

2011 Community Farms Roundtable
<http://www.communityfarms.ca/>
Vancouver, BC
November 18-19
Summary

The Community Farms Network was formed in 2009 as an inclusive association that welcomes the participation of people and groups supporting community farms in BC. The Network was developed to share best practices in cooperative and sustainable farming and living. Ongoing Roundtable meetings create opportunities for sharing inspiration, information, and ideas.

Members of the Network benefit from:

- Information and resource sharing
- Face-to-face gatherings for celebration and sharing
- Mutual mentorship and inspiration
- Advocacy on zoning and housing policy and legislation
- Linking initiatives, costs, equity (a community farm union!)

Report on the Experiences Shared at the 2011 Roundtable

Themes from Friday Night Open Circle Discussion: Sharing of “Joys and Challenges of Community Farms”

Participants shared a wide range of joys and challenges, suggesting that “the balance of success and challenges differs each season”. Members of the network were proud of food grown and sold and highlighted the importance of the “community” aspects of the farm through a diverse range of on-farm events and activities that integrate community and shareholders. We heard examples of successes in farm business start-ups and new strategies for farmland protection, and discussed the growing interest of young farmers in community farms, as well as the increasing availability of agricultural programs for young farmers. Participants remarked that “people involved in co-ops are great to work with!” and the group discussed the broadening scope of co-op organization as a better system of (noncompetitive) economic organization for many types of businesses beyond farming.

Community farms are not just about farming. In the past, most of population was involved in farming but now most people are detached from the land. Community farms are a means of creating an attachment of broader community to agriculture again even if they aren’t necessarily farmers. Healthy relationships build healthy communities beyond just the group of farmers. There is community valuation of the work that farm coops are doing – valuation of farms beyond just food production for community well being.

From the Friday Night Open Circle Discussion, several themes were developed for Saturday's discussion:

1. *Housing – Zoning, Bylaws, \$/Equity, Land Use Arrangements*
 - a. There were shared concerns that zoning and bylaw restrictions (both related to the ALR and specific to different municipalities) were limiting the development of community farms by restricting access to housing. Concerns were also shared about equity and investment in individual housing arrangements on shared land.
2. *Mental health/behaviour expectations, boundaries and consequences*
 - a. There were shared concerns about working “in community” which may require diverse kinds of support for mental and physical health. The group was interested in discussing best practices, codes of conducts, and sources for external support (including access to cooperative health insurance policies).
3. *Farm governance* (decision-making - internal, external with Boards, membership, recruitment, and transition), along with board Maintenance, Transition, and Communication – multi-stakeholder issues. Responsibility, Liability and Risk Management.
 - a. Farm Governance - how to manage a multi-dimensional, multi-generational, operation with a wide range of on- and off-farm stakeholders was another shared concern of all present. Community Farms Advisory Boards were identified as a key element supporting the vision and mission of many farms, but the group expressed difficulty in navigating the roles and expectations of board members, farmers, community members, and other stakeholders.
4. *Secure land access and matching land with future farmers*
 - a. Secure land access is n ongoing concern for community farm members – both current farmers seeking models for transition and for new farmers seeking access to land for a start-up operation.
5. *Financial sustainability for Community Farms*
 - a. Farming as a Business (rather than a lifestyle) and Community and Shareholder Financial Supports were identified as key themes for further discussion and input by group members.
6. *Cooperative Business Models* [community service co-ops, ‘getting it started’, how to make it easier]
 - a. There was significant interest in learning more about cooperative business models (particularly Community Service Cooepratives) as a mechanism for addressing concerns around the Financial Sustainability and Governance of Community Farms.
7. *Community Networks and Support/Cross pollination*
 - a. Finally, the Roundtable and the Network were identified as key nodes for sharing experiences – the question is how to expand the network to incorporate more participants involved in an increasing range of community farm models.

Day 2: Finance, Ownership and Governance (FOG) presentation by Brandy Gallagher and Rick Julisson, O.U.R. Ecovillage, Shawnigan Lake, BC.

- Documentation of O.U.R. Ecovillage FOG project available at <http://ourecovillage.org/about/projects-research/fog-research-project/>
- Governance structure, bylaws, and land-use/zoning documentation available at <http://ourecovillage.org/about/organization/>

OUR Ecovillage is a 25 acre sustainable living and demonstration site, with a central focus on food sovereignty, education, and the protection of sensitive ecosystems. It is also a cooperative intentional community. There are 47 partner groups in the research in FOG project, 80% are community farms. Community farms with multiple activities pose a conundrum to ALC/ALR. There is a shifting in family structures and redefining family: The nuclear family doesn't provide the labour that large families used to, and there has been an increase in transitional non/permanent agricultural labour from non-family actors. For members of the FOG project, a central issue is "who and what" constitutes family and community? This project, and the experience of many of the community farm members around the table, indicated a need to shift legal, regulatory, political trends related to family farm financing, ownership, and governance.

Finance

- Recommended Reading: Woody Tasch, 2009, *Inquiries into the Nature of Slow Money: Investing As If Food, Farms and Fertility Mattered*. Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Overarching Issues:
 - Farming community as a life beyond a business – how to talk about this in language that outside investors and financers will understand?
- Social financing: People investing in each other instead of maintaining an arms-length relationship with finance institutions was highlighted. Brandy and Rick discussed the potential of the following areas as new structures for funding options:
 - CICs – community investment certificates - taking venture capital act and creating a framework that allows for investment in community enterprises.
 - Transferring RRSPs, to obtain good interest rates.
 - MIC – mortgage investment certificates;
 - Community Trust for Ethical Investment – 30% tax rebate when you invest, tax deferral benefit for investor.
 - Canadian Ag loan fund;
 - Direct loans;
 - Direct government backed mortgages.

Ownership

There are 5 ways to own land in Canada:

1. Co-op
2. Non-profit
3. Corporation
4. Strata corporation
5. Partnership

There is a challenge when mixing aspects of these different organizational structures – mixing of housing coop, worker coop, business, etc. can create tension between different actors (ex. between producers, workers, and a value-added business...). There is a need for a holistic model that incorporates the different aspects of these models of ownership into a structure that is recognised and supported by outside institutions and policy. OUR Ecovillage started with a non-profit status and ran all activities as a charitable education initiative.

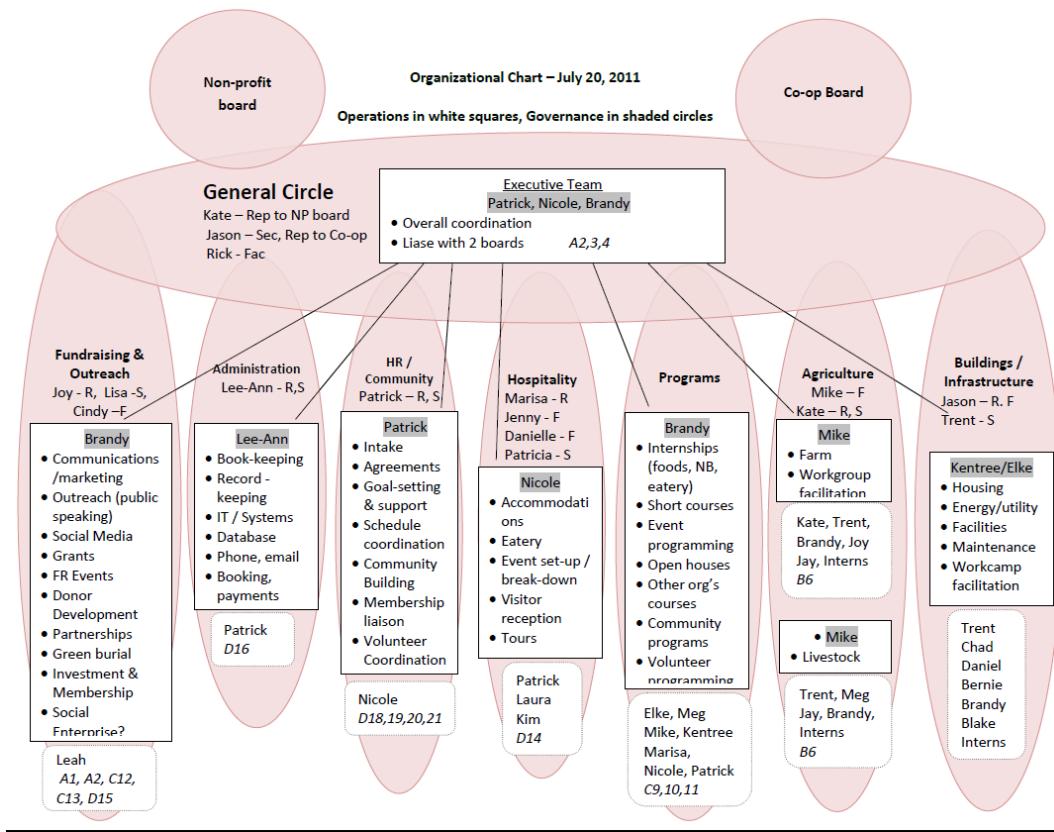
- 7 different zoning now under one new and innovative zoning arrangement, developing by working with all levels of government for a successful outcome. Home and building construction on property, including new zoning arrangements and building codes for “natural building”, creating infrastructure for activities. The zoning allows the development of many small businesses related to the farm, creating opportunities for personal streams as well as collective streams of businesses. Also allowed for business outside of the farm business – the group considered it very important to have an allowance for another income stream. For example, O.U.R. Ecovillage has developed food and accommodation services for educational programs– dormitory spaces and tenting are legal on the property, which is unique, as well as a bed and breakfast. Allows for fully immersed learning and living situation on the farm, based on the concept of sustainable living.
- An agricultural covenant was designed with TLC, many other trusts don't factor farming in covenants, whereas TLC specifically does factor farming and food production into covenant. See [TLC Page on Agricultural Conservation Covenants and Easements](#). The O.U.R. covenant includes a mandate for farm, food, protection of sensitive ecosystems, right to live and work on farm and education. The Covenant requires that education must continue to be provided and the people living in on-farm housing must be working on farm in some way. O.U.R. Ecovillage is able to issue tax credits via TLC for donations as a result of link with TLC. OUR is not part of the ALR. Zoning, covenant and ALR are three separate entities, all requiring separate reporting processes.
- It is a challenge to have the multiple activities on the farm understood, it has been an uphill challenge for O.U.R. Ecovillage. Conversations with banks and financial institutions: “they have to understand in this day and age that this is about farming, not living on farms”, but there is a lack of understanding from outside funders and about the necessities of on-farm living. It is difficult to have to work within compartmentalized outside institutions – funding, tax assessment, government regulations – established social institutions don't know how to adequately assess the operations at OUR because it does not fit established patterns of business, farming, building, living etc.

- Challenge: putting together multiple stakeholders for multiple activities. Community farm goes beyond just a group of farms – range of public and private schools, community organizations, government involvement, business incorporate and grassroots involvement. “How are you going to own a commons?” If it is truly common share what is the legal model for owning land that is common in Canada and what title will be attached to the land? O.U.R. Hybrid coop model came out of existing coop act/legislation – put in multiple classes within the multi-stakeholder model to give everyone a say. It was a huge challenge to get such a diversity of multi-stakeholders, with different interests, to come to decisions. So challenge is then how to make timely and effective decisions within this model.

At O.U.R. ecovillage, there are 5 classes of ownership/membership in the multi-stakeholder cooperative.

1. Hearth keeper stewards - people who live and farm on site and run activities.
2. Enterprise stewards - people with small business operating on the farm.
3. Educational stewards – teachers in farm school, universities...
4. Community stewards – neighbours, family friends who support process.
5. Agricultural Stewards – run CSA, on site or has small nursery on site, personal or collective agricultural initiatives.

Everybody should fit into 5 classes of membership – 2 people are representatives for classes, in order to create a voice for all interests on the farm. The O.U.R. ecovillage organizational chart reflects the current organizational structure of the enterprise.



Governance – Rick Julisson

- Recommended Reading: John Buck and Sharon Villines, 2007. *We the People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy*. Sociocracy.info Press
- Sustainability includes government and decision making as well as finances and farming. How do we make decisions such that everyone has a voice but we don't spend all our times in meetings? These are bold propositions – that not everyone has to be in on the decision, and not everyone has to agree.
 1. Not everyone has to be in the room [ie. To figure out what crops to grow – we don't need the construction and marketing teams, but we do need input from the food team, the program team re: numbers, the agriculture team]. Each team has its own decision-making and consultation process, and reports back to the general circle. E.g. the agricultural team meets for 10 minutes each morning to set their agenda
 2. We've moved to “consent” rather than consensus. We don't need everyone to “agree” – that everyone must “prefer brown”. Instead, we have the ability to “consent” without agreeing. People can put forward “argued” and “paramount” objections. With this system, we've had decisions made a lot faster and with more community buy-in.
 3. There are 2 boards at OUR Ecovillage: 1) a Non-profit board that runs actual programs on land, sometimes leasing land to individual enterprises. The non-

profit, charitable status is beneficial for certain grants, taxes etc. 2) The Coop board is working towards owning land, doesn't own it now (it is held under private title collectively by several individuals). The goal is for the cooperative to own land. Nonprofit status and coop status provide different benefits and by having two boards allows for drawing on those different benefits. Overall the two boards should act together in synch.

Break Out Session: Mental Health

Farms to have the opportunity to be a place of health – but Community farms face challenges in identifying and supporting the special needs that individuals and communities can work with effectively. While farming itself is a therapeutic activity, mental health issues are affecting the performance of several community farms in our network. It's about people experiencing a change in capacity (physical, mental, variable status) and how the ability to deal with that has to be built into farm governance structure. Community farms don't necessarily have the mandate, skills or resources to take care of therapeutic situations. Examples were shared of how several members of the network are developing structures to support the “whole health” of the farm.

- Codes of Conduct: Ex. Providence Farm. As part of that code, it says if any of these agreements are broken, there are consequences. We read through it and people sign it. We hope that they can understand it. E.g. You cannot come back to the farm because our first priority is safety for everyone.
 - MOU: Ex. Growing Opportunities. We've had a MOU with people, we've never had anyone sign them. The MOU indicates “I'm agreeing to work in a cooperative arrangement with other members, which we will share and sell surplus. I will act in a way that's beneficial to others.”
 - Values Commitment: Ex. FCF. Purchasing a farm share was understood as a values commitment. The communities had a hard time figuring out the boundaries – we had nothing in writing around codes of conduct. There was a sense that we are a community, we take care of our own, if this person had diabetes, we would help him. For others, however, there was a sense that this was NOT a therapeutic farm, if someone had experience with addiction, this was about supporting farmers and this was not OK.
 - Expectations: Ex. EcoReality “When we advertised for members based on wanting community, we got a bunch of broken, needy people that wanted to be taken care of. Now we advertise for people who want to be involved in collaborative agriculture.”
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Break Out Session: Community Farms Governance

- How it works now
- Challenges
- What support needed
- What support would look like to you
- What will help move it forward

Current governance structures presented at Roundtable:

[see <http://www.ffcf.bc.ca/programs/farm/cf/buildinglfs.html> for a description of other community farm structures]

- 1) **Haliburton** - Non-profit society. Defined roles are needed. Communication between the board, farmers, and other stakeholders is also a challenge and defined roles may help with that. Mandate/mission has been defined and is useful. Operational, day-to-day decisions are the problem. Same structure since inception of the board. No paid staff, all volunteer. Legally no one can live on the farm – this is a challenge when people come together for a meeting.
- 2) **Horse lake Community Farm** – For-Profit co-operative. Board of directors – 7 members – one of directors appointed by the TLC and this person is mostly a communication link between farm and TLC, 1 board member is renter of the property (farmer), other board members are elected for 2 year terms from the member base of the farm. Different directors have different responsibilities within the boards. More ad hoc operation in terms of meeting organization. Found easy to sell first 35 shares, then harder to sell shares. Planning done by board including the day to day activities. One challenge is better utilizing outside expertise. Has to be at least one farmer (from renter group) on the board, but there can be more.
- 3) **Surdel farm coop**– marketing cooperative currently, potential to establish a farming coop. 5 farmers currently make up a marketing cooperative, not incorporated. 3 farms are new farmers on small plots of rented land, Rodriso farm (40acre), another small organic farm.
- 4) **Glen valley** – Currently functions under old coop act, but changing to a non-profit, community service cooperative status. All shareholders are allowed to be part of governance, stewards elected (directors) who meet once a month by telephone. Confusing governance structure – there is not consensus about the decision-making capacity of the stewards, which is being worked through at the moment in a series of conversations on governance..

- 5) **Yarrow** - Umbrella is a cooperative and there are 3 entities under that. Co-housing will eventually be a strata, farmers group leases land directly from coop and are discussing forming their own coop but hasn't happened yet. Currently they are lease holders. A third group are a business corporation "beneficial ownership" commercial business. There is some struggle because some people do not see need of the overarching cooperative structure, and there are philosophical differences within the group. The business group is still sorting out their role and relation to the rest of the coop. Potential for having a learning centre established as a non profit that would be eligible for grants. Credit union holds mortgage, CHIEF (cohousing investment fund)
- 6) **GVRD, Colony Farm.** Started in 1924, GVRD took over in the early 1990s. Covenant stating that needs to be agriculture uses on land. In the midst of preparing a land use plan. Proposal is for sustainable agriculture, educational, incubator farm system. There would be a principal farm manager running the farm with farm interns coming on board, creating a transition period for young farmers, build capital for farmers wishing to start their own business. Not for profit organization, bring farmers, educators, industry people together. Academic director, farmers market volunteer coordinator, therapeutic garden coordinator, researcher, principal farmer, farm trainee student interns and many other roles. Academy would be the board of directors, parks division of government would maintain trails and oversee some basic management. 2 heritage buildings on site currently, one of them could be used for principle farmer. Challenge of establishing housing for interns.
- 7) **Fraser Common Farm** – Do not really have a board of directors, governance by group called farm keepers which is open to anyone who wants to be involved - in practice it is mostly people on the farm, 40 members and about 6 are actively involved in the farm. Second coop on the farm, Glorious Organics been established for 20 years. Challenge is to grow the coop. Unclear if consensus is needed for big decision – question of how much voice and decision-making power members would have when they aren't involved, what does it mean to be a shareholder? Membership in a coop entitles you to a vote whether you are active or not. Put effort into outreach and have members that don't even respond. Original relationship with housing coop in Vancouver urban centre– when it began members of city coop were members in the farm but this relationship has faded.

Themes:

Defined Roles

For-profit vs. non-profit

Member involvement/non-active shareholder

Amount of decision-making power of members

Role of communications technology on governance

Clear agreements between farmers and shareholders
Member Engagement
Structure and Framework – Constitutions and policies

Support needed:

- Sharing information – putting constitutions online
 - Sharing experiences, what are others challenges and how did they deal with it
 - Creating opportunity for personal meeting, integrating technology to be better involved
 - Information on how to best conduct board meetings
 - Clear principles set forth for the board (beyond legal structures)
 - Importance of original set up of the boards and its operating structure
 - Embedded constitutions vs. policy that can be adjusted
 - Dispute resolution mechanism
 - Dissolution clauses
 - Having choice of coop structures when originally forming and properly matching the choice to the goals of those forming the coop
 - Legal complexities, minimizing that complexity
 - Constitution – putting it into practice
 - Problem of out dated constitution
 - How to re-engage community
 - How do we get membership
 - 2012 international year of cooperatives – can we use this to engage people in BC
 - Need for outreach and education on cooperatives amongst general public
 - Extension of cooperative organization in society at large and connecting different types of coops
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Housing –large group discussion

See additional Resources:

http://www.plantofarm.org/Files/Farm%20Housing%20Committee%20-%20Literature%20Review_2009-04-08.pdf
http://www.plantofarm.org/Files/Farm%20Assessment%20Review%20Recommendations-SSIAA_2009.pdf
http://www.plantofarm.org/Files/Farm%20Housing%20Discussion%20Document_2009-12-07.pdf

The ALC conducted a review in Fall 2010, which discussed potential changes in housing regulations. See <http://www.gov.bc.ca/agri/alcreview.html>

It has been interpreted as a set of recommendations for municipalities to follow to implement policy. ALR doesn't allow covenants to be placed on the land. ALC act says that habitation on

ALR land is determined by farm workers needs, ALC delegates authority to municipalities to make decision – divided authority. In theory if you are turned down by municipality you could request directly to ALC – but no precedent of this working.

- Limiting building footprint – good because limits pools, tennis courts, etc that tend to come with non-farm mansions
- Limit on distance of housing away from roads – support this restriction because farmers tend to want to be near road, rich non-farmers want to be hidden away
- ALC wanted to include real estate as a stakeholder

Actions:

- Suggestion of researching land which already has more than one residence and figure out exactly what permits/legal status was obtained
 - If we are going to gain recognition by government we need to have an established set of criteria to bring to the government to ensure our needs will be met: Not privately owned, Intention of farming in perpetuity
 - Situation of people leasing land – who owns and is responsible for new buildings and infrastructure?
 - Who do we need to lobby, who to present our demands/needs to?
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