

Belfast Area Cohousing & Ecovillage

FARMLAND PRESERVATION + ECOLOGICALLY-MINDED HOUSING

Frequently Asked Questions about Cohousing

How does cohousing differ from other kinds of collaborative living arrangements, such as intentional communities?

Some people involved with cohousing like to describe their communities as “intentional neighborhoods.” By contrast, “intentional communities” frequently connote a shared religious, political, environmental or social ideology rather than simply the desire to have a strong sense of community with your neighbors. Cohousing residents privately own their homes and do not pool their incomes.

How large are cohousing communities and who lives there?

Many people feel that cohousing works best with 25 to 35 households. Different-sized groups enjoy specific advantages. For example, in a smaller community, you will know every person quite well if you choose to do so. A larger community usually has enough resources to support more extensive common facilities, and enough people to create a greater variety of community activities. Cohousing attracts a wide range of household types: single people of all ages, couples, families and single parents of infants, toddlers and school-aged children, couples whose children are grown, and retirees.

How does a community get started?

Sometimes a developer who already has control of a site or piece of land will initiate and/or drive a new community. Other neighborhoods begin with a core group of future residents who hold the vision of cohousing and build momentum with outreach to prospective neighbors. Sometimes they will work with a local real estate professional to help them find an appropriate site. And they will be wise to contact [cohousing professionals](#) to help them establish the basic systems, roles and responsibilities of members. Completed cohousing communities and The Cohousing Association also can provide support to individuals seeking cohousing for themselves, and to new groups through this website, tours, workshops and our biennial national conference.

How is home ownership legally structured in cohousing communities?

Most cohousing communities in the U.S. are structured as condominiums or planned unit developments (PUDs). In the “lot development model,” residents jointly own the common property and facilities, and are the sole owners of the lots on which the homes are built. Sometimes residents in attached townhomes own just the land directly under their homes (the footprint), or perhaps the footprint plus a small back or front “private” yard.

Do cohousing communities incorporate green design and materials?

Most people who seek cohousing have a high level of environmental consciousness. Communities typically incorporate green building materials and techniques in the design and construction to the extent they can afford them, and are attentive to minimizing their impact on the natural environment.

What is elder or senior cohousing?

Cohousing came to the U.S. from Denmark, where intergenerational communities gave birth to a successful, age-specific cohousing model for active elders. The first [elder-only cohousing](#) neighborhoods for active adults, 55 and above, are just now emerging in the U.S. Design features include easy access for all levels of physical ability and also may include optional studio residences in the common house to provide living quarters for home health aides whose services may be shared by several residents.

Is cohousing based on a specific ideology, shared values or religious or spiritual beliefs?

Some cohousing communities create a shared vision or ethic, such as sharing resources, welcoming diversity and creating a safe environment for children, but residents typically represent a variety of religious and spiritual backgrounds.

Is there a screening process? Who decides who lives in cohousing?

Most forming and developing cohousing groups do not screen new members. Potential members learn about the community and the expectations for participation and decide for themselves whether or not the community will meet their needs. To help potential member households make an informed decision, groups usually require attendance at an orientation, several regular business meetings, and perhaps some involvement with a committee before they can apply for membership.

Why join a group at the beginning?

The sooner you enter the community, the more opportunity you have to be part of the design and planning. Early membership also gives you a higher priority in the order in which homes will be selected. Many groups offer a financial incentive for joining the project early, such as a discount applied to your final house price.

Are cohousing homes more affordable than other types of housing?

Affordability varies. Some cohousing neighborhoods now incorporate approaches to maximize affordability, but most often construction, consultants and financing costs are similar to those in any new development. Cohousing homes tend to be comparably priced with other single-family houses, townhouses or condominiums in the area. In addition to your new home, however, you also will benefit from a custom-designed neighborhood and extensive common facilities, as well as ongoing costs that tend to be less than in a typical U.S. home. Reduced living expenses result from living collaboratively. For example, optional community meals several times a week can save money, as can other practices such as energy-efficient design and building, or commonly owned equipment such as one lawnmower per neighborhood. Driving expenses tend to be lower because many social activities occur in the neighborhood and carpooling is common. Residents also often make group purchases of food and home maintenance items, and handle neighborhood chores themselves instead of paying for outside labor. Additionally, several families may share the costs for kids' play equipment and childcare. Residents typically pay homeowners' dues in cohousing, but community work-sharing can offset many costs.

How does cohousing provide for residents of different economic means?

Some states, counties or municipalities require developers of multi-family housing to have a certain percentage of the new units meet a standard for "affordability." People in cohousing usually welcome this, and often wish they could make even more than the required percentage affordable. Unfortunately, unless the developer can get public or private subsidies or grants, a community can build only a limited number of affordable units without significantly driving up everyone else's costs.

What about buying into an existing cohousing neighborhood?

Turnover tends to be very low in built cohousing communities. The vast majority of people who sell their homes do so because their life circumstances change, not because cohousing doesn't work for them.

What if a member wants to move out of the community and sell his or her home?

Any household leaving the community can legally sell its property to anyone it chooses, except in a few cohousing communities in the U.S. that are structured as cooperatives. Some groups maintain a “right of first refusal,” which means that the seller must offer his or her home for purchase by the community or to an individual or individuals within the community before putting it on the open market. In other communities, residents sign a voluntary agreement that they will not lease or sell their house to a person or persons who do not wish to participate fully in the community. Some groups maintain a waiting list of people interested in being informed if a home becomes available. The seller and the rest of the community will benefit if everyone lends a hand in finding new owners. When it comes to resales, experience has shown that homes in cohousing have appreciated faster than the market as a whole.

What about rentals?

Many cohousing neighborhoods include a few rental units owned by members who intend to move in later or who are away for a period of time. Some people want to rent in cohousing to try it out, because they cannot yet afford to buy a unit, or because they want to live in a particular community but no units are currently available for sale. Most residents agree that rental units are a positive addition to a community.

Do residents have their own kitchens?

This is the single most frequently asked question of cohousing residents and professionals. Yes, each residence has a fully equipped, private kitchen. In addition, the common house contains a kitchen, where community members regularly share a few meals each week. The common house kitchen can also have shared storage space and equipment.

Tell me about common meals.

Cohousing residents generally feel that common meals hold the community together, and usually serve two or three meals each week in their common house. Eating common meals is always voluntary. In a few communities cooking is also voluntary, but in most cases it is not. However, the cooking (and cleanup) responsibilities can be structured in a variety of ways. Commonly, a team of two to four persons prepares meals for diners who sign up in advance. Each adult resident helps cook and/or clean up once every five or six weeks. Residents pay only for the meals they eat, with dinner prices typically ranging from \$2.50 to \$5.

How is the community managed?

Residents manage the community through a homeowners association. Committees carry out the work. Most cohousing communities make decisions by [consensus](#), and although many groups have a policy for voting if the group cannot reach consensus after a number of attempts, in practice they rarely or never find it necessary to vote.

How are commonly owned facilities, landscaping or gardens cared for?

Each community devises its own process for doing the necessary work on common property. Some expect residents to contribute a certain number of hours per month; others accomplish the work with a voluntary system. Typically, residents match personal skills and passions with projects that need attention.

How much participation is required?

Cohousing communities tend to trust the rhythms of the group, where participation ebbs and flows among individual members. A minimum level of participation generally includes cleaning in the common house or working on the land. Residents who eat common meals usually are expected to assist on a cooking or cleaning team once a month or more, depending upon the community's needs.

What about privacy?

Most cohousing residents recognize an intrinsic need for indoor and outdoor private space. Neighborhood designs attempt to achieve a balance between personal privacy and community interaction. In addition, the social mores of the group include respect for individual needs for time alone.

What about safety and security?

Because residents know all their neighbors, cohousing provides an excellent built-in neighborhood watch system. Residents easily notice someone who is not a familiar face in the neighborhood. Even in urban areas, many cohousers are comfortable leaving their front doors unlocked when they go to the common house to pick up laundry or mail. Cohousing parents report that their communities feel extremely safe for raising children. If a child falls off a swing when he or she is out of his or her parent's immediate sight, for example, another adult surely will assist the child. Additionally, everyone helps protect and maintain the property for a resident traveling out of town.

What if I don't like someone in the group?

It isn't essential for everyone in a cohousing community to like every neighbor. In fact, a variety of personalities will add interest to neighborhood life. Cohousing residents need only share the goal of making their lives more enjoyable by cooperating with their neighbors.

How are disputes about things like pets, noise and property upkeep handled?

One of cohousing's great strengths is the assumption that members can work out their conflicts. Most cohousing communities use [consensus decision-making](#), which tends to satisfy most residents and give them a sense of participation on challenging issues. Some communities convene a conflict-resolution team when a particularly hot issue arises. Through the Cohousing Association website and listserv, communities share information about proven techniques for resolving conflict. Finally, if the situation warrants it, a community may call in an outside professional to facilitate the process.

For the website version of these FAQ's and for more information about cohousing in the United States contact the Cohousing Association of the United States. www.cohousing.org