

# THE COOPERATOR

*News and updates for leaders of resident-owned communities*

## Co-ops return to in-person annual meetings after two years of remote or hybrid meetings

*Encourage attendance and run a successful meeting with these helpful tips*

**Emily Stewart**

*Lending & Co-op Development Manager*

Throughout the pandemic, cooperatives grappled with whether Annual Membership Meetings should be conducted in person. Many communities found solutions that worked for their membership – either conducting fully remote meetings, a hybrid approach of remote and in-person, or meeting in-person as normal.

NCF recommends all Boards return to in person Annual Meetings this year to enable full participation by co-op members. Annual Meetings should always be held according to your bylaws. Many of the co-ops NCF supports have bylaws that instruct co-ops to follow certain rules regarding Annual Meetings, including:

- Meeting must be held in the last quarter of your fiscal year between October and December;
- The time, place and agenda should be sent in writing to all members and posted in public locations within your commu-

nity 10 days before the meeting;

- Last year's financials and proposed annual budget should also be made available to members 10 days before the meeting.

The primary purpose of the Annual Meeting is to approve the next year's annual budget and capital improvement plan, elect a Board of Directors, and vote on any changes to the community rules.

Ensuring adequate member attendance can be a hurdle when preparing for an annual meeting. Your co-op's bylaws will tell you how meeting quorum is determined for your community. In many co-ops, quorum is defined as 30% of all members. Make sure to have an updated rent roll and current accounts receivable ledger to determine the total number of residents in good standing that will have voting privileges. Here are some tips on encouraging attendance at your annual meeting:

- Notify early and often about the time, date and location of the meeting;
- Provide food. Think about all of the different cultural groups in

- your co-op and what foods they may prefer;
- Offer incentives. Some communities have provided one month of free lot rent or prize raffles to those who attend. (Members must stay for the entire meeting to be eligible for the raffle drawing);
- Offer some form of child care or children's activity space for families with children to be able to attend;
- Appoint a timekeeper to ensure the meeting runs on schedule.

If you need help implementing any of these suggestions, please reach out to your NCF Technical Assistance Provider.



# Co-ops practice good governance through board recruitment

**Kathleen Richert**

*Training and Outreach Coordinator*

A Succession Plan is an organization's strategy for recruiting new leaders, making smooth transitions, and passing on information.

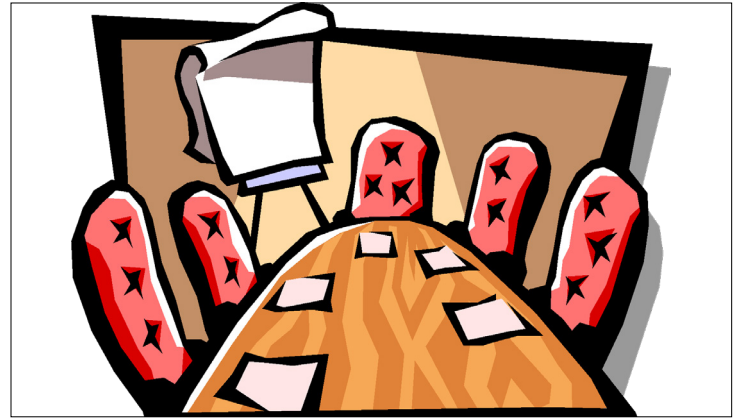
Like most good plans, it is a map that helps your co-op move ahead. A succession plan may not seem necessary when all roles are filled and everything is running smoothly, but at any point, your Board president or any other Board member may decide to end their term early.

Your co-op will weather leadership transitions more smoothly if you have a plan for replacing board members at the ends of their terms and have a process for recruiting new board members.

Creating a plan for leadership recruitment and transition ahead of time provides an opportunity to increase board diversity, fill skill gaps, or realign Board member's experience with the community's changing strategic and operational needs. A mix of ages, skill sets, and backgrounds enables Boards to make wise decisions for their communities. Continually recruiting new people onto the board helps broaden the base of involvement from all co-op members.

Many co-ops sink into a pattern where the same people serve term after term on the board. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," right? The reality is that if your co-op isn't recruiting new people to the board, something is broken and does need fixing. The foundation of the co-op model is democratic governance and participation of the members. Board recruitment ensures that members have an opportunity to engage meaningfully in the operations of the business, which is a core principle of co-op governance.

The truth is, unchanging board leadership puts your community at risk because it leaves the co-op vulnerable to changing circumstances. For example, if something happened to 'that one person on the board that knows everything,' where would it leave the rest of the co-op? Unchanging perspectives on the board can also lead to



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mistrust and create a lack of confidence among co-op members.

New board members bring fresh ideas, different perspectives and renewed energy into board meetings based on their experience and diversity of gender, age, and ethnicity. Here are our top tips for ensuring good recruitment practices at your co-op:

**1) Institute term limits and hold all board members accountable to them.** If you create a culture at your co-op that board service means signing up for a "lifelong appointment," you are going to have a hard time recruiting new board members. When your term is up, it's time to step back for a while and support others to learn how to lead. Remember, veteran board members can always come back, but it's important for veterans to step away to give others room to learn.

**2) Add board members in staggered terms so new members can learn from veteran board members.** Create opportunities throughout the year for veteran board members to "cross-train" newer board members on core governance and operational practices.

**3) Normalize board recruitment.** Discussions about refreshing the Board are sometimes emotional, but incorporating recruitment into your co-op's annual routine lessens the emotion. In a healthy co-op, board turnover and onboarding of new members is like the changing

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# NCF seeks input from co-ops on *Infill Guide*

**Kathleen Richert**

*Training and Outreach Coordinator*

Nearly every co-op has open lots and vacant homes. Those open lots and vacant homes represent lost income and lost opportunity for your co-op. Every vacancy is costing your co-op money. Placing homes on empty lots is called “infill”.

We include moving people into unoccupied homes in this strategy because the result is similar—adding rent-paying households to your cooperative’s revenue stream.

Infill benefits your community in several ways. One of the most obvious is stabilizing rents and lengthening the time before a rent increase may be needed. Additional homes are equally valuable because they bring new people into your co-op, and the new people bring energy, different experiences and fresh ideas.

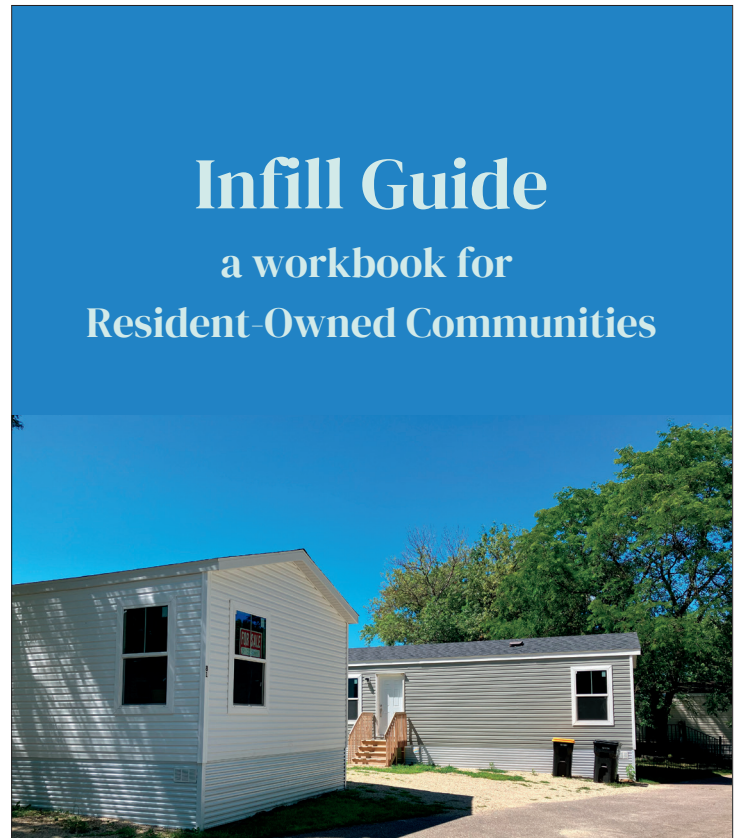
Using a Rural Cooperative Development Grant (RCDG) from the USDA, NCF worked on developing an Infill Guide for our network of communities over the summer.

Our goal was to create a guide that would help a co-op’s infill team develop an action plan that fits best with their community’s individual resources, needs, and priorities. The guide does not promote a single, one-size-fits-all strategy. Instead, we outline different approaches step-by-step, examining the decision points along the way.

Everyone who attended a Common Ground 2022 session received a draft copy of the Infill Guide with the other goodies in their bag at the end of the conference.

You may have noticed that it is stamped “DRAFT”. The next step in development is to test the guide with communities, revising where needed based on your input and experience. In the end, we want a simple to understand, easy to navigate format that the Board or Infill Committee can use to place homes on empty lots with confidence.

We are looking for community teams to work with. If your cooperative has done infill, we are interested in talking with you about your process and how it compares



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*A photo taken at Zumbro Ridge Estates in Rochester, MN is featured on the cover of NCF’s Infill Guide.*

with the examples in the guide. If your community needs to do infill and is weighing its options, we are interested in working with you to develop a plan.

Kathleen Richert will be calling communities to talk with you about these next steps. If you want to be first in line for consideration, please send an email directly to her at [kathleen@northcountryfoundation.org](mailto:kathleen@northcountryfoundation.org).

Your contributions will make it easier for other co-ops, and that is one more beautiful thing about working cooperatively.



# Common Ground Conference attendees share strategies to fill vacant lots

*After two years of remote conferences, attendees gather at Woodlawn Terrace*



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Conference attendees pose for a photo outside a new manufactured home in Woodlawn Terrace Cooperative in Richfield, MN. Since becoming resident-owned in December 2021, Woodlawn has partnered with a local manufactured home dealer to bring in seven new homes and has plans to bring another fourteen new homes in the next two years.

## **Kathleen Richert**

*Training and Outreach Coordinator*

This year's Common Ground Conference / Tierra Compartida Conferencia took place mostly online with several online workshops held over the week of September 12 - 16.

After two years apart, co-op leaders were finally able to come together for an in-person part of the conference held on Friday, September 16 at Woodlawn Terrace Cooperative in Richfield, MN. Attendees of the in-person portion of the conference took part in a workshop on vacant lot infill, followed by dinner together as a group at a nearby restaurant.

Conference attendance increased by 35% over last year. Thank you to all those who got the word out about the conference.

The newest co-op in NCF's network, Woodlawn Terrace Cooperative, welcomed conference attendees for the in-person session which included guided tours of the new, customized homes that came into the Co-op recently through a partnership with a local manufactured home dealer and installer. Board members shared their infill strategies and attendees received actionable information on how to fill vacant lots in their home co-ops.

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*Common Ground continued from page 4*

NCF broadened conference outreach this year by offering Spanish language options for our Spanish-speaking community members. NCF staff member Sam Estes was instrumental in providing translation services throughout the event. Thank you, Sam!

If you were unable to join the remote sessions this year, you can view the recordings on NCF's YouTube channel.

If you've never visited NCF's YouTube channel before, you can find the recorded sessions from previous years of Common Ground presentations as well. Just type Northcountry Cooperative Foundation into the search bar at YouTube to find our channel. Then click "subscribe," so it will be easy to find in the future. P

Please share the links with your neighbors, because there's a lot of great information there!

While you're at it, join our Facebook page, Midwest ROCs, and 'Like' Northcountry Cooperative Foundation's page too. It is an easy way to connect with people living in other communities, be the first to find out about news and opportunities, and share knowledge with others.



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*Board members from Sungold Heights (Worthington, MN) and Park Plaza Cooperative (Fridley, MN) pose for a photo during the tour of new homes at Woodlawn Terrace Cooperative in Richfield, MN.*



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*Common Ground Conference attendees and NCF Board Member Sarah Berke (pictured far right) pose for a photo at the dinner following the conference session at Woodlawn Terrace Co-op. Pictured left to right: Bev Adrian (Woodlawn Terrace Co-op), Marjory Gilsrud (Madelia Mobile Village Co-op), Natividad Seefeld (Park Plaza Co-op).*

# NCF welcomes new Development Manager, Michelle Dobbratz

Michelle works closely with the Executive Director to write grants and provide donors with the opportunity to support the NCF mission.

While studying plant sciences at the University of Minnesota- Twin Cities, Michelle discovered her love for grant writing and project management.

At UMN, Michelle wrote grants to start an interdisciplinary student group, fund several multi-year sustainable agriculture research projects, and provide paid research opportunities for students from communities underrepresented in agriculture. Michelle served on numerous grant review committees before starting her career as a freelance development consultant and grant

writer for sustainable agriculture nonprofits in 2019.

As a freelance consultant and grant writer, Michelle has helped her clients bring on additional staff, increase educational programming, and position themselves strategically for more fruitful partnership opportunities. In addition to her grant writing and development work, Michelle has worked in food service, outdoor retail, teaching English to speakers of other languages, grassroots advocacy, government administration, and medical equipment manufacture.

Michelle has always had an interest in housing justice and is very excited to serve the mission of NCF. When she's not at work, Michelle enjoys spending time with her two



*Michelle takes a selfie with her kitten, Pavlova.*

cats, working on her house, hiking, and camping.

## 5 ways to save money on energy this winter

Here is a list of five things you can do to make your home more comfortable and more energy efficient this winter.

### AIR SEALING

- Weather stripping and caulking (windows and doors)
- Seal around ducts and vents
- Install foam outlet and switch plate gaskets

### DIY INSULATION

- Insulate outside access panels with pink foam

- Pipe wrap
- Cover window air conditioners outside

### SAVE ON WATER COSTS

- Low-flow shower heads
- Sink faucet aerators
- Drain and refill your water heater

### INSTALL SMART ELECTRONICS

- Smart thermostat
- Smart powerstrips
- Replace traditional light bulbs with LEDs

### COMBAT HEAT LOSS

- Put up plastic barriers on windows
- Block air leaks under doors and around windows

Energy Assistance Program in MN: [mn.gov/commerce/consumers/consumer-assistance/energy-assistance/](http://mn.gov/commerce/consumers/consumer-assistance/energy-assistance/)

Energy Assisetance Program in WI: [benefits.gov/benefit/1397](http://benefits.gov/benefit/1397)

For more tips watch Eric Nelson's Weatherization presentation from Common Ground on NCF's YouTube Channel.



# Keep it cozy: weatherizing your manufactured home

**Dan Gordon**

*Housing Program Associate*

With summer coming to a close, it's a good time to start thinking about how to best protect your home for winter. Taking a few simple steps will help you cut down on heating bills and lessen the impact that the yearly freeze and thaw will have on your house. Here are a few tips to help you get started.

## Insulate your water pipes

While holes in your skirting can allow animals to get under your home, they also can let snow blow in that can potentially freeze your pipes. Make sure your skirting is sealed and your pipes are wrapped with heat tape. A small amount of time spent protecting your water lines will save you from a massive headache if a pipe bursts in the winter.

## Apply for Energy Assistance

Several state and federal programs exist to help low-income families with their utility bills. In some cases they will provide a home energy audit so you can learn where your heat is escaping and heat your home more efficiently. This money is often awarded on a first come, first served basis, so apply as early as possible. For more information go to: [energy.gov/eere/wap/how-apply-weatherization-assistance](http://energy.gov/eere/wap/how-apply-weatherization-assistance)



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*Proactively filling in gaps around windows and doors with spray insulation can help save money and keep your home warmer.*

## Stop heat leaks

Add weather stripping to your doors. Apply silicone caulk around doors and windows, electrical outlets, gutter seams, and the ceiling exhaust fans in your kitchen and bathroom. If you have a double-section home the “marriage line” between the two halves can lose its seal if the house becomes unlevel, make sure and check this area for any gaps.

## Clean and repair your gutters

Gutters full of leaves and twigs won't drain, and this can lead to ice dams. They can even swell and rip away from your house. Make sure your gutters are hosed out before the freezing weather sets in.

## *Board recruitment continued from page 2*

of the seasons—something that happens every year. Board recruitment is part of every Board member's job responsibility—constantly building and updating a pipeline of interested and qualified candidates.

Annual meetings present an opportunity to improve the composition and the functioning of the board. Talking to interested people ahead of time helps them be ready when Board nominations are asked for. Create a document of Frequently Asked Questions, ahead of time to give out to members at

the Annual Meeting that explains the Board positions, but also helps co-op members ask good questions of candidates and make an informed vote.

Include questions such as: What do Board members do? Who is eligible to serve on the Board? Can someone serve on the Board, but not be an officer? What are the responsibilities of each board position?

Building a well-functioning co-op happens over several years. So does building the abilities and skills of the members who serve on the Board. It takes time and intentionality, but the rewards are worth the effort.