

# Educating & Organizing Key Constituencies in Starting a CLT: Three Strategies

Excerpted from: *Development without Displacement: Issues and Options in Creating a Community Land Trust*. (© 2001 Institute for Community Economics) Report prepared for the MacArthur Foundation and the City of Chicago by John Emmeus Davis, Burlington Associates in Community Development LLC.

There are any number of approaches a CLT can take in educating and recruiting key individuals and essential interests. The real issue here is not who a CLT needs to reach, since it must eventually cultivate all of these constituencies, but where a CLT should start. Should the CLT start big and gradually narrow its efforts at educating and organizing a base of support – or should the CLT start small and gradually broaden its base? Should the CLT start with the community or start with individuals and institutions that may fund or sponsor the CLT? These choices are not mutually exclusive. They sometimes occur on parallel tracks. These choices are not even the only ones a fledgling CLT can make in deciding which strategy to use in educating and organizing key constituencies. For purposes of discussion, however – and to illustrate the kinds of issues that arise in choosing a strategy – three different ways of sequencing a CLT campaign of educating and organizing are described below.

## Community Organizing

Proponents and organizers of the proposed CLT conduct a campaign of popular education within the neighborhood, city, or metropolitan region intended to be the CLT's service area. Dozens (perhaps hundreds) of individuals, churches, voluntary organizations, and businesses are introduced to the CLT. Interested individuals are recruited to serve as an organizing committee for the CLT. That committee proposes a structure for the CLT and later convenes open meetings of the entire community to explain and endorse that structure. The bylaws are adopted and a board is selected. The CLT then begins to solicit outside resources, to build its own internal capacity, and to explore opportunities for developing its first project.

### Advantages:

- ❖ **AWARENESS & ACCEPTANCE OF MODEL.** A campaign of popular education removes some of the strangeness and much of the confusion that surrounds an unfamiliar model of housing. A community that understands the model, including whatever network of community development organizations that might already exist, is more likely to embrace the CLT and to support it as a means of realizing its own interests and goals, rather than to resist it.
- ❖ **RECRUITMENT BEYOND THE USUAL SUSPECTS.** CLTs tend to attract interest and support from unexpected corners of the community. By casting a wide net, a fledgling CLT reaches beyond the small cast of professional volunteers and self-anointed leaders that often dominate locality-based organizations.

- ❖ **MARKETING.** At the end of the day, a CLT can only succeed if there are people within its target community who are willing to invest their savings and their hopes in buying a CLT home. An education and organizing strategy that is broadly based not only plants the seeds for recruiting people to the CLT's membership and board, but for selling the CLT's homes.
- ❖ **FUNDRAISING.** An organization with wide and deep community roots will make the CLT more legitimate and more "fundable" in the eyes of private foundations and public agencies outside the CLT's service area that are asked to invest in the projects and operations of a new nonprofit. A community organizing approach to starting the CLT may also uncover churches, businesses, and individuals within the CLT's service area that can fund the organization, particularly in its early days when organizational development rather than housing development is the priority.

### Disadvantages:

- ❖ **TIME-CONSUMING.** Community organizing is a slow and deliberate process. Holding multiple informational meetings can consume an enormous amount of time, as can the deliberations of an organizing committee. There are many moving parts to the CLT model; many decisions to be made about governance, use restrictions, resales, and roles. The process of discussing and deciding these questions can continue for many months.
- ❖ **HIGH EXPECTATIONS.** Broadly educating the community about the CLT can raise high expectations among low-income tenants that they may soon be able to purchase a CLT home. By the time the organization has been developed and the housing has been developed, years may have passed. Expectations that are quickly raised but not quickly fulfilled can undermine the credibility of a fledgling CLT.
- ❖ **LIGHTENING ROD.** When a CLT "goes public," it provides a forum for any individual or organization whose self-interest might be threatened by either the CLT's non-speculative approach to private property or the CLT's possible competition for funds, sites, or constituents. Being denounced in public before it has the backing to withstand such challenges and before it has decided key questions about its structure and program can diminish the CLT in the community's eyes even before it has had a chance to get started.

## **Core Group Organizing**

Proponents and organizers quietly approach key individuals and organizations most likely to support the creation of a new CLT. The most interested and committed of these are recruited to serve on an interim board. This interim board creates the corporation, fleshes out details of the CLT ground lease, and launches the CLT's first project. When the CLT is ready to do its first project – or, perhaps, once its first project is in the ground – the CLT moves to broaden its base of support within the targeted community. Popular education does not begin, in other words, until the details of the local CLT have been worked out and, perhaps, not until an actual project is underway. In time, the interim board is replaced by a duly elected tripartite board, once there is an actual membership and leaseholders to put on the board.

### Advantages:

- ❖ **FASTER DEVELOPMENT.** Like-minded individuals can move faster to establish the CLT, without taking time to convince the unconvinced. Furthermore, to the extent that these individuals have had previous experience establishing nonprofits, running nonprofits, and developing affordable housing, not only can organizational development go more quickly, so can housing development.
- ❖ **FLYING BELOW OPPONENTS' RADAR.** Core group organizing is a stealth approach to establishing a CLT. By the time the CLT goes public, its leaders have decided key questions of structure and role and, possibly, have launched the CLT's first project. Opponents are forced to challenge an organizational reality rather than a speculative concept.
- ❖ **BUILDING CREDIBILITY.** A new organization that announces its presence in the community by putting housing in the ground has instant credibility – among residents and funders alike.
- ❖ **BORROWING CREDIBILITY & CAPACITY.** The fledgling CLT borrows the credibility of the individuals and organizations that step forward to sponsor it – and to serve on its interim board. One of its sponsoring organizations may even provide staffing and administrative support until the CLT is ready to fly on its own.

### Disadvantages:

- ❖ **BURDEN OF ELITISM.** A model that publicly boasts of its accountability to local residents and leaseholders, but privately begins as a small club of insiders, has a credibility problem. This is a burden that can be eventually overcome, but the time and effort it will take to do so can be considerable.
- ❖ **BORROWED BAGGAGE.** A newly created CLT has an advantage over any other community development organization that has been on the scene for many years. It has no history of inter-organizational conflict. It has no political baggage. Starting with a clean slate, the CLT can focus on explaining intricacies and correcting misunderstandings about its unusual model of housing, instead of fighting fights and combating whispers left over from organizational skirmishes of the past. This advantage may be lost, however, when a CLT is started by a core group of high-profile individuals and organizations, any of whom may burden the fledgling CLT with their own political baggage.
- ❖ **MARKET RISK.** Building and marketing resale-restricted housing on leased land without first testing the demand for such housing – or without creating the demand for such housing through intensive education and outreach – can be a risky proposition.

## Resource Organizing

Proponents of the proposed CLT secure a commitment of funds or lands from public or private sources to seed the CLT. With these resources in hand, staff is hired to spread the word, to build the base, and to

plan for the use of these committed resources, either through community organizing or through core group organizing.

### Advantages:

- ❖ **ACCEPTABILITY.** The commitment of money and/or land bestows instant credibility upon a campaign to establish a new CLT. That does not mean that all skepticism about this unusual model vanishes, nor that popular education about the model is now unnecessary. It does mean that, instead of approaching the community hat in hand, the CLT's organizers come with coffers full, inviting the community to share in planning and using these new resources. Instead of competing from day one with existing nonprofits for scarce funding or scarce sites, the CLT arrives on the scene with its own money or land, ready to go.
- ❖ **EARLY STAFFING.** Rather than relying on volunteer efforts to do education and outreach and rather than relying on the temporary chairs of ad hoc committees to convene meetings and track decisions that form the organizational basis for the new CLT, a commitment of funds allows a fledgling CLT to hire one or two people to staff these functions. This allows, in turn, for the better recruitment of volunteers, the better use of volunteers, and the better coordination of the separate tasks that go into establishing a new CLT.
- ❖ **LEVERAGING.** Money attracts money. A CLT with some resources already in hand is better positioned to raise additional funds for its operations and its projects than one that is starting out with nothing more than a compelling idea for how affordable housing and community development might be more effectively done.

### Disadvantages:

- ❖ **GUILT BY ASSOCIATION.** Endorsement of the CLT model by an unpopular funder, public or private, can be the kiss of death when it comes to community acceptance of this new approach to homeownership. Especially among groups already aggrieved because of a real or perceived lack of investment in their communities by outside funders, the notion of limited equity housing on leased land can sound like a funders' ploy to save themselves some money and to allow low-income people a form of homeownership that is only half-a-loaf. When money talks, everybody listens – but many will reject what is said solely on account of who is doing the talking.
- ❖ **BUILDING PROJECTS BEFORE BUILDING AN ORGANIZATION.** The temptation, when money or land is committed upfront for building a CLT's first project(s), is to focus on project development to the detriment of organizational development. This can result in a mad scramble at the very moment that the CLT's first units are coming on line to finalize details of the ground lease, resale formula, marketing plan, selection policy, and orientation procedure for new leaseholders. Done in haste, these tasks are too often done wrong.
- ❖ **CATAclysmic MONEY.** Jane Jacobs warned long ago in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* of the critical difference between "gradual money" and "cataclysmic money." The former allows a neighborhood – or, by analogy to the CLT, an organization – to grow and change in small increments, becoming more complex, diverse, and stable over time.

“Cataclysmic money,” by contrast, pours into an area (or into an organization) in concentrated form, a torrent that not only produces drastic change but, by forcing development in a single direction, washes away whatever diversity and resiliency may have previously existed. When too much money or too much land is put into the hands of a fledgling CLT, it may get too big too fast, bypassing the steady learning and studied mastery of both its model and market that come from gradual growth.