

# How the “N Street Consensus Method” Helps N Street Cohousing Thrive

I criticize what I call “consensus-with-unanimity.” The “consensus” part is the *process* — the intention to hear from everyone in the circle, asking clarifying questions, expressing concerns, and modifying and improving the proposal.

The “unanimity” part is sometimes called the “decision rule” — the *percentage of agreement* needed to pass a proposal. In many communities it is 100 percent or “unanimity” or “full consent.” Except for anyone standing aside, everyone in the meeting must agree to a proposal — unanimity or full consent — before the proposal can pass. (This distinction was first pointed out by Sam Kaner, et. al. in *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* (New Society Publishers, 1996.)

In practice, consensus-with-unanimity means essentially that anyone can block a proposal for any reason, and there’s no recourse — such as, for example, having criteria for a legitimate block, or requiring anyone blocking to collaborate with others to co-create a new proposal. In my experience, consensus-with-unanimity is what most communitarians mean when they say “consensus.”

I don’t think consensus with unanimity works well for most intentional communities. In fact, as noted in the articles, I think using it can cause harm. When one or more people block proposals a lot, a community can experience frustration, discouragement, dwindling meeting attendance, and low morale.

However, consensus-with-unanimity is only *one* possible way to decide things after the consensus process. N Street Cohousing in Davis, California, has been successfully using a different consensus method for almost 25 years.

## **How N Street Cohousing Uses Consensus**

N Street Cohousing has a simple, straightforward way of using consensus. Here’s what they do.

When the facilitator calls for consensus on a proposal and no one blocks, the proposal passes.

**Up to Six Meetings:** If one or more people blocks a proposal, however, the person(s) blocking are obligated to meet with small groups of other members in a series of solution-oriented, consensus-building meetings. Their job is to think through the issues and mutually agree on a new proposal that addresses the same problem as the blocked proposal. They present the new proposal at the next business meeting.

The small groups are required to meet up to six times and in no more than three months after the proposal was blocked. They’re not *required* to take six meetings or three months! In fact, in 25 years it’s never taken them more than two meetings to do this step.

The people who supported the proposal can send representatives to these meetings, but they don’t have to attend all of the meetings.

The person(s) blocking is responsible for organizing the meetings, and the meetings must take place.

**A New Proposal:** If a new, mutually agreed upon proposal is created in one of the meetings, it goes back to the whole group and is taken up as a new proposal.

**75 Percent Super-Majority Agreement:** If the person(s) blocking and the other members cannot come up with a mutually agreed-on new proposal during the series of meetings — or if the meetings don't take place for some reason — the original proposal goes back to the next Council to be reconsidered. But at this meeting, it can be passed by a 75 percent super-majority agreement of the members present.

(If more than just a few people block a proposal, depending on the size of the group, of course the proposal doesn't pass because it clearly doesn't have enough support, and the group does not invoke this process.)

### **Why the N Street Consensus Method Works Well**

This consensus method makes anyone who wants to block take more responsibility for the effect of their block on the group. "If you've blocked," says Kevin Wolf, cofounder of N St. Cohousing and originator of this method, "you've got to be part of the solution. Anyone who wants to block has to ask themselves, 'Do I oppose this proposal enough to go through all this?'"

*Satisfaction.* When I visited N Street Cohousing several years ago, I asked various community members how they liked their decision-making method. "We like it," I heard over and over. "Our meetings run smoothly." An unusual aspect of N Street Cohousing is that 75 percent of their members are renters (60% of the homes are rentals), and having both renters and owners in the community decision-making process sometimes triggers conflict. But not in this community.

*Deterrence.* While this method could seem like a lot of work and bureaucracy, N Street members believe it's effective not only because it works well but also because it *exists*. It's a deterrent to the kind of frivolous, personal blocking one can see in many intentional communities.

"Someone blocked a proposal in one of our meetings recently," N Street member Pamela Walker told me when I saw there. "We'd forgotten to tell this person how we work with blocks here. So when we told them, they said, 'Well, if I'd known I had to do all this I wouldn't have blocked!'" (Pamela told me the person then rescinded their block.)

In the nearly 25 years since N Street was founded, Kevin Wolf estimates there have probably been about 12 blocked issues total. Of these, only two or three have invoked this process. Each time the blocking people and proposal advocates only reached a second small-group meeting before they mutually crafted a new proposal. Thus they've only held about six small-group meetings in nearly 25 years to deal with blocks!

(The other 10 blocked proposals were resolved informally outside the meetings, by coming up with let's-try-it new solutions that worked, or often because assumptions just needed more time to be clarified.)

**Respect for community members.** This method is effective, in my opinion, because it respects both the person blocking and those who support the proposal.

\* It respects the person(s) blocking because it offers up to three months of informal opportunities — and up to six formal opportunities — to share his or her views with others in a more intimate setting, mutually create a new proposal, or persuade at least 26 percent of the people that the proposal should not be passed.

\* It respects the people supporting the proposal because, if the small groups cannot build enough consensus to reach agreement, the later 75 percent super-majority agreement will

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ensure that the most number of people will get the most of what they most want. "Tyranny of the minority" isn't possible.

***Balancing Power with Responsibility.*** Community-based consensus trainer Tree Bressen highly values inclusivity in community and is passionate about consensus. She considers N Street's Consensus Method to be inclusive and fair to everyone. "It seems like consensus to me," she says. "And I like how it balances power with responsibility."

### **Alternatives to Consensus-with-Unanimity**

Over the last year I've studied Sociocracy, a governance and decision-making method developed in The Netherlands in the 1970s and used by an increasing number of intentional communities instead of consensus. I've also studied Holacracy, a governance and decision-making method developed in the US in the early 2000s, and with which at least one community, ZEGG in Germany, replaced their consensus method. I believe these methods result in more effective, productive, and satisfying community business meetings and committee meetings than when a group uses consensus-with-unanimity.

And I believe the N Street Consensus Method works very well too, and is easier for a group using consensus-with-unanimity to implement, because they don't need to learn anything new. What do you think? Want to try it?

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*Future articles in the series will describe the "Four Decision Options/Choose Your Committee Members" method of Ecovillage Sieben Linden, Systemic Consensus, Tim Hartnett's "Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making" method, Sociocracy, and Holacracy (and why they work especially well in intentional communities), and politically incorrect tips for adopting a method that may work better than consensus-with-unanimity, even if your older members are devoted to it.*

### **Resources**

- Tree Bressen: [www.treegroup.info](http://www.treegroup.info)
- *We the People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy, A Guide to Sociocratic Principles and Methods*, by John Buck and Sharon Villines (2007): [www.sociocracy.info](http://www.sociocracy.info)
- SocioNet online discussion: [www.socionet.us](http://www.socionet.us)
- Governance Alive, author and consultant John Buck: [www.governancealive.com](http://www.governancealive.com)
- *Holacracy One*: [www.holacracy.org](http://www.holacracy.org)