

Old Grace Housing Cooperative

Report from the Deepening Community Initiative roundtables

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Introduction

Throughout October and into November the Old Grace Housing Cooperative held a series of five roundtables with the membership to go over the proposed organizational values and to discuss how the community could put these principles in action. With 36 attendees contributing to the various discussions, there were lots of valuable insights and ideas. This was an objectively successful initiative which garnered the participation of a significant majority of co-op members who contributed many positive and forward-thinking ideas to the process. In the eyes of the facilitator, the Old Grace Housing Co-op has an extremely engaged membership, which is something to be proud of and capitalize on, while also something that will take effort to sustain.

This report is broken down into three sections, general comments about the values, how to see the values in action, and facilitator recommendations.

Thoughts on the Values

General Comments

- There was overall appreciation of the values that were presented. There were no concerns with most of the language used, with some exceptions below
- There was a gap identified in most of the sessions that could be defined as service, engagement, or commitment
- The definitions were well-liked and while we didn't wordsmith them, there were some specific comments noted
- There was agreement that seven seemed to be like a good number of values and if this had to increase, it shouldn't go up by much
- The values cannot be viewed in isolation and there is substantial overlap between them, and they all impact each other.

- The values are aspirational in nature, but most are already being achieved at some level
- There is no desire to police these values, the focus of all efforts have to be about promoting them and developing systems that facilitate them
- The values should be promoted in a way that is understandable and inclusive

Specific comments

There were lots of comments provided and many came up across different groups. The earlier bullets are more frequently heard comments.

Community

- Not everyone in the facility has the same vision for community
- Community may not be as important to some as it is to others as members have moved in for differing reasons, some for community and some primarily for affordable housing
- There is still reluctance with the ongoing COVID epidemic to gather in large groups
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Democracy

- Democracy was universally seen as essential to the operations of the co-op but where decision-making should happen has not been discussed for a while
- The sheer number of committees was identified multiple times as an example of democracy or as an example of complexity in the system
- Democracy needs inclusion and inclusionary action to get voices to the table
- Still need space for spontaneity

Respect

- This can be challenging as not everyone has the same ethics or views
- Respect is defined well in the value
- It is hard to confront someone when you think they are being disrespectful
- There are systemic issues with racism, misogyny, and other bigotries that are challenging to overcome

Empowerment

- Without empowerment there is less engagement
- The concept of “aging in place” may go with this value
- Is the word “involvement” a better word than empowerment?
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Sustainability

- The word “socially” was added independently by the first couple of groups
- There were concerns that having economically (and then socially) dilutes the environmental-specific message of the value
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Equity

- Reconciliation may be an important missing component
- The co-op needs to commit to inclusion and learning how to ensure equal opportunity for participation in co-op decision making

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Social Responsibility

- We must consider what is reasonable to expect from members
- There is no desire to police this or other values

Values in Action

There were numerous specific ideas that the Old Grace community could potentially implement to achieve the values as they are defined.

Community

- More effort put into being intentional in organizing activities with the purpose of building community
- Have more food-based events such as potlucks or with specific themes
- Hold more holiday related events for various holidays including non-traditional western holidays
- Circulate photos of past events to seek engagement in future events
- Prominently display these values when finalized
- Ensure sign up sheets for all events are highly visible
- Have engaging educational events such as talks from community members or university staff
- Have culturally specific events and speakers
- Continue the great monthly newsletter, resident forum, and other connection tools
- Put up a "gratitude board" for people to share nice stories or comments
- Ensure there is an overall common objective for the community
- Hold a bold 5th anniversary event
- Aim to engage people from the moment they arrive or become a member

Democracy

- Increase number of town halls per year
- Have discussions around one specific topic that is going to be addressed at an upcoming board or members meeting
- Develop a template for committees to follow in how they operate to ensure transparency and consistency
- Hold a broad series of discussions on what democracy is and by whom should decisions or categories of decisions, be made
- Offer more information and education on democracy
- Continue transparent practices such as sharing board minutes
- Build understanding of how members can get more involved and how they should contact for certain issues
- Develop a better set of meetings rules/processes that is shorter, simpler, and more useful
- Consider how Old Grace democracy can be more bottom up
- Consider how to effectively incentivize more meeting attendance

Respect

- Provide education to the membership or committees on ways to be inclusionary and respectful, and on collaborative processes
- Consider how to take action and support people who are disrespected
- Set precedents and state this value explicitly at the beginning of all meetings

Empowerment

- In developing or planning activities, empowerment of others should be kept in mind
- See the connection between empowerment and succession planning
- Be intentional in empowering others to use their skills and abilities around the facility
- Develop a buddy/liaison program for new residents to help them navigate the co-op
- Develop a “spirit of rotation” where jobs/tasks are broken down and others are encouraged and mentored to take them on
- Develop a deliberate process for skill identification among the membership
- Ensure there are supports in place for people to participate in meetings, such as child care

Sustainability

- Explore electric plug-in options
- Explore the landscape and consider ways to have less grass, more gardens
- Consider e-bike storage options
- Audit the buildings’ energy use to find ways to cut down
- Offer education on sustainable living

- Explore what a merger may look like in the future
- Broaden committee involvement
- Conduct a review to identify the tasks done by volunteers to ensure a plan to continue these activities

Equity

- Offer education on equity and inclusion
- Consider equity in developing any and all processes
- Work to ensure everyone knows their voices are valued
- Highlight all sorts of members and their accomplishments in the newsletter

Social Responsibility

- Hold activities that support the community such as tree banding or food bank initiatives for Harvest Manitoba
- Consider social purchasing policies such as buying locally or from B-Corps
- Connect with community groups such as the Wolseley Community Association to work together and offer support
- Stay connected with other co-ops and offer our expertise to the movement
- Consider how these values affect discussions on topics such as what to do when people are sleeping in the vestibule
- Build a culture of ambassadorship
- Invite more outside groups into the space for tours and activities

Recommendations

Based on what was discussed at the various sessions, the facilitator has some high-level recommendations regarding the values

- Add another value that encompasses the ideas of service to, engagement with, and commitment to the co-op. However, we must be cautious of the expectations we place on each other and be considerate of others when wording this.
- Separate out *environmentally sustainable* from *socially and economically sustainable* so the definitions are not muddy. One is about being environmentally sound and the other is about the overall sustainability of the co-op and its operations. Consider using something like a Thriving Co-op instead of socially and economically sustainable.
- Consider holding a series of discussions on democracy and decision making to get feedback on how decisions should be made and by whom, and strive to generate consensus on Old Grace's democratic model.
- Ensure that members are empowered to hold events without board leadership or involvement. There didn't seem to be any obvious barriers to remove but continuing to encourage members to take the initiative to start or coordinate events will be essential to the continued success of the Old Grace community.