspaper.

As mentioned already, you may be able to meet your financial needs through imposing dues. This works as the sole funding method mainly where people are of fairly uniform income levels and where people have more money than is required for survival. If it works for you, by all means use this method as the simplest, fairest, and most direct method of funding.

If, however, people are resistant to dues, income levels differ substantially causing dues to be perceived as unfair, or members are resentful of residents who will not join or pay dues, you may need to turn to other fund raisers. Sometimes you simply need additional funding.

Like many other times in this book, our suggestion is to prefer the simple over the complex, at least at first. Exceptions to this rule of thumb will be noted later. First, here are some ideas on relatively simple fund raisers:

1. Sponsor a concert or other entertainment event in which essentially you hire a performer that your constituency will really enjoy. It is even possible to ask a theatre group or regularly recurring musical show to put on an extra show just for your group at a time and day when they



ordinarily would not perform. See if the entertainer will contribute all or part of their usual fee or expenses, and in any event, of course charge more than you need to pay them.

If you have to pay the performers, learn well the first lesson of fund raising: Don't Lose Money. The most likely small-scale money maker in this arena would be asking a local musical group with at least one tie to the neighborhood to perform free; then you know that you will make at least some money.



2. Ask a local restaurant to contribute 20% of revenue from a certain evening or day to your group, in return for your publicity and asking your members to dine there. A restaurant is particularly likely to participate if you choose a time when normally their customer base is low, typically a Monday or Tuesday night. Sometimes a restaurant that is normally closed on Monday will open just for your group, and you can perhaps even arrange a higher percentage than 20% if you are in the neighborhood.
3. Hold a raffle if you have something to offer that will really draw attention. That means it is a fairly big item that people from beyond your territory would like to have. Make it something unique and exciting. A weekend at a condo 200 miles away will not attract the kind of interest you need, if the raffle is a stand-alone event. If you have acquired a house, raffle it. If you can offer a week in an apartment in Paris, and you have a ready supply of people who can afford transportation, offer that. Otherwise forget raffles as a major source of funds.

If you decide to proceed, sell tickets by asking people to e-mail or call one person, if your organization does not have an office. If an organization in your neighborhood is willing to take the calls or e-mails, so much the better. Establishing a PayPal account is so easy that you should be able to hold a raffle without having to handle cash, but pay attention to whether you are implicating a member as receiving personal income. Watch applicable laws and rules if you are thinking about using your website or a commercial website to sell tickets.

4. Hold a barbecue featuring the best-known barbecue artist in your area. In many communities someone has a portable set-up and can bring it to your neighborhood. The smell of smoky meat wafting over the neighborhood will bring publicity even with those who did not read their newsletter.



If you can, have your members make and contribute the side dishes, including the baked beans, collard greens, goat cheese salad, or whatever would be your neighborhood's style. Drive as hard a bargain with the barbecue pit owner as you can, but of course be respectful and fair if the person is trying to make living in this manner.

Charge enough to make sure you have a profit, and publicize the event to as wide an area as possible. Selling tickets in advance can provide you with some assurance that you can make a profit. If you can manage a little extra pizzazz for the event, by making the venue unique,

offering entertainment, or having your members do face painting with the kids, so much the better.

5. Find a business in your area that is paying for a service that your group could perform. To meet our criterion for easy fund-raising, this should be a once-a-year or twice-a-year job. For instance, you might be able to rake the leaves or help them convert from summer to winter, or from winter to summer. Or maybe you have a business that badly needs painting, so you achieve more than one objective by offering to paint it for an amount that is less than a contractor would charge, but would represent a solid contribution to your treasury.

These examples are enough to extract the key principles of easy fund-raising:

- Find something that is done once and therefore does not require continuous recruitment of volunteers.
- Find something that an expert already is doing and engage them to do it another time for the benefit of your group.
- Find something that a local interest is paying others to do that your group can provide on an occasional basis.
- Find something that is already organized by others, and add value as an organization by publicizing the event and bringing in customers for a known commodity.



Considering another important point, perhaps your fund raising can contribute to awareness of your major issues. In this category fall work-intensive but very worthwhile fund raisers such as neighborhood tours, fairs, and so forth. If you have interesting architecture, organize a house or institution tour with a hefty admission fee. If you have great restaurants, initiative an intriguing progressive dinner. If you are rural but your group is concerned that the rural way of life is being ruined by intrusive development, hold a pig roast, barn dance, or other agriculturally oriented event.

If you have lots of kids and a park but not much else to brag about, have the kids do a really amazing show in the park every Saturday afternoon all summer, followed by homemade ice cream.

If your neighborhood is in trouble, consider carefully whether you want visitors to know that. If you do, bring people in to see how bad conditions are and to try to shame City Hall into paying attention.

For additional fund-raising perspectives, see our page at <http://www.useful-community-development.org/how-to-fundraise.html>.

## Organizing for Addressing an Issue

If you have a problem for which the solution is not readily apparent, you will need to take the time and effort to determine (a) the causes of the problem, (b) whether the causes are larger than your organization can hope to stem, (c) possible solutions that have been effective in other places or times, and (d) a visualized positive outcome.

Build up the outcome or the goal, making it as specific as possible so that people can really visualize it and formulate a compelling issue.

Examples of a specific goal with a visual component are:

- Our neighborhood would be so safe that people would take walks in the neighborhood after dark again.
- Every storefront would be filled with a customer-oriented business.
- Every vacant residential lot will be developed into a new residence.
- Every person in the neighborhood who wants to work will be employed.

Notice that the goals need not be entirely “realistic”—they may be idealistic as long as they are not laughable. It is probably not realistic that there will never again be a code violation in your neighborhood.

In resolving issues, it is a good practice to begin with the end in mind. The concept of “[backward planning](#)” may be a useful tool if the problem is well-defined, finite, and somewhat within the neighborhood’s control. Thinking of the desired end state, what happens right before that? And right before that? And so forth, till you see where to start.

An example of such a problem in a neighborhood where there is a market for housing would be eight city-owned vacant lots that you would like to see sold and developed as housing. A “backward planning” approach would be reaching an agreement with the city that within the next two years, they auction the properties to the highest bidder that will agree to construct a certain type of housing unit on them.

Since you anticipate that this will be a two-year effort, you might say that within 18 months, you need to have an agreement with the city on exactly how the request for development proposals will be administered. In 12 months, you want to establish with the city what rules will be imposed on the purchasers of the property. Within 6 months, you may want to have an agreement with the city that you are authorized to plant grass seed and regularly remove weeds and trash from the lots.

We are great proponents of the typical forward-looking planning as well, where your first item would be to obtain permission for seeding and weeding, and so forth. However, “backward planning” is useful when you suspect that someone or an entity such as city government may be a little slow in proceeding, but your organization wants to pick up the pace. This method helps identify the amount of type each step should require, and therefore when you need to start.

You should be learning that starting a neighborhood organization, whether it is to deal with one issue on a temporary basis or to set up a more permanent forum for action and socializing, involves setting up a delicate balance between a real problem and hope for a solution. Employ every method you can think of to make it fun, appealing, lively, and safe for people to become involved in your cause.

When hope seems in short supply, the solution often is to cite how people similar circumstances obtained a positive outcome. The Internet is your friend in locating solutions, and as we expand our set of e-books and articles at [www.useful-community-development.org](http://www.useful-community-development.org), giving you new materials in real time, you will be well equipped to provide hope.

In emphasizing the importance of hope, we do not mean to imply that you should underestimate the extent of real threats and problems. Actually underestimation is a serious issue for neighborhoods and communities, most of which do not realize they are in danger of dying until they are on life support.

Pay attention to the opinion of professionals in urban issues, community development, housing, rural development, or whatever is appropriate in your case. If they are pessimistic about your chances, ask the “why” question to every assertion of pessimism they make. Just as individuals often defy the odds, so do communities. But for communities to beat the odds, major effort is required.

**Just as individuals often defy the odds, so do communities.**

## **A Basic Communications Program**

Shortly after the question of the name is settled, you may want to consider some type of organized communication program. Start an e-mail list for sure.

Newsletters also immediately spring to mind, but before you start down that road, determine if you have the people, energy, and resources to keep one going. Consider carefully if a newsletter really has to be a monthly publication, whether it can be labeled An Occasional Publication as part of its charm, or whether bi-monthly or quarterly will work fine.

Also consider whether a paper edition distributed by mail is the format for your newsletter. If most people in your neighborhood have Internet access, you probably want an e-mail newsletter that saves

paper and postage. Someone with a word processing program can generate the newsletter, ideally saving it as a .pdf file that can be opened by both PC and Mac users. A standard 8.5 by 11 inches is the best format because some people will print it at home. Better yet, use a web-based newsletter service such as [Mail Chimp](#) or [Constant Contact](#).

Graphic interest is always advisable, so use abundant photos and some free or very inexpensive clip art just to make your newsletter more appealing. Try to include local photos in every issue. Two columns may be more interesting than one, but there are effective one-column formats. Give each article a headline (title), and don't place more than three or four articles in an e-newsletter or on a printed page.

Longer is not better, so keep the length of each article down to what is necessary to convey essential facts as well as local color. If you or someone writing for the newsletter has a tendency to write lengthy articles, insist on the newspaper format where the most important information is conveyed at the top of the article. Then cut the article off at some point, and conclude by saying, "For further information, contact Jim at xxx-xxxx," or "To discuss this matter further, speak with any board member."

Printed newsletters may be distributed by hand, but if you do so, remind distributors that it is illegal to put them directly into mailboxes. So they will need to be tied to doorknobs, placed between a screen door and front door if you live in a neighborhood where most people have both, or other such method.

You have the options of distributing newsletters only to your paid members, but you may want to consider distributing them widely as inexpensive advertising if you have decided to be a dues-supported organization.

Our website gives more detail about [neighborhood publicity](#) and [neighborhood newsletters](#).



After the name is settled and some basic communication established, another issue that members will raise is a logo. Many important organizations have survived without a logo, and similar to the question of by-laws, do not allow the logo discussion to de-rail other important work. If you have a graphic designer in your midst, ask him or her to design a logo free. If not, you may decide to pay for this work, and some logo design services have risen on the Internet. You also can try those ultra-inexpensive web-based services, such as [www.fiverr.com](http://www.fiverr.com). Sometimes you can get a cool logo for \$5 USD, or pay three people to do one each and choose the best one.

If the cost of a logo is questionable expense for you, consider just a graphic way that you always write your organization's name. For instance, it could be **Southern Heights Neighbors**. But you can be more inventive than that!

You can find ornamental fonts (styles of lettering) on computers, so your solution might be as simple as finding a font that reflects the feeling you would like for your organization. Certain fonts recall particular historic periods, formality or informality, elegance or a hip gritty look, or an industrial or homey feel. Find a member with many fonts, which is almost anyone with a computer, and you will encounter many choices. If you use Microsoft Word, you have access to Word Art, which makes the words themselves look three-dimensional and fancy.

### **Leadership: Rhythm of Activity and Preventing Burnout**

Leading a neighborhood association can be surprisingly hard work. There are myriad personalities to manage, and a startling array of opinions, tiny facts, power structures, and details to master.



For instance, as you move past the first meeting or two, you should learn about neighborhood associations in general. If you are a novice in the world of non-profits, you may want to read about [how to start a nonprofit](#) of any type.

You need to start becoming a subject matter expert on your first problem, unless you have a professional in urban or town issues in your midst who attends meetings faithfully and can help fill the knowledge void.

Sometimes neighborhood dynamics feels more like voodoo than an art or a science. But we can assure you that someone somewhere has invented a successful approach to your issues--even if it is a work-intensive approach.

So between helping human beings work together productively in an organization, becoming a nonprofit organization expert, and learning more about neighborhood dynamics than you ever imagined, it would be easy for you as a leader to burn out. We don't want that to happen.

Worse yet, we don't want the whole organization to become burned out.

Let's assume for a moment that the first issue you have addressed is resolved for the time being. How do you keep up enthusiasm?

It is perfectly fine to allow a month or two of vacation from group activity before delving into the next big problem or project, but do this on a pre-determined schedule so that it does not seem as though the leadership or the membership is exhausted.

Simply say, "We're taking the summer off, but we'll see you on September 17," or "Let's take a two-month break to enjoy our success before we begin the next project, which will be... (describe it)." In a basically stable community this approach is better than continuing to schedule meetings, whether or not anyone has determined what the next project will be. If you are afraid to let the effort sag, plan purely social events for a couple of months.

If your community or neighborhood is in rather desperate straits, or if your group is large, it seems silly to stop all activity after an apparent success. If you wish, shift the spotlight to a different committee or group of individuals, and allow the different group to carry the burden for a time. The people who worked hard on the last success should have the luxury of simply showing up to an occasional meeting for a while.

**If you sense that the group does not know what to do next, be particularly deliberate about taking a break.**



All of this strategy is designed to prevent group burnout or a premature disbanding of the group when there is more work to be done. While performing an individual cognitive task, most of recognize that if we feel “brain dead,” we should take a walk or another type of break. Or we can take two weeks of vacation and feel refreshed. Or a six-month sabbatical to concentrate on family matters and return to work reinvigorated.

The same principles apply to a group. Do not push on at the cost of having almost everyone tire of the work. And if you sense that the group does not have an idea of what to do next, be particularly deliberate about taking that two or three month break, even though you may be afraid that the group will never come back together. If indeed you have correctly diagnosed the need for a multi-dimensional group, after a hiatus, people will come back with new energy. The you can hold a session in which ideas about the next project are discussed, and in effect you re-organize again around a new focus.

## Organizing Your Information

A key to your success will be good information. It might seem silly to include organizing your information in a book about starting a neighborhood association. But actually, as we know from experience if we think about it, it is much easier to collect information when we notice we will need it, rather than to wait until months or years later to decide that we really should be adding up how much we spent on milk over the last five years.

So our argument is to set up some basic systems for collecting information from the very beginning, knowing you will have to add other forms of information and tweak your systems as you go along.

Numbers seem to impress many people, and particularly if you are vying with other communities for the attention and financial assistance of a government and foundations, sooner or later will need data. Data that are dramatic enough often will assist you in recruiting people from the neighborhood to participate in your activities.

Block Group	Number of Housing Units
128	91
129	15
130	14
131	19

Turn to your most local level of government first for data. For instance if you are a rural area, that might be your county government. For a small town or a city, it will be your city government. Frequently data will be decentralized, but if your city has a planning office, they probably will be pre-disposed to find you whatever type of data you need. Probably they already have it formatted into an electronic file—and all you have to do is ask!

Police in particular like to tightly control their data, sometimes for good reason and sometimes just because that is the culture. If you cannot persuade your police department to give you numbers of crimes on a block-by-block basis, perhaps they will give you data covering a larger area. If they will not

give you numbers, perhaps they will give you rankings. A ranking would mean that perhaps your neighborhood has the fourth highest rate of car theft per thousand residents of any place in the city.

The U.S. Census collects a rich array of data, and now most of it can be accessed on-line ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)). In large cities, block-level data about housing characteristics are available and may be useful. If there is no one in your group with the patience or educational sophistication to use the on-line data, ask at a local college or again at the city planning department or the city clerk for an interpretation. A friendly librarian might help too.

Our web page on [neighborhood demographics](#) will be helpful if you don't know much about the topic.

Sometimes you will need to gather or collect your own data. Examples of do-able projects would be:

- Counting the number of filled and vacant storefronts.
- Counting the number of cans and bottles littering the park on various mornings of the week.
- Taking your own phone or paper-and-pencil survey of member attitudes, beliefs, or characteristics.
- Counting the number of children using the sidewalk versus walking in the street to school.
- Counting the number of trail users during certain hours of the day.
- Counting the number of porch lights on in particular blocks.
- Counting how many cars roll through a stop sign.
- Asking your merchants for sales data from "off-season" months compared to "high-season" months.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

### **Networking:**

Permanent organizations of community associations in the U.S. include:

Community Associations Institute (applicable to you if you have a formal homeowners or property owners association), [caionline.org](http://caionline.org)

Neighborhoods USA, [www.nusa.org](http://www.nusa.org)

### **Training:**

An organization that offers books, materials, and trainings on the asset-based approach to community development is:

Asset-Based Community Development Institute, [www.abcdinstitute.org](http://www.abcdinstitute.org)

A membership organization that offers excellent periodic trainings to both member and non-member group representatives is:

NeighborWorks® America, [www.nw.org](http://www.nw.org)

Training in community organizing, with a progressive or liberal streak, occurs through:  
Midwest Academy, [www.midwestacademy.com](http://www.midwestacademy.com)

Excellent training and programs about community dialogue are available through:  
[www.everyday-democracy.org](http://www.everyday-democracy.org)

### **Critical Internet Resources:**

Download the free [Google Earth](http://www.google.com/earth/) tool, or better yet the amazing Google Earth Pro tool, and zoom in on aerial photography of your neighborhood. Other cool features of Pro make it quite worthwhile for the new neighborhood leader.

DataPlace™ is designed to provide a one-stop online source for housing and demographic data. (Demographic means data about people's income, age, race, and so forth.) You can create maps, charts, and rankings to compare your neighborhood or community with others or simply to illustrate characteristics of your own place. Find this at <http://www.knowledgeplex.org/dataplace.html>.

Especially helpful example of city websites offering neighborhood association advice:  
[www.cityofhenderson.com/neighborhood-services](http://www.cityofhenderson.com/neighborhood-services)

Our own website, which you can search from nearly every page. Obvious choices are the three-part series on [starting a neighborhood association](#), which contains a fair amount of overlap with this e-book but includes some information not found here. We also have a three-part series on [neighborhood associations](#) in general, which will help when people want to jump ahead to topics that we consider as not being essential decisions for the first few months.

### **Books:**

Margaret Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Return Hope to the Future*

John Kretzman and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*

Mike Green with Henry Moore and John O'Brien, *When People Care Enough to Act: ABCD in Action*

Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*

John McKnight, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*

Peter Lovenheim, *In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time*

Nancy Thompson, *All About Neighborhood Associations* (forthcoming, electronic only)