

Co-housing = A Look at Ann Arbor's Three Thriving Cross-Generational Intentional Communities



By Sarah Rigg

Photo Coordination by Susan Kravitz Ayer

I may have more familiarity with intentional community than the average person since I've had friends living in university co-ops and have visited three communes over the last decade. However, though I knew Ann Arbor was home to three co-housing communities, I wasn't really sure what co-housing was until I took a tour of the Sunward, Great Oak and Touchstone communities and began talking to the residents this autumn.

This lack of understanding about co-housing appears to be common. Despite the diversity of cultures and living arrangements in the Ann Arbor area and residents' general familiarity with co-op living, members of Ann Arbor's co-housing communities still have to explain what co-housing is to friends and co-workers. They get reactions ranging from "So it's like a commune or a cult?" to comparing co-housing to a kibbutz or a condominium association.

Nancy Harter, a retiree who lives in Great Oak, says she's had to explain what co-housing is "so many times." Friends and family have asked her, "So, is that a commune?" or "Is that a co-op?"

Susan Ayer, editor of the Washtenaw Jewish News, lives in Sunward, and she says very few people in Ann Arbor know what co-housing is unless they know someone who lives in one of the communities.

"Most people think it's a co-op or a hippy commune. Or maybe a kibbutz. In some ways, it's like a kibbutz, but in other ways, it's very different. I'm Jewish, so that's the frame of reference (my friends) have. I love telling others about co-housing. They always say they think it sounds wonderful."

Sunward founder Nick Meima says the communities are technically a condominium association but with many differences from the typical condo development. These differences start with community members being heavily involved in the design and architecture of the community and include the prominent role of the common houses.

Though a few residents moved into co-housing after having been members of a spiritual community, the members of Sunward, Great Oak and Touchstone don't share their income as in a commune, and they don't share a spiritual or religious dogma. In fact, a wide diversity of religious faiths is represented from Judaism and Christianity to paganism or agnosticism. What all members do share is an interest in creating intentional community and sharing resources.

Friends and socializing

Several community members spoke to me about the advantages of having opportunities for socialization and human contact without having to throw parties or making plans two weeks in advance with friends.

"My one-liner is that it's a place I can be an introvert without being lonely," says Ken Winter, who has lived at Sunward since it was first formed. "I have people in my life who are a part of my world, and I don't have to throw a party or formal dinner. I don't have to do social events to have contact with people and have people in my life."

Others say that they felt isolated from neighbors in a typical apartment building or single-family home and like knowing so many of their co-housing neighbors.

Amy Harris rented in Sunward and then bought a house in Great Oak shortly after the second community was established. When she first thought about moving to Sunward, she was a divorced single mother.

"I lived in single family home on the old west side," Harris says. "I loved the neighborhood, but I felt kind of isolated being a single parent. I only saw my neighbors when the weather was nice. For big chunks of the year,

we just waved from our cars. That kind of bothered me." Harris says making friends with neighbors in co-housing is "much easier."

Harter also says she likes how much interaction there is in her co-housing community. "I know all these people. All my neighbors know one another," Harter says. She says she enjoyed being part of a community where residents feel comfortable asking neighbors for rides to the airport or to borrow a tablespoon of spices for a cooking project. "That kind of sharing is really neat," she says.

Betsy Reitbauer moved to Ann Arbor from New York to be closer to her daughter and grandchildren. "I was coming here without knowing anyone, basically, and my daughter is still 50 minutes away. It can be hard to make friends and get in the social fabric of a community." She says living in co-housing at the newest community, Touchstone, was a good way to get to know people as a newcomer to a new city.

"Co-housing appealed to me in part because I figured it'd be far easier to get to know people," she says. "A co-housing setup certainly does it. I work with them and eat a couple meals a week with them and got to know them faster. I figured when you move, it'd take a solid year to make friendships, and you'd just have to count on being lonely for a while. But this is as close to instant friendship as you can get. You don't replace friendships of 30 to 40 years, but you have people to do things with, connect with. I'm lucky that I like a lot of the people here."

Ayer says one major attraction of co-housing was knowing and being known. "I like the sense of having neighbors that I know well and that know me," Ayer says.

She says she also likes the balance of having people to interact with or to be by herself in private when she needs to.

"Sometimes I'm tired and I've got a lot of work to do, I just want to go to my house and be by myself," she says. "I just want to sit on the couch, read a newspaper and not talk to anyone."

However, other times, she says, she enjoys walking to and from her home and being greeted by neighbors and the children of the community. "As I walk down to my home, I run across kids drawing with chalk on the walkway, or Moms standing around talking with each other, playing music, playing with kids. It pulls me into this extended family of sorts."

"The other morning I'm leaving for work in the morning, and Gabrielle, who is four, came out the door and yelled, 'Hi Susie!' To me, that's priceless."



Nancy Harter

Harter, 77, retired to Great Oak, and said she enjoys being the oldest person in a young group of residents. "It's fun to be with that generation," she says. "It's interesting, too. I would have never known that people live with a computer growing out of their hip. I just finally bought one."

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Photo by Susan Kravitz Ayer

Jeremiah Lee, Jack Pyle, Brian VanderElzen with son Lohan, and Joe Lovill at Touchstone



Photo by Michael McIntyre

Summer nights at Sunward



Photo by Susan Kravitz Ayer

Lois Zimmerman and Sonia Kraftson preparing Thursday dinner at Touchstone



Photo by Susan Kravitz Ayer

Heather Fitzgerald and Adi Aditya, with daughter Divia Fitzgerald and son Jai Fitzgerald



Photo by Susan Kravitz Ayer

Lois Zimmerman, Betsy Reitbauer and Kristen VanderElzen at Touchstone



Photo by Michael McIntyre

Cohousers relax on the lakeside new rock bench, with Great Oak in the distance

Co-housing – A Look at Ann Arbor’s Three Thriving Intentional Communities



Panorama of Great Oak

Photo by Michael McIntyre



Photo by Susan Kravitz Ayer

Malcolm Sickels and Amy Harris, with daughters Linnea Bleiler-Sickels, Melanie Bahti and Uma Bleiler-Sickels



Robert Bell and Aaron Wilson-Ahlstrom and his son Langston in the Great Oak Common House kitchen

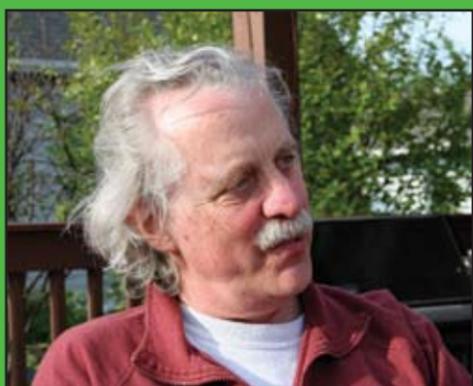


Photo by Michael McIntyre

Ken Winter - Sunward

Ken Winter said he thinks it's easier to raise children in co-housing than to bring them to co-housing when they're teenagers. "People who move here as teenagers, who are dragged by their parents, often have a lot of resistance," he says. "At that age, they don't want to be weird, have a weird family, a weird living situation. They're extra-sensitive at that age."



Photo by Susan Kravitz Ayer

A garden outside at Touchstone Cohousing



Wedding at Touchstone



Photo by Michael McIntyre

Rowena Cohahan & Noe

"I think it's different because you know your neighbors well enough that you care, and there's more investment in actually working it out," Robin Kahler says. "You may disagree on a topic, and, three hours later, you're having dinner together or you're harvesting vegetables."

Photo by Susan Kravitz Ayer



Jason Scholz, Mary Kay Burton and Kendra Pyle study the work assignments

Ken Winter says that Sunward was a pioneer in working out conflict, and he feels they handle things better now than they did at the start. "When there's a certain issue with emotional charge that comes up and finds its way into a community meeting, we deal with it better now than in year one in terms of people being able to listen to each other, people being able to express themselves."

Panorama of Touchstone



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Amy Harris lives in Great Oaks Co-housing

Jim Cook, one of the newest additions to Sunward, says he chose co-housing because the atmosphere was one he felt his wife would feel most comfortable living in. Before moving into Sunward, he had lived in Vietnam with his wife and her family for a year.

“Sunward is the closest thing to a Vietnamese village,” he says. “For her, she feels more at home. Everybody knows everybody, but there’s more privacy.”

He says that being new in a community could be hard, but that his 10-month-old daughter Yenni was a great ice-breaker. He says the baby is the cutest in the family, then his wife, and then himself.

“They don’t want us here- they just want the baby,” Cook jokes. “But they have to take me if they take the other two.”

Co-housing residents also talk about the formal and informal ways they support each other in times of need, from watering each other’s tomato plants to bringing meals to a member who has just had a baby or who has broken a leg.

Robin Kahler, a resident of Touchstone, says that the community was notable for the amount of support residents get when they’re sick or in crisis.

“When there is illness, hospitalizations or even births, neighbors bring food over for a couple weeks. So, there’s a lot of support,” she says. “When people moved in this summer from out of state, they were new to Ann Arbor. They were able to have instant support, and we’re able to give them ideas of where to go shop.”

“I don’t think you could put a value on what it’s like to be part of a co-housing community and have your neighbors be there for you when you need them,” Ayer says. “And you have the opportunity to be there for them.”

Sharing resources

Another theme that came up over and over in conversations with co-housing residents was not the abstract idea of community and togetherness but a concrete and practical value of sharing resources.

Harris says that when she lived in her house on the old west side, she was troubled by the fact that everyone had to have his or her own stuff. “They all had their own lawnmower, clippers, washer and dryer,” Harris says. “It seemed like an incredible waste. When I learned about co-housing, the opportunity to share resources appealed to me hugely.”

Reitbauer also named sharing resources as a major part of co-housing’s appeal. “It has always seemed inefficient for women to each be cooking for three or four people. It made so much more sense have fewer people cooking for more people,” she says. “There are things to be gained by family togetherness and so forth, but there’s a certain economy of effort to have at least some meals eaten together.”

She cited several other examples of sharing resources. “Not everyone has to own a lawnmower. A lot of people are perfectly happy using the same washer and dryer (in the common house). Not everyone has to own a tall ladder. Every now and then, someone will put out an announcement on the Internet group, saying, ‘I have an extra whatever, can anyone use it?’ Or, ‘I need whatever,’ and they see if anyone offers.”

Winter says he felt living in co-housing meant a more efficient use of energy and resources, and cited the optional community meals as an example. “You eat better and cheaper for less work than if you made it yourself,” he says. “My wife and I cook once a month, and that’s all the work we do for the dinners; we get 12 to 15 dinners a month for that.”

The community meals also appealed to Tom Akiva, a resident of Great Oak. “It’s great being able to come home after work and have nice cooked meal,” he says. “There are a lot of shared resource advantages- not just meals. There’s the common house, and access to machines and tools without having to buy them.”

Meima cited the workshop that Touchstone and Great Oak built together as another example of sharing resources. “Together, they created a separate building for woodworking and working on cars. They built it together and funded it together. You would never ever find that any place else, having neighbors pitch in together the money, energy and effort to build the thing and say, ‘This is, collectively, ours to use.’ This is phenomenal. It’d never happen anywhere else.”

Treading gently on the land

Most, though not all, members, also share an interest in eco-friendly living and a desire to minimize their impact on the land and nearby natural areas. For that reason, the communities were built to cluster homes close together and leave a lot of open space. For example, Sunward comprises 20 acres, but only about five are developed.

Harris says this was a big attraction for her. “The design of the houses is great in that it minimizes impact on the land,” she says. “I’m fine with living in a smaller house; McMansions are not a good use of natural resources.”

Rowena Conahan, who lives with her family in Sunward, says sharing resources and reducing her footprint on nature was a consideration for her when choosing co-housing. “The philosophy of living with neighbors and living together and sharing resources, reducing impact on the world- I love all that,” she says.

However, she had to think hard before deciding to move into co-housing because she had intended not to buy a new home. “I didn’t want to build a new house, one that wouldn’t go back into the earth very gracefully. In my mind, this community was a hillside before it was a community. I asked myself before I signed (the contract) if turning this hillside into a community, would it be beneficial seven generations down the line. It was a clear “yes” to me. We would be taking something from the earth, but creating a living example of community would spill out into rest of world. So I was excited about that. I love that.”

Amy Harris says that as she talked, she realized how many things the community had done to tweak and adjust the work program and get it all to work. “As a member of the work committee, I’m focused on what doesn’t work and how to make that better. I’m on the fix-it side, rather than seeing the big picture of how well it really does work. The overarching goal is to maximize happiness of workers.”

Conahan says that she liked that the design of the community would preserve 10 acres of forest and create several acres of prairie as well.

Also, all three communities require members to park at the perimeter, and the interior of each community is pedestrian-only space, with a few exceptions for when people are moving into a unit or making a delivery of large or heavy furniture.

Harter doesn't mind the policy of leaving cars at the perimeter since she chose a housing unit right next to the parking lot. "My car is 15 feet away. It's very convenient."

Reitbauer has mixed feelings about the concept.

"I like it better in the summer than in the winter," Reitbauer says. "For me, in bad weather, that's a disadvantage. I made the choice that I wanted one of the prettiest view here, so I have to walk approximately the distance of a football field from my front door to the garage. When it's icy or bitter cold,

Conahan adds that one concern people always bring up about home schooling is how children will be socialized. "Here, it's not remotely a big deal," she says. "There's more socialization than we could hope for."

Ed Herstein, a member of Sunward, doesn't have children of his own, but has enjoyed hosting international exchange students while living in co-housing.

"I'm currently hosting my tenth exchange student through the AFS program," he says. "I've had five from Finland, four from Sweden, and one from Russia. They've all stayed for about 11 months while attending a year of high school here."

He said co-housing has been a great place to host the exchange students. "They very quickly get to know many of my neighbors, and the neighbors help them out with rides, meals, and other needs when I'm not available. The community also welcomes them to participate in meals, parties, work projects, and other community activities. I think hosting in an apartment or



Jim Crowfoot, Ruth Carey, Doug Siewert, Nick Meima, children Zuvuya, Dylan, and Luda, and Michael McIntyre at Sunward

Jim Cook says that being new in a community could be hard, but that his 10-month-old daughter Yenni was a great ice-breaker. He says the baby is the cutest in the family, then his wife, and then himself.

I don't like that walk. But, you know, I had to choose from the available units, and the one that had the nicest view was farthest from the garages. I don't regret my choice, but it is a negative to have that distance in bad weather."

Most members of co-housing have adapted to the walk, however. Many keep a cart in their garage so they can tote groceries or other items to their units more easily.

Despite the disadvantage in bad weather, Reitbauer says she loves the concept of keeping cars on the perimeter. "I love the friendliness of walking to my house and bumping into people on the way."

The young and the elderly

The communities host a tour and information session at 2 p.m. each Sunday, starting at Sunward and continuing on to Great Oak and Touchstone. If you attend a session led by Sunward founding member Meima, you're likely to hear him rhapsodize about how good co-housing is both for raising kids and for caring for the retired and elderly. Parents, he says, can relax and let their children play safely in a pedestrian campus where the children know everyone and won't be in danger from cars.

"If we'd lived in the country, we would have done that kind of thing," she says. "But, definitely living here, we had the room for it, and facilities and pastures." The llamas are now back at the farm in Manchester from which she'd originally bought them.

traditional home would be a much less rich experience for them- though I do need to let them know that living at Sunward is much different than living in a typical American suburb- and (hosting in an apartment would) also be a more challenging experience for me."

Not every parent thinks that co-housing makes raising children easy, though. Tom Akiva, a resident of Great Oak, says it can be "tough."

"When you're parenting in co-housing, you're around people making different decisions about limitations they give their kids, the rules they have," he says. "That means there's a lot of negotiating community space, talking to your kids about your expectations and rules and how they're different than the next door neighbors'. It was hard the first few years to figure out how to parent around people who were very different. Now, it's become pretty second nature, though."

Winter said he thinks it's easier to raise children in co-housing than to bring them to co-housing when they're teenagers. "People who move here as teenagers, who are dragged by their parents, often have a lot of resistance," he says. "At that age, they don't want to be weird, have a weird family, a weird living situation. They're extra-sensitive at that age."

At the other end of the age spectrum, elderly residents get to have equal input in the running of the community, unlike life in a retirement community where someone else sets the rules and policies.

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Winter, who is 65, says that the prospect of reaching retirement age while living in co-housing is, “a plus. Maybe a big plus.”

“First of all, Sunward is engineered with a fair amount of elder-friendly stuff. Some units are fully handicapped accessible. And the design philosophy is for all units to have a bedroom on the main floor,” he says. He mentions that Sunward especially skews toward an older population and that three elderly people have died while living there.

“And with two in particular, people who lived alone, there was an enormous amount of any kind of support you could think of,” he says. “We were here for them. Both decided to have a memorial before they died, and each threw a big party. They were attended by whole community. (Residents had) a lot of things to say at the memorial, and they were said while they were still alive. It was really wonderful.”

He says almost all the support for the elderly is informal. “There’s not a budget item for taking care of old folks. But we have resources and people to meet the needs.” He says there’s been talk about creating a more formal structure to help the elderly and about “aging in place.” He says that co-housing is a “fertile seedbed” for that kind of action once a critical mass of will is achieved to make it happen.

Harter, 77, retired to Great Oak, and said she enjoys being the oldest person in a young group of residents. “It’s fun to be with that generation,” she says. “It’s interesting, too. I would have never known that people live with a computer growing out of their hip. I just finally bought one.”

Meima tells the story of an elderly co-housing resident falling and breaking a hip, and says that within four minutes, several neighbors gathered, called an ambulance and arranged to take care of her dog and her plants while she was away.

“I don’t know of any other place where something like that would happen,” he says. He said in a typical neighborhood, one neighbor might have called 911, but the other pieces, like caring for the dog and plants, might not have happened.

“And they would have thought to call a relative, but they probably wouldn’t know who that is or how to get a hold of that person,” he says. “This remarkable set of circumstances characterized her living in co-housing and benefiting tremendously from it. In co-housing, older people are completely a part of and shape the community like anybody else. There’s that village concept, that it takes a village to raise a child. That village concept is equally important for older people for different reasons.”

Working together

One thing that sets a co-housing community apart from a typical condo association is the high level of participation by all members. In a typical condo community, everyone pays dues, but only a small board of directors runs things. In co-housing, almost all adult members are heavily involved in the day-to-day operations of the community, through business meetings and the work program.

Each community has a slightly different way of running a work program, but each community expects members to do somewhere between three to eight hours of work, which can include tasks ranging from cleaning and maintaining common areas to running committees and keeping notes. Great Oak’s hourly requirement is a bit higher because it includes meals, where the other two communities do not include meals in the work program.

Akiva, who was one of the first members to move into Great Oak, has done a variety of jobs as part of the work program. “I cook, assistant cook, and clean. I have been common house maintenance coordinator many times. I have done childcare during meetings,” he says. “We have a very structured, very fair system in my opinion. There’s

Amy Harris says she is an “idealist” about the consensus process. “It’s a way for everybody’s voice to be heard, unlike other places in life. The phrase I’ve heard and like is, ‘Everyone has a piece of the truth.’”



Photo by Gray Ayer

Susan Kravitz Ayer lives in Sunward Co-housing

structure to make it work but flexibility to make it humane. For example, when our now seven month old was born, we took a work cycle off.”

Harter says she thinks the work committee at Great Oak does “a terrific job” of distributing the work. “It’s an awfully hard job to do this fairly,” she says. She has fulfilled it by cleaning, shoveling snow and working on various committees. She is retired and has time for the work requirement but has some empathy for working families with children who have to put in time on community jobs on top of their career and child raising.

“You know each other well, and it’s not like if you say something (about the conflict) they’d stop talking to you,” Susan Ayer says. “It’s not an option- we interact too much. Even people I don’t like, I still have to be nice to them, because we interact all the time. We have to work things out. But it’s not just that you have to. People who live in co-housing, that’s the kind of community they want to be part of.”

She says one downside to the work program is that there are always some people who are “slackers.” She adds, “But that’s life. There are always people who do extra things nobody knows about. They care.”

Harter says that differing standards could also create some bumps in the work program. “The other thing that enters into this is what one person considers clean and what another person considers clean can be two different things,” she says. “There can be a little bit of problem there.”

Harris spends a lot of time thinking about community jobs and how they’re allocated. “I’m extremely immersed,” she says. “I’ve been on the work committee (at Great Oak) since beginning. I really think a lot about it. Sunward invited me over more than a year ago to ask about how our system works. I talked for one and a half hours and could have kept talking.”

She says that as she talked, she realized how many things the community had done to tweak and adjust the work program and get it all to run smoothly. “As a member of the work committee, I’m focused on what doesn’t work and how to make that better. I’m on the fix-it side, rather than seeing the big picture of how well it really does work. The overarching goal is to maximize happiness of workers.”

Three times a year, community members are given a list of necessary tasks and asked to rate them on a scale of one to five, with one being “Can’t do this or hate this job,” three being neutral, and five meaning “I’d love to do this job.”

“When there is illness, hospitalizations or even births, neighbors bring food over for a couple weeks. So, there’s a lot of support,” Robin Kahler says. “When people moved in this summer from out of state, they were new to Ann Arbor. They were able to have instant support, and we’re able to give them ideas of where to go shop.”

A computer program sorts these answers out and makes assignments. “The goal is that people have maximum happiness in their work,” Harris says. A work committee goes over the results to make sure the program did a good job. If there’s a problem, committee members spend a few hours fixing the results.

If people are still unhappy with a particular work assignment, there’s a remedy. “Recently, we added a job swap, a job fair,” Harris says. People can announce they don’t really like a job and can ask to trade responsibilities. “For the most part, it works really, really well,” Harris says.

Community challenges

Though members of the co-housing communities I talked to were overwhelmingly positive about the benefits of co-housing, they were also candid about the challenges and drawbacks.

“One thing I don’t like is that I get tired of committees, and I don’t think I’m alone,” Harter says.

Reitbauer echoed those sentiments. “Co-housing isn’t perfect. There are people who are less enthusiastic about meetings than others, and it does require a lot of meetings,” she says. “I don’t think it’s a good choice for someone who really hates meetings or who isn’t willing to do a share of the community work. We try to help people self-select by letting them know that they will be expected to do a moderate amount of community work and come to community meetings.”

Several residents of co-housing also talked about conflict and how that’s handled in community.

Kahler, who has lived in Touchstone for three years, says that handling conflict in co-housing is different than having a disagreement with a neighbor in a typical living situation.

“I think it’s different because you know your neighbors well enough that you care, and there’s more investment in actually working it out,” Kahler says. “You may disagree on a topic, and, three hours later, you’re having dinner together or you’re harvesting vegetables.”

Ayer says that people in co-housing handle conflict differently because they feel a responsibility to one another. “It’s a mutual thing. You know if you’re doing something that’s annoying them, you’re going to stop, because if they were doing something annoying, you’d want them to stop it,” Ayer says.

“You know each other well, and it’s not like if you say something (about the conflict) they’d stop talking to you. It’s not an option- we interact too much,” she says. “We have to work things out. But it’s not just that you have to. People who live in co-housing, that’s the kind of community they want to be part of.”

The community also has formal venues for working out disagreements. Winter mentioned the mediation guild. “Say you and I live here and we have a spat because we both signed up for room in the common house for different important events,” Winter says. “Perhaps it got personal and emotional, and the situation escalated. That’s the kind of thing where the mediation guild basically makes somebody available to listen and suggest. They don’t arbitrate, but they do facilitate communication and conflict resolution. It’s not a mechanism you’ll find anywhere else.”

Winter says that Sunward was a pioneer in working out conflict, and he feels they handle things better now than they did at the start. “When there’s a certain issue with emotional charge that comes up and finds its way into a community meeting, we deal with it better now than in year one in terms of people being able to listen to each other, people being able to express themselves.

Part of this, he says, is that members now just understand that conflict is inevitable. “Maybe most important, we’re not surprised when there are conflicts anymore. Some people came into community thinking that if we just hold hands, there won’t be any conflict. If we just all love each other, everything will be perfect. So when there was conflict, it was very upsetting because people had the feeling it shouldn’t be happening. But we’re growing up, and we now know there will always be conflict. There are just better and worse ways of living with it and growing from it.”

Harris also looks at conflict as being both inevitable but also an opportunity for growth. “If you put people together, there will be conflict. It’s part of human nature,” she says. “You need to learn how to be cognizant of opportunities to move forward. Conflict can be a source of energy. When there is a conflict, by definition, there’s energy in it. You might be angry and have two parties who can’t agree. But they’re engaged. That’s good energy. If you’re avoiding conflict, there’s no energy to resolve or to create something new. Conflict leads to creativity.”

Conahan says that conflict can be “intense.”

Conflict is intense because we decided, let’s tie ourselves together with the biggest chunk of our financial assets,” Conahan says. “That can be hard if you’re not getting along with neighbors. When we started, (Sunward) was the first co-housing community in the Midwest. We had relatives telling us, ‘What if it fails? What if you can’t stand each other and all lose your homes?’ We were saying, ‘We can’t fail for that very reason.’

Conahan says that sharing the community assets creates pressure to resolve conflict. “We’ve certainly had the experience of interpersonal conflict here. But for myself, it’s the best growing experience of my life. I don’t know that everyone would appreciate that challenge, and not everyone would see it that way.”

Winter also says that getting organized and creating processes for handling day-to-day issues helps cut down on conflict. “We’ve grown immensely in being organized to function. For the first five years, it was hard to know what to say and who to say it to. We were not organized, had no budget, and just dealing with maintenance level stuff involved a great rallying of energy. Now we have processes and an annual budget, and the machine works. Some kind of conflict stress is not necessary if you’re organized.”

Reaching consensus

In all three communities, decisions are reached by consensus rather than by a majority vote. This comes naturally to some community members but is an adjustment for others.

“The basis of the consensus model is actually hearing everyone’s opinions and trying to find a solution that works for everyone,” Kahler says. “And if it doesn’t, it’s not quite ready to be approved.”

Harris says she is “idealist” about the consensus process. “It’s a way for everybody’s voice to be heard, unlike other places in life. The phrase I’ve heard and like is, ‘Everyone has a piece of the truth.’”

Harter says she was comfortable with consensus decision making because she’d been a member of the League of Women Voters for years, and that’s what they use. “Usually, it might take three meetings and some adjustment, but we usually reach consensus.”

Herstein, on the other hand, said he has “mixed feelings” about the consensus model. “In our early years, consensus decision-making taught us to listen to each other, to learn to compromise, and to feel more like a community,” he says. “It also improved my ability to listen carefully to others and to be aware of when I was hogging the conversation. But consensus decision-making also requires a great deal of time and energy, and in some cases can lead to harder feelings than making a decision by voting. Although it’s traditional for co-housing communities to govern themselves by consensus, I don’t think it’s necessary to do so.”

“The basis of the consensus model is actually hearing everyone’s opinions and trying to find a solution that works for everyone,” Robin Kahler says. “And if it doesn’t, it’s not quite ready to be approved.”

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Akiva also has mixed feelings about consensus decision making. “Frankly, it can be annoying,” he says. “It’s slow and very process-focused. But it works pretty well for most of our decision-making needs. We get most ideas out in the open this way and pretty good decisions get made.”

Ramaswamy Aditya, who lives in Great Oak with his wife and children, says that making decisions by consensus was a small adjustment. “But I’ve been struck at how reasonable everyone is,” he says. “Things take longer than if one was to make decisions by fiat, but considering we’re all trying to look out for the good of the entire community, we have the luxury and necessity of spending that time.”

Enjoying diversity

An unexpected benefit for some members of the co-housing communities was the diversity of people and cultures they are exposed to. Several residents cited getting to know people they wouldn’t normally seek out as friends as a pleasant surprise.

Akiva says he likes the social benefits of co-housing and being able to have large group of neighbors he knows well. “Some are not necessarily people I’d go out and make friends with,” he says. “But they’re in my life in a fairly meaningful way. I have in-depth interaction with people I would not normally have interaction with. The logistical set-up makes that interaction possible.”

Ayers had a similar reaction. “One of the benefits that I get from living here is hanging out with really amazing committed citizens, people that I wouldn’t normally be friends with,” Ayer says.

“They’re not the same age, or not the same religion, or not from the same workplace, or not necessarily involved in same type of activities. But being able to live here with these people has enriched my life beyond anything I could have ever imagined. It’s not just a question of meeting them, but learning from them. They are changing me by what they’re committed to and what they’re involved with and what they know about. It enables me to learn, grow, change and be a better person than I would have otherwise. This is a real gift for me being able to live here, a blessing.”

###



Photo by Susan Kravitz Ayer

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