

A Manual for Neighborhood Associations

City of East Lansing



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Introduction

Neighborhood associations play a vital role in representing the interests of residents and enhancing the local community. A well-organized association can have a significant impact on the quality of life in a neighborhood. The residents of the City of East Lansing demonstrate a great willingness to dedicate time and energy to make a difference in the community. This manual was designed to provide residents with sample policies and procedures that can be undertaken by neighborhood associations to encourage greater levels of civic participation and engagement. The City believes that increasing citizen participation benefits the whole community by creating a positive environment of shared responsibility and collaboration.



Role of the Citizen

Citizens have a very important role in the vitality and spirit of a community. Their active participation in local government is the best way to ensure that the quality of life desired is fulfilled. Citizen involvement can range from voting on a regular basis to being elected to serve in a public capacity. Both examples are equally as important to the process. Citizens also contribute greatly when they participate in or organize neighborhood projects or activities. Their involvement is crucial to improving the quality of life in their neighborhoods and the city.

Role of Local Government

The preservation and maintenance of an area's quality of life is a shared responsibility. Local Government is responsible for ensuring that the common good is protected and public services are carried out in an orderly and efficient manner. The Neighborhood Presidents and Neighborhood Associations serve as a link between citizens and their City government and government employees. This document is only intended to provide users with guidelines and best practices for developing viable neighborhood associations. Neighborhoods are not obligated to use this guide.

Creating a Formal Structure

Neighborhood Associations

Neighborhood associations are generally a group of residents and other interested stakeholders that devote their time and energy to improve and enhance the well-defined, geographic area where they live. It should be noted that East Lansing does not designate neighborhood boundaries or establish associations, those are left up to the residents of the area. The neighborhood association meeting is a time to exchange ideas, decide on projects and priorities, propose solutions, and make plans affecting the neighborhood. Associations usually meet monthly to discuss a variety of issues. Some issues could be: sponsoring neighborhood events, economic well-being of residents, improving city services, implementing projects to build neighborhood pride, and publishing neighborhood newsletters. Most official neighborhood associations have an elected board of directors and bylaws.

Homeowners Associations

Homeowners associations are groups of homeowners who live in an area developed by the same developer, usually referred to as a subdivision. Homeowner associations usually have a formally elected body and are governed by deed restrictions - a set of rules that homeowners agree to when they purchase their house. These rules, or covenants, often govern construction regulations, membership/dues requirements, as well as a wide variety of other issues. The City of East Lansing does not have jurisdiction to enforce these restrictions, so homeowners associations may have their own enforcement mechanisms. Some homeowners associations also focus on items that affect their neighborhood such as beautification/clean-up, crime, street lighting, building issues/concerns, and social events. These issues are similar to those addressed by neighborhood associations.

Bylaws

Neighborhood and homeowners associations should consider implementing bylaws describing how they will do business. Bylaws simply establish the rules governing a group. They serve as a constitution that establishes the legal requirements for the association. They also govern the way the association functions as well as the roles and responsibilities of its officers. Bylaws can help members clearly define and understand the purpose, procedures, and role of their neighborhood association.

A sample outline from a set of bylaws can be found in the appendix. It contains information that you may consider including in your bylaws. The sample outline is very inclusive, so do not feel your association must have every article or section. When designing bylaws, use only those areas you need. It is important to customize bylaws to meet the needs of your group. Be specific, but still allow flexibility within your association. The bylaws will be part of your neighborhood association for a long time.

Bylaws should be reviewed periodically to assure that the association's purpose has not changed. Reviewing bylaws on a regular basis ensures the rules are continuing to meet the needs of the group.

Many neighborhood associations also find it helpful to adopt "operating procedures" separate from the bylaws. These rules generally are easier to amend than bylaws. The purpose of such rules is to identify agreements of a particular board or set of members about how to conduct meetings and other activities. Such rules should never be in conflict with the bylaws. Instead, they should address more detailed procedures than those covered in the bylaws. The key concept of operating procedures is that they reflect the desires of the current board or members and are changed when the desires or needs of the group change.

Membership and Officers

Associations should choose leaders that are elected to official terms. The bylaws should describe all the positions, election procedures, how often they are elected, and the major responsibilities expected from each position. The positions created typically make up the neighborhood association board members.

Membership

It is important for the neighborhood association to be as inclusive as possible. Any person who is a resident or property owner within the neighborhood association boundaries, or who meets the criteria outlined in your association bylaws, is a prospective member and should be able to participate in the association.



Officers and Board Representatives

Elections should be held annually for a neighborhood association to elect a Board of Directors. These officers will handle the business of the neighborhood association throughout the upcoming year. The association's bylaws should specify the positions and the general framework of the electoral process. Descriptions can outline the responsibilities of the board and other individual officer positions.

There are a number of duties and responsibilities involved in forming an organization. It is important to have enough people on the board to delegate the many tasks that need to be completed. The following positions are the minimum number recommended for the governing board of your association:

Chairperson or President

This person is responsible for the overall leadership of the association board, sets the agenda and facilitates all meetings. It is important for this person to be objective and judicial. A chairperson should never dominate discussions. The chairperson keeps the

meeting running smoothly while allowing participation and is the person who makes sure people keep to the agenda, both in content and timing.

Some duties that are usually the responsibility of the chairperson are:

- Ensure members are notified about meeting dates, times, and locations.
- Represent the association in a public capacity as well as on the Mayor's Council of Neighborhood Presidents.
- Keep the meeting focused and within the allotted time frames as outlined in the agenda.
- Mediate arguments between members as they arise.
- Clarify decisions made by the group.
- Develop an organized agenda.
- Bring issues to a vote as needed and in an orderly manner.
- Review tasks and make assignments.
- Ensure that all members follow bylaws and procedures.
- Give credit and recognition for accomplishments.
- Follow up on decisions made at meetings.
- Meet with successor and transfer records, files, etc.

How to Make Your Job as Chairperson More Manageable

1. Introduce yourself at the beginning of a meeting. Don't assume everyone knows who you are. If the group is a reasonable size, have everyone introduce themselves as well.
2. Review the agenda and establish ground rules.
3. Direct the discussion. Keep people on the topic. If irrelevant issues are being brought up, remind the group that there will be a time for new business at the end of the meeting. If people are repetitive, restate the information that they have shared and move on to the next speaker. If a decision needs to be made, call for a motion and take a vote. Keep your own opinions to a minimum.
4. Facilitate voting and decision making. Never assume there is an agreement until it is put to a vote.
5. Disagreement between the membership is inevitable. Mediate arguments when they arise. Remain impartial and fair. Give each person an opportunity to state his or her own point of view.
6. Publicly state in review what has to be done. Review all discussions, decisions made, and the tasks to be assigned. Make sure that people leave the meeting with a clear understanding of what decisions have been made and which tasks are to be done by whom.
7. Make every attempt to be as organized as possible. When it is time to end a discussion, announce that time is almost complete. Select the final speakers and their order from those still indicating a desire to speak. The discussion should end when those people have had their turn.
8. Do not be afraid to delegate duties and tasks. Be aware that you cannot do everything on your own.
9. Follow-up on the assignments after the meeting. Sometimes members need to be encouraged to get things done. You may need to provide a lot of positive reinforcement to get things accomplished. Stay on top of things to ensure completion and success of the assigned task.

Vice Chairperson or Vice President

This person assists the chairperson and serves in an advisory capacity to the Chair. In absence of the chairperson, the vice-chairperson conducts the meetings and exercises all of the usual duties of the chairperson. The Vice-Chairperson should also be a person with strong leadership qualities.

Some of the responsibilities of the Vice-Chairperson are:

- Effectively manage and facilitate meetings in the absence of the Chair.
- Step into the Chair position in the event that the Chair is unable to complete his or her term.
- Follow-up on tasks assigned to members of the association.

Secretary

The secretary records the minutes of the meetings and makes sure that copies of the minutes, agendas, and other records are available for the board and the public.

Some responsibilities for the Secretary are:

- Record the minutes during all association meetings.
- Maintain current and comprehensive membership records.
- Record all of the official correspondence of the association.
- Pass along important information to be included in association newsletters.

Treasurer

The treasurer is responsible for the funds of the neighborhood association. Most boards do not require anything but an occasional status report from the Treasurer. Someone should be selected that will take the duties of the position very seriously since the fiscal condition of the association is crucial to the future well being of the group.

Typical duties of Treasurers are to:

- Pay all of the association's expenses in a timely and accurate manner.
- Collect and deposit all funds received by the association.
- Maintain a financial accounting system that is adequate and thorough for the association.
- Collect voluntary dues from members of the association.

Build and Maintain Membership

Recruiting members is important for the longevity of any organization. Initially, many groups attract members through well-publicized meetings on issues that concern projects involving lots of people. Once the project is completed or a problem is solved, active members may dwindle away. Many organizations experience this problem, so you need to be creative to avoid this dilemma.



Here are some actions your group can undergo to build membership:

1. Have association members go door-to-door calling on their neighbors. This can be a week-long effort or be done in a day. You could have a membership drive and then have a party for the members that volunteered in the effort. Your members would have fun and would have an opportunity to share experiences with each other.
2. Pass out printed materials to encourage residents to get involved. It could be as simple as a letter from the president or a brochure with details on upcoming events or issues. Members should also carry membership forms with them and offer both immediate and mail-in membership opportunities.
3. Designate block captains that can pass out flyers and newsletters to prospective new members, welcome new residents, serve as a sounding board for specific problems or issues on the block, and organize volunteers to help with activities they might be interested in.
4. Community gatherings or other events are also a great way to recruit new members. Sponsor a booth at a community festival or event. This is a great opportunity to talk to people in your area. Have membership sign-up sheets available. You can also have information packets about the association to hand out at events.

Keeping members involved can be quite challenging. For every member that is active in the association, there are probably two who would be involved if they were properly motivated. Here are some ideas to keep in mind in order to retain active members:

1. Help new members find a place in the association. Many will offer to help but will not know where to start. Organize a list of volunteer activities and have those who want to help sign their name next to activities they'd be interested in helping with. This will be a great start for your new members.
2. Always welcome new members and attempt to make them feel at ease with the group. Officers and other members should watch for new faces at each meeting and welcome them. New or potential members should be introduced to someone who lives near them. Designate an official "greeter" at every meeting.
3. Encourage new ideas and input at all levels of the organization. People who are new in the organization can see things in a new light and provide new solutions to old problems. New perspectives can assist the whole group in problem solving.
4. Every meeting should represent the strongest commitment to organization. Busy people will not attend meetings or involve themselves in organizations they consider to be a waste of time. Have a well-planned meeting will also display a sense of accomplishment from the beginning. Have a written agenda for every meeting and stick to it.
5. Maintain current membership records. Keep a file with members' names, addresses, phone numbers, family member names, occupations, special talents, areas of interest, etc.

6. Being part of a neighborhood association is not all work. Have fun as well. Sponsor parties and celebrations to get to know your neighbors better. Your events should appeal to all, including children. This will foster a strong sense of community spirit among your neighbors.

Meetings

Regular meetings are important so that members are informed of current and future issues and projects, as well as the accomplishments of the group. It is also an excellent opportunity to give recognition to members and committees who have contributed a lot of their time for the association.

One thing to remember about meetings is that it isn't always necessary to call a full group meeting to make minor decisions. When minor decisions need to be made, consider having the board vote on such matters. Perhaps decisions regarding the allocation of pre-determined dollar amounts could be voted on at the board level. Most groups have a board meeting once a month unless something important requires an additional meeting. In order to prevent member burnout, meetings should not be longer than one hour.

One important part of holding a meeting is its location. Choose a place that is centrally located and familiar to the neighbors. The location can set the mood and the friendliness of the meeting. Try to estimate the number of people that will attend. The room should be comfortable but not so large as to make the people feel lost.

The meeting room should be arranged in a way that will encourage people to participate. The chairs can be arranged in a semi- or full circle so that everyone can be seen.

Be sure to have enough copies of the agenda available when members arrive for the meeting. Members can begin familiarizing themselves with what is to be discussed and will be aware of the order of topics while waiting for the meeting to begin. The agenda should be short and concise. A sample agenda is provided in the Appendix of this manual.

Many groups are comfortable using Robert's Rules of Order, but feel free to use whatever method works best for your group. A special effort should be made to ensure that a vote truly represents the desire of the group. Keep meetings orderly and democratic.

Refer to "How to Have Successful Meetings" in the Appendix at the end of the manual for more tips on holding meetings.

General Meeting Rules

Your association should set some general operating rules for meetings so that they run smoothly and without difficulty. The operating rules could be included in the association's bylaws so that all members are aware of them. Some common rules for all meetings are the following:

- One person speaks at a time
- No derogatory remarks of yourself or others
- Speak from your own experience
- No cross-talk (i.e. no side conversations or interrupting the speaker to dispute points.)

Committees

Organizations can accomplish their objectives through the dedicated work of committees. The tasks and the types of committees depend on the overall purpose and structure of your neighborhood association.

Two types of committees can be formed:

1. Committees for Internal Projects

Some examples of internal projects are fund raising, meeting arrangements, communications/publicity, bylaws, and social events.

2. Committees for Neighborhood Projects

Some examples of neighborhood projects are housing conditions, police/neighborhood relations, economic development, neighborhood maintenance, community services and resources, and traffic safety.

It can be difficult to keep members on committees active, productive, and motivated. Here are some tips to keep in mind that can help:

- Encourage members to participate in the association and the committee planning process.
- Define and discuss the goals and objectives of the committee.
- Provide reasons for the actions to be considered by the committee and the neighborhood association.
- Give recognition to members and committees who have contributed to the advancement of the neighborhood association.
- Make meeting time and committee work as productive as possible. No one wants to feel their time is being wasted.
- Help members develop communication skills.

Raising Funds

Neighborhood associations sometimes wish to raise funds for additional operations or special events and projects. The ways that a group raises funds are limited only by the members' imaginations. Funds can be raised by the group itself, private donations, or private and government grants. East Lansing offers a neighborhood enhancement mini-grant that may be used for neighborhood projects or events. Information about the grant is available on the City neighborhood initiative website.

A fund raising committee should be selected to prepare a budget and to oversee projects. Often people who are well known and liked in the community are successful project leaders. This person should also have good contacts in your local business area. Most importantly, the person should have the time to dedicate for the fundraising.

Bookkeeping

All neighborhood associations encounter a sum of money for one reason or another. A management system needs to be in place for dealing with any funds handled by the association. The best thing to do is to open a bank account for the group.

Each month, the Treasurer or another designated person should prepare a written financial report. The report should include the results of the month's activities (i.e. from March 1 to March 31). The report should include at least the following information:

- Cash available at the beginning of the month.
- Total receipts during the month (with breakdown by source).
- Total disbursement during the month (with breakdown by type – i.e. postage, supplies, printing).
- Cash available at the end of the month.

Publicity

Publicizing your neighborhood association's activities is really important. You will be planning several great programs for your neighborhood, so don't keep them a secret. Share them with as many people you can. This will help others in the neighborhood join your efforts and take part in making a difference. Publicity is also an easy way to increase membership in your association.

There are different sources that can be used for publicity that groups should take advantage of. A good publicity network is important to make people aware of their activities and projects and to keep members informed.

Web Site

Many people have access to the Internet, so this is a great place for neighborhood associations to publicize events. The Internet is a great way to distribute information and associations should definitely take advantage of it. The City of East Lansing offers a city sponsored, community maintained website option for neighborhoods. If your neighborhood is interested in pursuing a website please contact the East Lansing Communications Department at 517-319-6927. You may review other websites at www.eastlansingneighborhoods.com.



Email Groups and Listservs

Several neighborhoods choose to develop an e-mail group or listserv to distribute information directly to residents' e-mail inbox. Often the chosen webmaster will be in charge of maintaining the group or listserv and responsible for sending updates and messages. Neighborhoods can use these groups for meeting reminders, neighborhood updates, urgent news, or whatever is deemed appropriate.

Projects and Activities

Organizing neighborhood projects can provide opportunities for neighbors to work together and continue to stay active. It also builds the credibility of the group as a moving force in the community.

Some common neighborhood projects are listed here to help you get started:

Neighborhood Cleanups

Neighborhood cleanups are a great way to boost pride in your area. Your group can organize to collect debris in alleys, backyards, vacant lots, and sidewalks. When most of the litter is cleared, occasional cleanups can be organized to maintain the areas clean. Cleanups are a great way for neighbors to feel proud of where they live and provide immediate results.

Here are some helpful tips for planning a cleanup:



- Schedule a cleanup date (and a rain date) and time. Choose a Saturday or a Sunday, since most people are free on those days of the week.
- Notify residents of the project. Inform them of the date, time, and what tools would be helpful (work gloves, rakes, garbage bags, etc.) You can pass out or post flyers or make posters.
- On the day of the cleanup, organize people into teams to get the maximum use of your manpower and tools.

Neighborhood Watch

By educating your neighbors in safety techniques, you can improve the security of your neighborhood. A well-informed group with an active interest in crime prevention can significantly reduce the local crime rate.

How to get started:

Contact the East Lansing Police Department to learn which officers are assigned to your neighborhood. The Police Officer may be able to come and speak with residents to discuss any security complications, and present measures to solve them. Any information about neighborhood safety programs should be distributed to community residents. Literature concerning safeguarding homes, burglary prevention, car thefts, and civilian patrol can be obtained from the Police Department.



Neighborhood Improvement Projects

There are a variety of enhancement projects that your group can organize to make your neighborhood a great place to live. Start by identifying what your residents value in your neighborhood and what they think needs to be done. Consider a clean-up project, landscaping, entrance signage, park improvements, or a friendly code enforcement sweep. Neighborhoods participating in the Neighborhood Partnership Initiative program are invited to contact the staff liaisons regarding the proposed improvement projects. All residents are also encouraged to contact the City Manager's Office at (517)319-6920 for more information regarding what City Department or staff member can best assist in an improvement project.

APPENDICES

Sample Bylaws

Article I. Purpose

Section 1. Name

The name of the neighborhood association shall be _____.

Section 2. Purpose

The purpose of the neighborhood association shall be to promote a better neighborhood and community through group action.

Article II. Membership

Any person residing on _____ between _____ and _____ is eligible for membership.

Article III. Voluntary Dues

Voluntary dues shall be \$4.00 per person per year.

Article IV. Meetings

Section 1. General Membership Meetings

Regular general membership meetings will be held _____, or more or less often as deemed necessary.

Section 2. Board Meetings

Board meetings will be held on the _____ of each month, or more or less often as deemed necessary.

Section 3. Quorum

At least ten percent of the membership must be present to conduct official business.

Article V. Officers

Section 1. Number and Election of Positions

The officers shall be a President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer, who shall be elected in _____ of each year. The term of office shall be one year.

Article VI. Committees

The membership may establish necessary committees at any meeting. The President may also establish such committees. The President shall appoint committee chairpersons.

Article VII. Amendments

The bylaws may be amended at any regular general membership meeting. Two-thirds (2/3) of those members in attendance must approve the amendment.

Sample Bylaw Organizational Outline

Article I. Purpose

- Section 1. Name of Organization
- Section 2. Purpose of Neighborhood Association

Article II. Membership

- Section 1. Membership Qualifications
- Section 2. Membership Voting

Article III. Voluntary Dues

Article IV. Meetings

- Section 1. General Membership Meetings
- Section 2. Special Membership Meetings
- Section 3. Agenda
- Section 4. Quorum
- Section 5. Participation
- Section 6. Procedures

Article V. Board of Directors

- Section 1. Number of Board Members
- Section 2. Terms of Office
- Section 3. Eligibility for Board Service
- Section 4. Duties of Board Members
- Section 5. Election of Board Members
- Section 6. Board Vacancies
- Section 7. Duties of Board Officers
- Section 8. Board Meetings
- Section 9. Emergency Powers
- Section 10. Termination for Non-Attendance

Article VI. Committees

Article VII. Conflict of Interest Procedures

- Section 1. Definition
- Section 2. Declaring the Conflict of Interest
- Section 3. Abstention from Voting

Article VIII. Grievance Procedures

- Section 1. Eligibility to Grieve
- Section 2. Complaint Receipt
- Section 3. Final Resolution

Article IX. Procedure for Consideration of Proposals

- Section 1. Submission of Proposals
- Section 2. Notification
- Section 3. Attendance
- Section 4. Dissemination

Article X. Public Meetings/ Public Records Requirements

Article XI. Boundaries

Article XII. Non-Discrimination

This section should describe the association's commitment to include all members of their neighborhood as defined under the "Boundaries" section of the bylaws. Be as inclusive as possible.

Article XIII. Adoption and Amendment of Bylaws

Sample Agenda

- I. Call Meeting to Order
 - II. Introduction of Organizers and Guest Speakers
 - III. Discussion and Possible Action on the Problem(s) of:
 - a.
 - b.
 - IV. Discussion and Possible Action on Forming a Neighborhood Association
 - V. Other Neighborhood Concerns
- Adjourn

Hints for Having Successful Meetings

1. SMILE! No matter how serious the purpose of the meeting, remember the meeting itself is a positive event. Neighbors are coming together to solve problems.
2. Make everyone feel welcome. Personally greet as many people as possible.
3. Encourage everyone to fill out and wear nametags.
4. Keep the meeting moving. As soon as you can wrap up one Agenda item, move immediately to the next.
5. Encourage participants to speak their minds freely, but stay on schedule. Be polite, but firm. (for example: “Basically, then, what you are saying is...” Or “So, you think we should....”)
6. When a speaker begins getting off the subject, gently, but firmly return their focus. (for example: “That’s a subject we’d all like to talk about another time, but right now we need to resolve (this issue) first.” Then call on someone else.)
7. Treat everyone with respect. Don’t belittle or criticize any participant.
8. Accept all ideas equally, even those with whom you disagree. Use the discussion period to voice your preferences, but be willing to accept the majority opinion gracefully, even if you do not agree with it.
9. Don’t let disagreements between participants become personal arguments. Try to stop arguments before they get started. (for example, “Okay, that’s good. We have two completely opposite ideas on this subject. Let’s hear some other ideas now.” Or, “Would someone else like to comment on these ideas?”)
10. Never complain about members.” Praise the people who came to the meeting instead of complaining about those who didn’t. Praise those who volunteer to help. Never complain about those who don’t.
11. Keep the meeting upbeat. Generate enthusiasm and hope. People with positive attitudes can accomplish almost anything.
12. Always adjourn the meeting on a positive note. Thank everyone for their interest and participation.

Neighborhood Self-Evaluation Checklist

The following checklist provides a way for a group to rate their skill or knowledge in different areas. The list is fairly extensive, so not all of the areas will apply to your group. Simply mark each point with the using the following scale:

- NI** (Needs Improvement)
- S** (Satisfactory)
- E** (Excellent)
- NA** (Not Applicable)

You may also add comments to the list. Feel free to recopy this list and add columns for your comments.

Self-Evaluation Checklist:

Organization

- Has written mission statement and bylaws (or operating procedures)
- Develops annual goals and work plan
- Annually evaluates organizational activities
- Meetings are held regularly, widely publicized, and open (and accessible) to the public
- Meetings are well organized; a written agenda is available and is followed
- Meetings begin and end on time
- Written minutes are kept and distributed

Leadership

- Reflects neighborhood population
- Articulates issues clearly
- Democratic participatory methods are used to make decisions
- Communicates regularly with group about financial status, key issues, and work plan, etc.
- Knowledgeable about local government and how to influence decision making

Communication

- Newsletters are produced and distributed regularly
- An Annual Report or Fact Sheet is produced and distributed
- A record of decisions and policies is well-maintained
- Meetings have adequate publicity throughout the neighborhood and areas where neighbors frequent
- An annual meeting is held for the entire membership/community
- A good relationship with local media is maintained
- Makes presence known at public hearings and before official bodies

Diversity

- Leaders and members reflect the neighborhood's diversity (race, homeowners/tenants, income levels, etc.)
- Meeting places are accessible to all persons

- Group involves non- or limited-English speaking persons
- Issues addressed by the group are representative of active and not-so-active members

Volunteers

- Group recruits and maintains active members
- Group provides orientation for new members
- Volunteers understand their role clearly in the group
- Volunteers are held accountable for their assignment
- Volunteers are motivated and stay involved
- Volunteers are clear about the group's agenda, goals, and tactics

Resources

- Group members have diverse fundraising skills
- Annual fundraising goals are set
- Annual fundraising plan and calendar is developed
- Fundraising events are planned and implemented
- Fundraising plan is evaluated at least once a year
- Timely research is done for sources for renewable money
- Maintains 501(c)(3) tax exempt status