

Best Practices for Community Organizations

SAMPLE MISSION STATEMENTS FROM COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS IN PHILADELPHIA

East Kensington Neighbors Association mission is to organize the voice, concerns, and the action of East Kensington residents. Geographically East Kensington is bounded by Norris Street to the South, Frankford and Trenton Ave to the East, Lehigh Ave to the North, and Front Street/ Kensington Ave. to the West.

Francisville NDC mission is to improve the quality of life in the Francisville community through Commercial and Residential Development and to implement programs designed to develop the youth, aid senior citizens, and generally invest in the people of Francisville.

The mission of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) is to promote the social, cultural, and economic welfare of the Logan Square neighborhood and larger community, to attempt to represent fairly all residents, businesses, and institutions in the neighborhood, and to work cooperatively with government at all levels to achieve these ends.

Organized communities are better communities. Community organizations enhance neighborhood identity and cohesiveness. Members of community groups are better informed and better able to network and share information. Having a community organization allows a neighborhood to be represented more effectively with local government.

Managing a Community Organization

Well-organized community groups have a clear mission, rules that govern the organization, and committees that divide the work among the members, topic by topic.

The Mission Statement

One of the first tasks that a new organization should complete is to develop a written mission statement. This mission statement will unify the members of the organization around a common purpose and help the organization to recruit new members who share that goal. Mission statements may address planning, land use, and zoning issues, as well as broader quality of life issues such as public safety or social welfare. Often community organizations include in the mission statement information on their membership and how they propose to accomplish their goals. For neighborhood-based organizations, it is important to set forth the geographic area of the neighborhood's concern in the mission statement.

The Membership

Strong organizations actively and regularly seek new membership from the organization's service area. They strive to include membership that is representative of the range of community members, including homeowners, renters, business owners, and institutions. Including this diverse membership helps the organization build partnerships and improves its access to skills and experience that will help the organization function well. A diverse membership will also help the organization understand issues from a variety of points of view and make sound decisions. The organization's publications, such as its website, newsletters, flyers, etc. should state that meetings are open and that new members are encouraged. Among the decisions that the organization will

The Nicetown Community Development Corporation has a mission to dynamically improve the quality of life in Nicetown and surrounding communities, by establishing sustainable community economic development.

Queen Village Neighbors Association: To help restore and preserve the historic value of the neighborhood, and to bring together people who are willing to work to improve their properties and to make the community an attractive place in which to live and bring up their families.

The South of South Neighborhood Association (SOSNA) is a group of committed residents who are working to improve quality of life, safety, and infrastructure in our neighborhood.

Walnut Hill Community Association (WHCA) is a growing neighborhood group run by residents who are dedicated to their community revitalization. WHCA actively promotes the neighborhood and encourages residents to participate in community events and to help determine neighborhood improvement priorities.

have to address are: membership dues; length of membership; categories of membership; and requirements and responsibilities of members. These decisions should be recorded and made a part of the organization's rules or by-laws (see below).

Rules and By-Laws

Well-functioning organizations operate by a set of rules, commonly known as by-laws. These rules set expectations and guide the conduct of the organization's members and leaders. They help the organization make decisions, and the members to understand their responsibilities and what to expect from each other. By-laws or rules can take a number of different formats, but they typically address common issues, including:

- Membership: categories of membership; dues; renewal; responsibilities.
- Board of Directors: the size of the Board; how it is elected; and its responsibilities. Be careful not to have too small or too large a board – both create difficult situations. A good rule of thumb is to have an odd number of members, usually between 9 and 19.
- Officers: election of and responsibilities of officers such as President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer.
- Committees – who decides what committees are formed, the membership of each committee, and their responsibilities.
- Meetings: who is empowered to call a meeting; how are decisions made (majority vote? more than majority vote?); establishing a quorum (how many members need to be present to make a decision).
- Changing or amending the by-laws: one of the most important up-front decisions in rule-making is determining how to change the rules. Since this is such a basic decision, in many cases organizations require a certain number of meetings to discuss rule changes and a certain level of notice about the meetings (for example, it must be discussed at two meetings prior to a vote; or the proposed change must be distributed to members at least 30 days in advance). Organizations also frequently require a vote by more than a majority of the members (such as 2/3 of the members).

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ESTABLISHING A LAND USE, PLANNING, OR ZONING COMMITTEE

Here are some specific recommendations for this type of committee:

Clarify the responsibilities of this committee with regard to proposed development projects within the organization's boundaries – for example, will it meet with developers? Will it speak for the organization on such matters or make a recommendation to the organization?

Many groups seek local professionals in related field (architects, engineers, planners, etc) to participate on this type of committee.

One of the most important set of decisions will relate to the role of near neighbors of the project. Will there be special outreach to them? Do their voices carry more weight?

Meetings on development projects are more successful if the committee is able to obtain important information about the project beforehand, such as copies of site plans; any variances or special exceptions being requested, etc.

Organizations do not have to start out from scratch when writing by-laws. There are numerous resources available, including templates or guides available on the web, the by-laws of similar organizations, and legal service organizations, that focus on working with non-profit organizations.

The Role of Committees

Committees play a critical role in organizations. Organizations often form unique committees to address specific concerns in their communities. Standing committees continue from year to year to handle on-going issues. Ad-hoc committees have specific assignments to help manage special short-term projects. The ideal number of members on a committee can vary, but 12 or fewer is a manageable size. Remember to list the standing committees in the organization's by-laws and include a short description of each committee's purpose and responsibilities.

Examples of typical standing committees include membership, public safety, neighborhood beautification, finance, economic development, and planning/land use/zoning. Many organizations seek local professionals with expertise in these topics to serve on committees, which is why it is important for an organization to seek a diverse organization.

Community Meetings

Healthy community organizations hold regularly-scheduled meetings. Many organizations in Philadelphia meet once a month, except during the summer season. Regular meetings allow organizations to maintain an open channel of communication, increase awareness of issues and concerns in the community, and respond dependably to these issues. Groups should take the following steps to convene and conduct meetings:

- Notify the Board, members, and the public of upcoming meetings. A meeting calendar on the organization's website is a useful way to keep the membership updated of scheduled meetings. Other ways to distribute meeting notices include newspaper ads, email blasts, flyers, and social media. If a meeting agenda item concerns a specific property, its good practice to contact the nearest neighbors (such as within one square block of the property) and invite them to the meeting.

- Invite a Community Planner from the Planning Commission to attend the meeting.
- Draft an agenda and list of planned presenters ahead of time and share with all members. A typical agenda for a community meeting includes:

Sample Agenda

1. **Call to Order**
2. **Introductions and Announcements**
3. **Approval of Minutes from Previous Meeting**
4. **Committee Reports**
5. **Guest Speaker Presentations**
6. **Unfinished Business**
 - > *Unfinished business item 1*
 - > *Unfinished business item 2*
7. **New Business**
 - > *New business item 1*
 - > *New business item 2*
8. **Adjourn**

- Distribute a sign-in sheet at the meeting so that attendees can share their name, address, and contact information.
- Use the Planning Commission's District Plan and neighborhood plans, if available, as guidance during the meeting.
- Strive for orderly and respectful discussion among meeting attendees.
- Record and distribute minutes of each meeting.

Best Practices for Community Organizations

PLANNING COMMISSION REGULATIONS REGARDING REGISTERED COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

The Planning Commission's official requirements for RCOs are stated in its Rules and Regulations. These regulations provide more specific detail on qualifying criteria for organizations, registration and renewal procedures, and procedures regarding meetings with zoning permit applicants.

Visit www.philaplanning.org for more information.

Registered Community Organizations

The Planning Commission encourages civic associations, neighborhood associations, community development corporations and other neighborhood-based groups with a similar mission to join the Commission's registry of community organizations. Registered Community Organizations (RCOs) receive formal notice from zoning permit applicants of projects located within their boundaries that require Civic Design Review or Zoning Board approval.

Local RCOs meet with zoning applicants and document the results of the meeting before any public Civic Design Review meetings or Zoning Board hearings. Local RCOs are also eligible to participate on the Civic Design Review Committee for projects located within their boundaries.

How to Register

The Planning Commission will accept new registrations during June and December each year. RCOs must renew annually in June of each year. The Planning Commission's application form is posted on its website, www.philaplanning.org.

Types of Registered Groups

Each RCO must register as either an **Issue-Based** or **Local RCO**:

- **Local RCO** - The geographic area of concern is at least five city blocks but no more than 7 square miles.
- **Issue-Based RCO** - The geographic area of concern is greater than 7 square miles.

Qualifying Criteria

Any organization seeking Local RCO status must:

- Be at least five city blocks but no more than 7 square miles.
- Have a mission involving land use, which may include aspects of zoning or development.
- Hold meetings that are open to the public and scheduled on a regular periodic basis (such as monthly).
- Announce its meetings publicly through flyers, newsletters, newspaper notice, electronic or social media, or another form accepted by the Planning Commission.
- Have an executive committee, board, officials, or other leadership chosen through elections.
- Have written rules establishing the mission, operation, regulation, and geographic boundary of the organization.
- Have the majority of its members consist of residents, property owners, business owners or operators, or tenants from the organization's registered geographic area of concern.

Any organization seeking Issue-Based RCO status must:

- Be larger than 7 square miles.
- Have a mission involving land use, which may include aspects of zoning or development.
- Be incorporated as a non-profit in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

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Responsibilities of a Local RCO

Participation on the Civic Design Review Committee

For Civic Design Review projects located within the boundaries of a Local RCO, a representative of the Local RCO participates as a member of the Civic Design Review Committee at the public meeting for that project. In cases of multiple Local RCOs for a single project, the organizations must nominate a single representative at least 7 days before the scheduled CDR meeting or the Executive Director of the Planning Commission will select a representative from among the nominees to serve on the Committee.

Meetings with Zoning Permit Applicants

Local RCOs are responsible for convening and conducting a meeting with applicants requiring Zoning Board approval or an advisory recommendation from the Civic Design Review Committee for a project located within the Local RCO's boundaries. If there is more than one Local RCO, those organizations must coordinate to convene a single meeting. Local RCOs must:

- Advertise the meeting (See “Managing a Community Organization” above).
- Document the outcome of the meeting within 45 days from the zoning permit application date (for Civic Design Review) or the date the applicant filed the petition of appeal to the Zoning Board (for special exceptions and variances). The documentation should include a brief summary of the major discussion points from the meeting and a written statement of the RCO's opposition, support, or lack of agreement on the project.
- If a meeting with the zoning applicant did not take place, instead document a good faith effort to review the application at the RCO's next regularly-scheduled meeting, or to establish an alternative meeting date within 30 days of the permit application or appeal filing date, as applicable.
- Send copies of the documentation to the zoning applicant, the Planning Commission, District Councilperson, and the Civic Design Review Committee or Zoning Board, as applicable.

Sample Meeting Documentation

General Information

[Community Organization Name]
[Community Organization Address]
[Community Organization Phone]
[Community Organization email]

Date

[Name of Chairperson of the Zoning Board]
Zoning Board of Adjustment
1401 John F. Kennedy Boulevard
Municipal Services Building – 11th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19102-1687

**Re: [Calendar No. of Zoning Board Case]
[Zoning Application No.]
[Hearing Date and Hearing Time]**

Dear Mr./Ms. [Name of Chairperson of the Zoning Board]

On [date], the applicant of the above-referenced case met with members of our organization.

Outcome of Meeting

Based on the outcome of that meeting, our organization [supports / opposes] the application for the following reasons:

- > [Reason 1]
- > [Reason 2]
- > [Reason 3]

OR

Our organization did not reach agreement on the application because [state main reason for disagreement]. Positive aspects of the application include [list positive aspects]. Negative aspects of the application include [list negative aspects].

Closing

Sincerely,
[Name of preparer on behalf of the organization]

cc: Community Planner of the Planning Commission
Office of the District Council Member