

Consensus and the Arrowtown Housing Cooperative

What is Consensus?

Consensus is working together rather than competing against each other in reaching agreement on a question or issue. The goal of consensus is a decision that is consented to by all group members, though this full consent does not mean that everyone must be completely satisfied with the final outcome—total satisfaction may even be rare.

Arrowtown Meeting Process

All meetings of any body of the Arrowtown Housing Cooperative should use both this document and the sincerest of good will as a guide in conducting meetings and making decisions.

Things for Each Participant to Remember

We each have the responsibility to engage in the meetings that we attend. Engagement, in this case, means participating, offering up disagreement, agreement, additional information and helping along the process of making a decision.

- 1) **Select a facilitator.** The facilitator will walk the group through the meeting. They will introduce agenda items, make sure that all members are heard and will also test for consensus. The facilitator *should not* be someone who has a lot to say at that meeting and, if possible, the responsibility of being facilitator should not always fall to the same person.
- 2) **Set an agenda.** This way all members know and agree on what they will talk about and in what order.
- 3) **Introduce an item.** The facilitator or someone they call on should introduce the item with: **1) a clear definition of the item** being discussed so that anyone who has less information will be caught up; and **2) a statement of what has to be decided.**
- 4) **Discussion.** An individual introduces an idea for discussion and this could be an opinion, a definition of the problem, a suggested approach or a proposal for a decision. Individuals respond to that idea and add more information or suggest changes or alternatives.

During discussion the facilitator is responsible for, though all group members share in these responsibilities:

- a) Keeping discussion on topic
- b) Providing clarification and rephrasing of complicated or confusing discussion
- c) Summarizing underlying agreement and difference in viewpoint
- d) Identifying new issues as they arise
- e) Ensuring that all viewpoints are heard and understood by the group as a whole

f) Identifying problems with the group's process and attempt to remedy them

- 5) **Restating Conclusion.** When it is apparent that most viewpoints have been expressed and all new information has been shared the facilitator or someone else should state the conclusion which the group appears to be moving toward.
- 6) **Making the Decision.** After the restatement of the conclusion, the group can respond with agreement or disagreement. Special care must be taken to be sure that any objections are heard. It is legitimate for someone to say, "I have no specific objections, but I don't feel settled on the subject yet."

In the end the decision need not satisfy everyone in the group, but it must be one that all group members are willing to live with. If serious objections still exist, then a decision is not made.

If a decision implies that an action will be taken, the group must clarify responsibilities for that action to ensure that it is carried out.

In special circumstances a group member may decide that while they would otherwise spend substantial time promoting an alternate solution, that an immediate decision by the group is so important to the group's interests that they will go along with a decision that they would not normally approve of. This is a concession that the person is making for the sake of the group and the group should never pressure someone into making this decision as the result would not be a true consensus decision.

- 7) **Blocking a Decision.** In our culture we are familiar with disagreement, but *blocking is not disagreement*. Disagreement is actually described as being at the heart of consensus building. Speaking openly, honestly and responsibly about the disagreement of ideas, facts, opinions and solutions and listening carefully to your fellows will almost always yield a decision for us.

Instead, blocking is when almost all of the group has come to a firm agreement on the issue at hand, but someone has felt it necessary to hold out on agreeing with the rest of the group—this can be called "blocking."

In short, blocking consensus occurs when one or a few individuals preclude what otherwise would be united judgment on an issue which has evolved through the consensus discussion process. Blocking is a statement of the great seriousness of someone's objections to a decision.

The decision to block consensus is a big one. If you as an individual block a decision that the rest of the group supports, you are saying that you feel the decision is so seriously wrong that you will not permit the group to proceed on it. Your reason may be on moral or practical grounds, or based on personal feelings or on the needs of group members or people whom the group affects. It is important not to take your power to block consensus lightly—it should never be used without first disagreeing and attempting to build consensus during the discussion phase (to do so would be an abuse of this power). However, if after careful consideration, you strongly believe that the decision would be a seriously wrong one, then it is your responsibility to block consensus.

The Rights of Members to Block and Participate in Decisions:

- a) **Residential members**, at any meeting they attend, shall have the right to participate in decisions and block a decision should they feel it necessary, so long as they have fully and responsibly participated in the consensus decision making process.
- b) **Associate members** shall have more limited rights to blocking and participation than residential members, though the cooperative should exhaust all avenues for reaching consensus before making a decision that *any* member would feel the need to block. This policy, hopefully, will never have to be used, but is in place to protect the cooperative and the work of all members (both residential and associate), not out of distrust.
 - i) Unless the associate member's endorsing party has established a policy to the contrary, at meetings of that endorsing party, the member shall have the right to participate in decisions and block a decision should they feel it necessary, so long as they have fully and responsibly participated in the consensus decision making process. The endorsing party has the right to further restrict the rights of associate members inside that body, but that must be agreed upon from the outset of associate membership; and
 - ii) at General Membership Meetings, the associate member has the right to participate in decisions, but not to block a decision; and
 - iii) at General Membership Meetings and Board Meetings, the associate member has the right to participate in elections. If the member's endorsing party is a subgroup, they shall have the right to participate in the selection of subgroup representatives. If the member's endorsing party is a committee, they shall have the right to participate in the selection of Officers of the Board.