

A Primer on Membership Development for Community Land Trusts

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In the formative years of the community development field, it would have been unthinkable for a nonprofit housing organization *not* to have a grassroots membership and *not* to have a governing board elected in whole or in part by that membership. More specifically, it was taken as an article of faith that those persons most directly affected or most directly benefited by the organization's work should have a favored place among the organization's members and directors.

Times have changed. There are now many nonprofits in the community development field that lack an engaged membership and an elected board. Many more that started out with deep roots in their communities have allowed those roots to wither. They may retain the formal structures of community involvement, but they have evolved into little more than opportunistic developers. They chase dollars, they acquire sites, they build housing, but they no longer do much to organize, mobilize, or involve the surrounding community in the organization's activities.

Most community land trusts, by contrast, remain faithful to democratic precepts that were once ubiquitous among nonprofit organizations that develop low-cost housing or redevelop low-income communities. A community land trust (CLT), in its classic configuration, is a membership organization, drawing its members from the neighborhoods it serves, from the people it houses, and from a broader community that supports its work. A majority of the directors on a CLT's board are directly elected by its membership. A third of the seats on a CLT's board are reserved for persons representing the interests of households living on the CLT's land, the clearest beneficiaries of the CLT's work.

Many CLTs take community involvement one step further, recognizing that neither an open membership nor an elected board are sufficient by themselves to ensure that a community's leaders and a community's residents will be actively involved in the CLT. These CLTs look for additional ways to raise their public profile, to expand their community base, and to energize and engage their members. A few CLTs seek to create a *culture* of involvement, where all plans, programs, and operations are made accessible to persons residing in neighborhoods served by the CLT and to persons residing in homes developed by the CLT.

There is enormous variation from one CLT to another, therefore, in the **ROLES** that members are asked to play. There is enormous variation in the **CONSTITUENCIES** that are targeted and recruited for membership in the CLT. There is enormous variation in the **ACTIVITIES** that are sponsored by a particular CLT in seeking to build and to sustain a membership. Membership development is a careful and conscious mixture of all three, with every CLT making slightly different choices in deciding how these roles, constituencies, and activities should be blended together.

WHY? (Roles)

Any strategy for membership development must begin with a clear understanding of why a membership is desired by a particular CLT at a particular time. Since the reasons for nurturing a membership can vary, so can the roles that a CLT assigns to its members. The most common of these reasons and roles are described below (in no particular order of priority or importance):

Accessibility

A membership can serve as the CLT's eyes and ears in the community, spotting unmet needs, communicating complaints, and keeping the organization open to information and ideas coming from outside of itself.

Accountability

A membership can assist in maintaining the credibility, acceptability, and authority of the CLT in the eyes of the community. It can help to keep the CLT closely aligned with the community's interests and issues, while keeping the CLT from drifting away from its original vision and values.

Advocacy

A membership can assist in promoting and defending the CLT in the face of local skepticism about this unusual model of housing. It can also help to overcome Not-In-My-Backyard opposition to projects proposed by the CLT.

Fundraising

A membership can assist in raising money from private and public sources to pay for the CLT's operations, programs, and projects. (Indeed, for most CLTs, fundraising and membership development go hand in hand.)

Labor

A membership can provide the CLT with a pool of committed individuals who are willing to volunteer their talents and time to the organization.

Leadership

A membership can serve as a reservoir and incubator for future leaders. Nominees to a CLT's board of directors, for example, are often drawn from those individuals who have already declared their support for the CLT by joining its membership.

Marketing

A membership can help to spread the word about the availability of houses for sale or apartments for rent through the CLT.

Networking

People who are members of the CLT are often members of other community organizations as well. A membership can connect the CLT to potential allies in the nonprofit, public, and business sectors.

Planning

A membership can help the CLT to evaluate ideas proposed by staff or board for new programs, new priorities, or new ways of conducting the organization's affairs, helping the CLT to anticipate how these changes might be perceived and received by the wider community.

Stewardship

A membership can ensure that the CLT remains faithful to its mission and model. In the "classic" CLT, the membership must approve any sale of the CLT's land and must approve any amendment to the CLT's limited-equity resale formula. The board cannot act unilaterally on either count. This helps the CLT to resist short-term pressures and temptations that can compromise the organization's long-term commitment to stewarding land and preserving affordability.

WHO? (Constituencies)

Community land trusts draw their members from multiple constituencies within the same community. Building a membership requires a clear understanding of whose interests are served by the CLT. The interest groups from whom CLTs have tended to have the greatest success in recruiting new members include the following:

Leaseholders living on CLT land

Most CLTs grant automatic membership to any adults living on land that is leased from the CLT, homeowners and tenants alike. (CLTs may also grant membership to businesses or nonprofits that occupy buildings on the CLT's land.) A leaseholder's interests are most likely to revolve around the fees charged, services provided, restrictions imposed, and risks taken by the CLT as the owner of land beneath the leaseholder's feet. Yet many leaseholders also take a personal interest in the CLT's activities and accomplishments, lending their support to both.

Homeowners not living on CLT land

To the extent that a CLT is successful in promoting revitalization and reinvestment in a dilapidated neighborhood, there is ample reason for the neighborhood's long-time homeowners to become members and supporters of the CLT. Conversely, support from homeowners in a gentrifying neighborhood where reinvestment has run amok or in an escalating market where housing prices and property taxes have begun to soar, is more likely to be linked to a CLT's success in moderating speculation, preventing displacement, and preserving access to homeownership for key workers.

Tenants not living on CLT land

Tenant support for a CLT is often based on hopes that the CLT will be successful in enabling tenants of modest means to purchase a home. Even tenants who are not prospective homebuyers, however, may respond to the CLT's promise of improving conditions in neighborhoods with dilapidated housing or stabilizing conditions in neighborhoods with overheated housing markets. Either promise may persuade tenants who are living in the CLT's service area to become members of the CLT.

Nonprofits providing services to the same constituency

The CLT is unlikely to be the only nonprofit organization serving lower-income households within a particular geographic area. The CLT may not even be the only nonprofit providing housing services. Serving the same community and sharing, perhaps, many of the same clients, the CLT and other nonprofits will often have many interests in common. Building on this base of commonality, CLTs in some locales have developed facilities for nonprofit partners, engaged in joint fundraising campaigns, or pooled their resources to provide homebuyer counseling, job training, day care, or other services for lower-income residents. A secondary benefit of such inter-organizational cooperation is the opportunity provided to the CLT to dip into a broader pool of potential members.

Conservation and historic preservation

In many communities, advocates for the development of affordable housing find themselves frequently in conflict with advocates for the preservation of open space, wetlands, agricultural lands, greenbelts, or wildlife habitats. In many other communities, the conflict is between housing and historic preservation, with advocates disagreeing over preservationist restrictions that can increase the cost of housing or battling over the future of an older, gentrifying neighborhood. Nevertheless, here and there, affordable housing, land conservation, and historic preservation organizations are discovering new ways of working together for common ends, combining their clout - and merging their memberships - for mutual gain. At a regional level, the fight against sprawl, in particular, has produced some surprising alliances between smart-growth activists and CLT practitioners. At the local level, some CLTs have expanded their base of community support by leasing land for community gardeners, developing vest pocket parks, or, in rural areas, combining a housing agenda with the preservation of family farming.

Local employers

In several communities, where a shortage of “workforce housing” has become a growing concern, major (and minor) employers have been persuaded to support a CLT with money and memberships. Such support has come from hospitals, schools, and municipal governments that worry about attracting key workers into communities with little low-cost housing; it has also come from businesses and banks that worry about retaining lower-wage employees who cannot afford to purchase a home.

Faith-based organizations

Churches, synagogues, and other religious institutions have been instrumental in seeding and supporting CLTs in a number of communities. Some CLTs have allowed the institutions themselves to become members of the corporation. A few CLTs have reserved seats on their board for faith-based organizations that are active in the CLT’s service area. More commonly, CLTs have looked to the congregations of faith-based organizations for organizers, leaders, and members.

WHAT? (Activities)

Activities for membership development fall into two categories: those aimed at *building* a membership (recruitment) and those aimed at *maintaining* a membership (retention). This is not a hard-and-fast separation, however, since the same activity often serves both purposes.

The goal of recruitment is to expand the number of people who are ready and willing to join the CLT. The goal of retention is to convince people who have already joined the CLT not only to remain members but also to participate more actively in the CLT. A CLT's tasks in recruiting and retaining members are three-fold: people must be informed about the CLT; they must be involved in the work of the CLT; and they must be invited to join. A membership is gradually built, in other words, through *information*, *involvement*, and *invitation*.

INFORMATION

❖ **Board & staff conversations**

Much information about the CLT is spread informally, through casual conversations. Every director on a CLT's board and every employee on a CLT's staff should be able to explain this unique model to friends and foes alike. There should be consistency in their explanations, moreover, so that people who are hearing about the CLT for the first time are getting a similar message. Orientation sessions for new directors and new employees, "refresher courses" for directors and employees who have long been with the CLT, and participation by board and staff in regional and national CLT conferences are some of the methods commonly used by CLTs to enhance the quality and consistency of the story being told by their closest associates.

❖ **Leaseholder conversations**

In the eyes of local residents, homeowners who actually live on the CLT's land are the word-of-mouth "experts" on the CLT. If the story they tell is positive (and accurate), the CLT is more likely to sell new homes and to recruit new members. If the story they tell describes a model that is flawed, a tenure that is fuzzy, or an experience that is fraught with difficulty, the CLT is going to have a harder time selling its homes - and selling itself. Outreach to a broader community begins with the education of the CLT's own leaseholders *before* they buy a home and with on-going communication between the CLT and its leaseholders *after* they move in.

❖ **Outreach materials**

Every CLT must have a basic brochure, describing in a clear, concise, and colorful fashion the CLT's history, territory, mission, and accomplishments. The brochure should also contain a simple explanation of the CLT model, summarizing its benefits for individual homeowners and for the larger community.

❖ **Organizational paraphernalia**

Many CLTs raise their profile and stimulate interest in their work by distributing to donors and members various mass-produced trinkets, all of which depict the CLT's name, logo, and slogan. These organizational giveaways include: bumper stickers, posters, T-shirts, coffee cups, canvas bags, refrigerator magnets, calendars, pens, and greeting cards.

❖ **Speakers bureau**

Although every member of a CLT's board and staff should be able to explain the organization's mission and model, some people will always be more willing and able to make formal presentations before a city council, a church congregation, a voluntary association, or any number of other venues where a CLT representative may be invited to speak. Most CLTs designate a handful of people who are comfortable and capable in such settings to serve as their "speakers bureau." These designated speakers are given a common set of hand-outs, slides, and tales to tell. They rehearse and refine their presentations collectively before venturing out individually. Some CLTs make a master list of town councils, planning commissions, voluntary associations, business clubs, and nonprofit organizations within their service area and create a speaking schedule designed to hit every one of these venues with a CLT presentation over a multi-year period.

❖ **Video presentations**

Many CLTs have supplemented the national Homes & Hands video, available from the Institute for Community Economics, with videos and slide shows of their own. Typically featured in these local productions are descriptions of the kinds of housing problems that the CLT is attempting to address, profiles of selected CLT homeowners, and pictures of selected CLT projects.

❖ **Press events**

Whenever a CLT reaches an organizational milestone (e.g., initial incorporation, first membership meeting, a five-year anniversary, etc.), whenever the CLT launches a new program (e.g., a center for homebuyer counseling or classes in simple repairs for new homeowners), or whenever the CLT achieves a production goal (e.g., groundbreaking on a new project, move-in day on a completed project, the first commercial project, the 100th home sold), the CLT should notify reporters and call in the cameras to trumpet these events to the wider world.

❖ **Web site**

An increasing number of CLTs have developed their own web sites as a means of describing their mission, explaining their model, touting their successes, and selling their homes to a computer-literate public. See, for example: www.sawmillclt.org/; www.dsni.org/; www.rondocl.org/; www.bclt.net/; www.landtrustduluth.org/; www.colorado-housing.net/thistle/common/default.asp

❖ **Newsletters**

Although some CLTs use a web site or e-mail to inform current and prospective members of their activities, many others produce and distribute printed newsletters on a bi-monthly, quarterly or semi-annual basis.

❖ **Annual reports**

A CLT's annual report can be as simple as a stapled set of financial statements, accompanied by a cover letter from the director discussing the year in review. It can be as sophisticated as a full-color booklet with photos and charts, printed on glossy paper. Either way, the annual report becomes a way for the CLT not only to show its solvency but to share its accomplishments with present - and prospective - members.

❖ **Community events**

Many CLTs take every opportunity to stimulate interest and to raise their own profile and by hitching their wagon to public events organized by others, participating in house and garden tours, chicken barbeques, farmers' markets, and county fairs. One CLT even entered a float in a local parade to announce its presence and to increase awareness of local housing needs. Other CLTs have sponsored widely publicized, widely attended events of their own (some of which combine membership development with fundraising). Examples of such CLT-sponsored events include neighborhood barbeques, formal dinners, neighborhood garage sales, multi-cultural fairs, music and dance performances, and walking tours of CLT houses.

INVOLVEMENT

❖ **CLT annual meeting**

Nearly every CLT is required by its bylaws to gather its members together at least once a year for the minimal purpose of nominating and electing directors to the CLT's board. Many CLTs turn their annual meetings into something more than a legalistic election, however. These membership meetings become celebratory occasions for recognizing the contributions of key individuals, applauding the year's accomplishments, playing music, sharing food, and having fun.

❖ **CLT committees**

Although individuals serving on the CLT's board tend to make up most of the roster for every committee, it is not uncommon for individuals who are **not** on the board to serve on many of these committees as well. Non-board members are often found, in particular, on a CLT's outreach & publicity committee, its fundraising committee, and its leaseholder services committee.

❖ **Homebuyer orientations**

Some CLT's involve members who live in CLT housing in orientation sessions for prospective CLT homebuyers. Hearing what it's like to buy a home and to lease land from the CLT from someone who has already done both, can be eye-opening - and reassuring - for someone who is still trying to understand this unfamiliar model of housing.

❖ **Neighborhood work parties**

CLTs often involve their members in activities aimed at improving the appearance, amenity, or safety of a targeted neighborhood. They have sponsored such activities as neighborhood clean-up or anti-graffiti campaigns, neighborhood watches, landscaping and flower-planting in local parks, and the painting or repair of homes owned by persons who are elderly or disabled.

❖ **Advocacy**

Whether acting alone or in coalition with other nonprofit organizations, many CLTs mobilize their members, on various occasions, to raise general awareness about local housing needs, to secure added funding for affordable housing, or to defend a proposed housing project against "Not-in-My-Backyard" opposition. The advocacy efforts of some CLTs extend beyond affordable housing, with the CLT's directors, staff, and members being involved in various coalitions and campaigns to

expand protections or services for lower-income people, to improve conditions in lower-income communities, to promote historic preservation, or prevent sprawl, or to preserve natural areas. Cross-organizational alliances like these not only energize and engage a CLT's members; they may also become a means for recruiting new members (and donors) into the CLT.

❖ **Homeowner associations**

For CLT members who are also CLT leaseholders, their most sustained involvement with the CLT - and with fellow CLT members - often occurs through a homeowner association. Not every leaseholder is also part of a homeowner association, but many are, especially those whose condominium, mobile home, or cooperative apartment is located on land leased from the CLT. Although many CLT members find participation in their condo association or co-op board to be all the involvement they can handle (and all the night meetings they would ever want), other CLT members develop skills, discover camaraderie, and delve into issues in their homeowner associations that lead them directly into a deeper personal involvement with the CLT.

❖ **Arts & crafts with a housing theme**

Several CLTs have mobilized the talents of their members in creative projects aimed at raising the profile of the CLT, raising money for the CLT, or raising general awareness about affordable housing. Woodcuts of CLT houses, rendered by a local artist, were used by one CLT to produce a calendar. In another community, a local photographer took portraits of CLT homeowners, recorded their stories, and mounted a traveling exhibit of photos and personal accounts that was later turned into a book. A painted mural on the side of a non-residential building was used by one CLT to involve local teens in brightening a street corner. Another CLT asked schoolchildren to draw their own images of "home," pictures that were turned into greeting cards. Another CLT invited families living in CLT housing or in affordable housing developed by other nonprofits to create quilt squares with a housing theme. These quilt squares were then sewn into a dozen 4 ft. x 8 ft. banners and hung in city hall to celebrate the cause of affordable housing.

❖ **Design charrettes**

Participatory planning is an integral part of residential development for many CLTs. Neighborhood residents, prospective homebuyers, and the CLT's own members are consulted early in the development process, soliciting their suggestions for improving a project's design.

❖ **Celebrations**

Every success, every award, and every anniversary of the CLT should be a cause for celebration, involving as many members as possible. Celebrations are a means of marking progress, sharing credit, and enjoying the hard-earned fruits of collective labor. The production and preservation of affordable housing is hard work. It is fraught with frustrations, set-backs, and the occasional failure. All the more reason to hold a joyous "harvest festival" whenever the dedicated labors of the CLT produce a bumper crop of accomplishments.

INVITATION

❖ Informal networks

Personal invitations from people already connected and committed to the CLT is one of the most effective means of recruiting new members. Every director, every employee, and every member of the CLT has family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances who might be asked to join the CLT. Some CLTs have gone so far as to set membership quotas for their directors, with each expected to introduce the CLT to a certain number of people every year and to bring a certain number of new members into the organization every year.

❖ Targeted invitations

The organizers of some CLTs have built their memberships, at least initially, by making a list of high-profile movers and shakers in their own community whose endorsement can lend credibility to the fledgling CLT and attract the interest and support of other people. A handful of these community leaders are approached and persuaded to join the CLT. They, in turn, are asked to sign their names to a formal letter, inviting other prominent members of the community to join.

❖ Door-to-door solicitation

Knocking on doors, meeting one's neighborhoods, and inviting them to join one's organization is a time-honored tradition among community organizers and grassroots activists. Although door-to-door membership development efforts are difficult (and rare) for CLTs with very large service areas, even a multi-county CLT is capable of conducting a concentrated campaign of knocking on doors, explaining the CLT, and inviting residents to join the CLT in a neighborhood targeted for revitalization or in the blocks surrounding a CLT project.

❖ Phone-a-thons

Some CLTs build their memberships in the same way that many nonprofits raise revenues, by phoning hundreds of strangers every year or two. Volunteers, staffing a phone bank, describe the CLT's work over the phone, ask people to consider joining the CLT, and mail out packets of information to anyone expressing an interest in the CLT. This is not a solicitation for money but for memberships.

❖ Mass mailings

Using mailing lists assembled by the CLT or borrowed from another nonprofit, a CLT may expand its membership by mailing its brochure to households throughout its service area, accompanied by a letter inviting them to join the CLT. As with the phone-a-thon (described above), this first contact with local residents is usually not accompanied by an appeal for funds.

❖ Sign-up tables

Some CLTs set up an information table at county fairs, farmers' markets, July Fourth celebrations, home and garden shows, and other public events where residents from the CLT's service area are likely to gather. Representatives of the CLT then spend the day passing out the CLT's literature, answering questions about the CLT, and signing up new members.

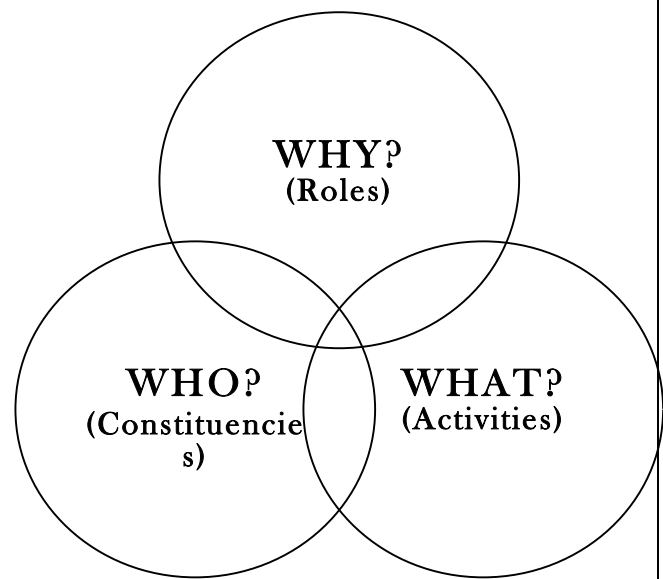
❖ Merged memberships

When a CLT develops housing for the clients of another nonprofit with a local membership or when a CLT develops a training facility, a community garden, a day care center, a clinic, or office space for another nonprofit, it is not uncommon for the members of that sister nonprofit to be offered parallel membership in the CLT - and vice versa.

HOW? (Strategies)

Any strategy for membership development is a carefully considered mixture of roles, constituencies, and activities. Some strategies are narrowly focused, using a specific activity to recruit or retain a specific constituency who may then be expected to play only one or two specific roles within the organization. Other strategies proceed in a more scattershot fashion, using multiple activities to draw multiple constituencies into the organization, involving them in numerous ways.

These approaches are not mutually exclusive. For example, a particular CLT may decide, after several years of operation, that much more attention needs to be paid to involving its own leaseholders in shaping the organization's priorities and programs. Another CLT may decide that the time has come to raise its profile and to broaden its support among constituencies who may care more about the conservation of wetlands than the construction of housing. In either case, a specific strategy could be tailored to fit a specific constituency. In neither case, however, would this tailored strategy likely be the CLT's *only* commitment to membership development. A concentrated effort to involve a CLT's leaseholders or to recruit local conservationists, in other words, is likely to proceed alongside a more diffuse effort to inform, involve, and invite a broad array of individuals in the same community.



Although the mixture of roles, constituencies, and activities may differ from one CLT to another, the *operational prerequisites* for planning and implementing a membership development strategy do not. There are at least three of them:

Membership development requires a COMMITTEE. A group of people within the CLT, preferably a standing committee or sub-committee of the board, must be given overall responsibility for building and maintaining a membership for the CLT.

Membership development requires a *CHAMPION*. An individual, from either the CLT's staff or its board, must be assigned the lead role in carrying out a membership development strategy. No one should be expected to do it alone, but one person should be given the job - and the authority - to see that membership development gets done.

Membership development requires a *DATA BASE*. A catalogue of names, addresses, and phone numbers must be maintained for all members. Some CLTs also collect, via a member application form, details about skills, talents, and other contributions (monetary and non-monetary) that a member might be willing to bestow on the CLT. The system for compiling, storing, and retrieving such information may be as simple as a stack of index cards in an old recipe box or as complicated as a multi-screen relational database program on a new computer. These bits and bytes of data are the raw materials out of which a CLT's membership is built.

Finally, it is worth noting three *organizational commitments* of those CLTs that typically have the most success in building and maintaining a broadly based, actively engaged membership.

Membership development is *CONTINUOUS*. Successful land trusts do not confine their efforts at public education, community outreach, and member recruitment to the early days of their organization. They keep doing these things month after month, year after year.

Membership development is *CUMULATIVE*. Successful land trusts expand their membership incrementally. New members are added at a rate appropriate to the organization's current capacity to absorb them, to involve them, and to keep track of them. This allows the CLT to put as much effort into retaining and engaging the members it already has as it puts into attracting new members into the fold. Over time, the CLT's membership slowly, steadily grows.

Membership development is *CULTURAL*. Successful land trusts build community involvement into the consciousness and culture of the entire organization. They go beyond the bylaw formalities of a corporate membership and an elected board. They go beyond the sponsorship of annual events aimed at recruiting and retaining members. In everything they do, these CLTs find a way to keep the community informed, to keep the community involved, and to keep the community invested in their projects, programs, and plans.