



NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION TOOLBOX





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Introduction

Are neighborhood associations successful? Yes! Determined neighborhood associations can rehabilitate housing stock, affect development plans and help ensure safety on Tuscaloosa streets. Neighborhood organizations bring together people of diverse backgrounds, with common concerns for safety, properties, homes and community interests. Neighborhood organizations help government staff and elected officials identify and resolve issues and concerns. There is strength in numbers and having a unified voice can make a difference.

This Neighborhood Toolbox will help you get your neighborhood association off the ground. This is general information; please remember that each neighborhood is different and what has worked for one neighborhood might not be right for yours. Use this information as a guideline and adjust as you need to. TNT hopes that you find this information helpful.

What is a Neighborhood Association?

A neighborhood association is a voluntary group of people within a defined boundary who work together to improve and maintain the quality of life in their neighborhood. The association may include homeowners, renters, apartment residents, business owners, school and church officials and members of other service organizations in the area. Membership is open to all residents, but participation is optional. Each member is given the opportunity to express their opinion and is eligible to vote on all neighborhood issues.

To ensure a visibly democratic process the association should have bylaws which provide for at least one general membership meeting each year and require the annual election of officers. Most neighborhood associations have dues and the amount is set by agreement and typically spelled out in the bylaws.

The activities of a neighborhood association are many and are truly only limited by its members' imaginations. They can help represent residents before their local governments; they can identify challenges and problems in the area and work toward solutions; they can help resolve conflicts within the neighborhood; they can provide volunteers for community projects. Perhaps the most important thing a neighborhood association can do is to simply build Community by helping neighbors get to know each other.

Neighborhood associations also provide the essential building blocks for larger community organizations. They allow greater partnership with the local government and thus, greater cooperation in code enforcement and police protection.

Neighborhood Association versus Homeowners' Association

A homeowners' Association is a formal legal entity which is usually created by the developer of a subdivision for the purpose of maintaining

common areas and enforcing private deed restrictions and covenants. In a Homeowners' Association membership and payment of dues is mandatory. Unlike a voluntary Neighborhood Association, a homeowners' association actually has legal authority to enact and enforce maintenance and design standards stricter than those required by local ordinance.

There is nothing that prevents a homeowners' association from doing all the same things as a typical neighborhood association and, it would seem redundant to have two separate associations. However, the specific dynamics of each subdivision should be considered when deciding whether to form a separate association or not.

How Can I Start a Neighborhood Association?

A neighborhood association can be started by developing a core group of three or four neighbors who are interested in organizing. This group is often several neighbors with a common interest but remember that churches, businesses and schools may be part of your neighborhood too! Host a meeting of this core group - your steering committee - in a comfortable setting such as someone's home or at the local church.

It is important to identify some of your goals before you ask others to form a neighborhood association. The committee should define the group's purpose. One way to work toward defining the purpose is to ask the committee members to respond to a few basic questions:

- Why do you think you should organize?
- What are the issues that need to be addressed?
- How do you want to improve the neighborhood?
- What resources are available in the neighborhood

Some possible goals include: helping neighbors to get to know and build a sense of community, making physical improvements such as getting street lights installed and constructing or improving community identification signs, holding regular neighborhood clean-ups, forming a community watch to reduce crime, organizing to share opinions with representative of government.

At this meeting you should define the boundaries of the neighborhood and name your group. Make sure you are not encroaching upon the territory of a neighboring association. This is a good time to contact Tuscaloosa Neighborhoods Together, which is keeping a database of neighborhood associations. TNT can help you determine whether there are other neighborhood associations nearby.

After the steering committee has established the purpose of the association and identified the important issues, it is time to prepare for the first General Membership meeting.

Getting the Word Out

The establishment of good communications and a good publicity network is essential to the success of any group. Groups must take advantage of all media - including word of mouth - to make people aware of activities. There are numerous ways to get the word out, really only limited by the group's creativity. Whatever method you choose, be sure the message includes the time, place, date and purpose of the meeting. A map to the meeting place can be helpful. The message should be disseminated at least a few days in advance but no more than a week because people tend to forget.

•Fliers

Fliers are an inexpensive way to get your message out to a large number of people. Any activity, project, or goal of the group can be announced in a flier. Use colorful paper and design the flyer so that it can be read from at least several feet away. You may be able to use your local church or school's copying machine (especially if you provide the paper). Post fliers in markets, laundromats, schools, beauty shops, and any other places frequented by the people you want to reach.

•Newspaper

Many newspapers will allow neighborhood organizations to advertise their monthly meetings in their announcement section with a small charge or none at all.

•Canvassing/Neighborhood Walk-through

Get to know your neighbors and invite them to join your organization by conducting a neighborhood walk-through. Divide your neighborhood into manageable sections (blocks often work well) and assign pairs to go door-to-door and introduce the association and its goals. Ask them about their concerns and respond with how your organization can help them effect a change in their situation. Invite them to attend your next meeting to voice their concerns. Also, ask them to bring some of their neighbors. Have them complete a block representative form or an information survey. If they are interested, be sure to get their name, address, telephone numbers and, probably most importantly, their email address. Thank them for their time. Visit or call them on a regular basis to keep communication flowing.

•Telephone trees

Telephone trees are an easy way to get a message out to a large group. Give each person at least six people to contact with a short message. Using a phone tree is a great way to reinforce the message put out by a flier or other method. A phone call the night before a meeting or event is often just the spur needed to get people to attend.

•Email

At every meeting ask people to give or update their email addresses.

Email is fast and free; many people can be reached with one message. Keep in mind, though, that not everyone you are trying to reach will have email.

•Block Representatives

Establish one or two individuals from each side of a street or block to serve as a liaison with your organization. They can inform neighbors about what your organization is doing and how to get involved. They can also recruit neighbors to support your organization and communicate with them by word-of-mouth or telephone. This is a big help when your neighborhood organization covers a large area and when new people move in.

•Yard Signs

Place yard signs out a couple of days before the meeting as a reminder. Also consider heavy traffic intersections in the neighborhood area.

•Newsletters

A monthly or quarterly newsletter can be an effective tool in communicating with your members. Short, informative articles that are of interest to the entire neighborhood will keep neighbors up-to-date. Newsletters can be paid for by advertising dollars and can be produced fairly inexpensively. A good newsletter might contain the following:

- Notices of important meeting dates and group events
- Information about city services
- Recent accomplishments of your group
- Notification of special events
- Recognition of volunteers
- Information about the schools in the neighborhood
- Profiles of neighbors
- Crime/safety information
- Birth/death announcements
- Graduation announcements
- Anniversaries
- A welcome to new neighbors
- Articles of community interest
- Advertising (especially of homes for sale in the area)

The newsletter editor will write articles, review articles submitted by others, and set deadlines. The newsletter committee should assist with typing, soliciting advertising, and arranging for printing. Decisions will need to be made regarding the title of the newsletter, number of pages, paper stock, and the arrangement of copy. Consider asking a local printer to donate printing services. Decide how to distribute the newsletter. Newsletters can be sent home with students. Also, consider utilizing boy or girl scout troops or block captains. If you decide to mail the newsletter, call the U.S. Post Office regarding a bulk mail permit.

First General Membership Meeting

The first general membership meeting is an opportunity to announce the formation of the association, get people to join and discuss specific issues facing the area. Hold the meeting in a convenient location with a room large enough to accommodate the group you expect. Remember that a too-large room can make people feel lost and make your meeting look poorly attended. In a small neighborhood meeting at a private home may be manageable. In larger neighborhoods, consider community centers, libraries, churches or schools. These types of facilities often offer rooms free of charge or for a minimal setup fee.

Arrange the seats so that people face each other. A circle or horseshoe is most effective. Schedule the meeting at a time when the most people are free - early evening or Saturday mornings. Consider offering a babysitting service for those with small children. Have several hosts so that everyone can be greeted as they arrive, asked to sign in and given a nametag. Consider having a map of the neighborhood and asking people to place a small, red sticker to locate their home on the map. Serve refreshments and let people meet and mingle for a while before conducting business. Have a printed agenda. Print copies for everyone and follow it.

At this meeting elect a temporary board and form a committee to work on bylaws and to nominate a slate of officers.

Running a Meeting

Start the meeting on time. Don't penalize those who are on time by making them wait for latecomers. If a number of people are late, begin the meeting with less important agenda items; this way you can reinforce the behavior of those who arrive on time without excluding those who are late. Make sure someone takes the minutes or records the meeting. If you do not have a secretary, rotate this task.

Agendas

When planning your meeting, it is important to establish the agenda or purpose. In other words, why are you meeting? The agenda provides structure for the meeting and can serve as a guide to encourage and limit discussion where appropriate. Copies can be made available to those attending.

Include these items in your agenda: reading and approval of minutes of the previous meeting; correspondence; committee reports; new projects; announcements; adjournment. Decide not only what to discuss, but also how long and in what order you will discuss the items. When listing agenda items include a time limit - your estimate may be over (or under) for some items but you will at least have a frame of reference to evaluate how the meeting is progressing. Topics for meetings should be varied to attract new people. Consider scheduling emotional or controversial issues towards the end of the meeting so that you can focus on other small, but necessary decisions early in the meeting. Avoid putting too many topics on the agenda. Try to stay within 1

½ hours, including some time for refreshments and mingling.

Participation

- Set realistic expectations for attendance. People have a wide variety of interests and may not be interested in attending every meeting.

- Create a welcoming and respectful atmosphere at your meetings. All members bring value to your group.

- Consider establishing a Membership Committee to focus on recruiting new members. Be realistic about what people can do given the other responsibilities in their lives. Respect all contributions, no matter how small.

Ending the Meeting

Don't let your meeting just fizzle out. End on time (or as close as possible) with a plan of action. Ask committees to research an issue and report back to the group. Summarize what has been decided. Then, decide on the date, time and place for the next meeting before members leave.

Meeting Tips

Depending on the goals of the group, meetings may be held once or twice a year, once a quarter or every month. Many associations hold monthly meetings of the Executive Board or officers and only hold an annual business meeting for the entire membership. Instead of meetings for the general membership, hold activities. You will find suggestions for activities later in this Toolbox.

Ice-Breaker Ideas

Ice-breaker exercises encourage people to interact in a fun, comfortable way. A five- to 10-minute ice-breaker before meetings is a great way to develop interaction and build the team.

- Ask people to find something from their wallet or purse about which they can share a memory or fact.
- Everyone shares two true statements about themselves and one false statement. Let the group try to guess which of the three statements is false.
- Have everyone share a favorite memory of living in the neighborhood.
- Ask people to share the best thing that happened to them that week.

Tips for Dealing with Difficult People

When a point is being discussed too long:

Summarize or table the question for a later time.

If a discussion between two group members becomes too heated:

Summarize points made by each person and turn the discussion back to

the group. Invite the individuals to stay after the meeting when the three of you can talk it over.

If one person dominates the conversation:

If you know that an individual tends to dominate the conversation, head them off early by saying something like, "I know you have strong opinions about this, Frank. Why don't we start off taking a minute for you to tell us what you think the issues are?" Interrupt with a statement giving the speaker credit for his contribution but politely asking him to hold his other points until later.

When a speaker drifts from the subject:

Interrupt, giving credit for the idea but explaining that they have departed from the main point. Ask the group the question of whether it wants to stray from the outline or follow it. Bring the discussion back to the topic by using the related idea as the transition.

When a member has difficulty in expressing herself:

Build up her confidence by expressing appreciation for what she has said and then rephrase her material with a preface, such as, "Is this what you mean, Ms. Jones?"

Bylaws

Bylaws are the rules that will govern the group. They should clearly state the organization's purpose, mission, and structure. Bylaws are just an instruction manual for how your group will operate; when you write the bylaws use language that everyone can understand. Generally, bylaws are only meaningful within the organization and are only as binding as the organization itself makes them. Below is a general outline to help you write your bylaws.¹

Article 1 - Name

Clearly state the name of your organization.

Article 2 - Purpose

1. State the purpose of the organization (i.e. why was the organization formed?)
2. Identify who you will serve (what are the boundaries of the organization).
3. What is the association's function (community building, education, crime prevention, advocacy etc.)?

¹ *This information is provided only as a guide for drafting your neighborhood association bylaws. Tuscaloosa Neighborhoods Together recommends that you consult with an attorney to review your organization's bylaws prior to adoption.*

Article 3 - Membership

- 1. Who can be a member of the association?**
- 2. Define types of membership (active/ non-active/ honorary etc.)**
- 3. Will there be any dues charged for membership?**

Article 4 - Voting

- 1. Who is eligible to vote?**
- 2. How many members have to be present to hold a vote?**
- 3. Define quorum.**

Article 5 - Board of Directors

- 1. Define the positions that make up the board.**
- 2. Define the terms of office.**
- 3. Define the duties of the officers.**
- 4. Define the powers of the board.**
- 5. Define how the board will be elected.**
- 6. Resignation.**
- 7. Vacancy.**
- 8. Suspension or removal.**
- 9. Compensation.**

Article 6 - Meeting and Organization

- 1. When will the association meet?**
- 2. What rules will govern the meetings?**
- 3. How will meetings be publicized?**
- 4. Can special meeting be called? If so, what will be the procedure?**
- 5. Can the board act without meeting?**
- 6. How is the fiscal year of the association defined?**

Article 7 - Committees

- 1. List standing/permanent committees.**
- 2. Who can serve on committees?**
- 3. How are committees appointed/formed?**
- 4. What are the powers of committees?**
- 5. When will committees meet?**

Article 8 - Contracts, Checks, Deposits and Funds

- 1. Who can execute contracts on behalf of the association?**
- 2. Who may write checks on behalf of the association? How are they approved?**
- 3. When and where will funds be deposited? Who will be responsible for depositing them?**

4. What records will be permanently kept and who will keep them?

Article 9 - Amendment of Bylaws

1. When will the bylaws be reviewed?
2. How can the bylaws be amended?
3. How will changes to the bylaws be communicated to the association?

Article 10 - Dissolution

1. What will happen to the assets of the association?

Article 11- Prohibitions

1. Is there anything you want to explicitly prohibit the association from doing?

Opening a Bank Account

If your neighborhood association accumulates money, you should open a bank account. An account can be opened by either a person or a corporation. (Information on incorporation is later in this Toolbox.) If an individual opens the account, that person's social security number will be used. If the association is incorporated, it must first obtain a Tax Identification Number - a federal tax number that is filed with the IRS. For information on receiving a tax identification please refer to the following web site:

<http://www.irs.gov/businesses/small/article/0,,id=98350,00.html>.

To open a bank account, you will need to present identification, such as a driver's license, credit card or passport. Along with your tax ID number, you will need other papers providing the legitimacy of your organization. Check with your bank to see what they require. Often they will require a copy of your bylaws or minutes of your first meeting. You must also state the names and titles of people who can conduct business for the organization. If you are a non-profit corporation, ask the bank what they will need you to bring. Not all non-profit organizations will receive a waiver of service charges; that is done at the discretion of the individual bank. If you are not a non-profit business, there is no automatic waiver of service charge, but it never hurts to ask. Signature cards must be signed by the current secretary or treasurer of the neighborhood association along with anyone else who will be signing on the bank account.

Incorporation and Nonprofit Status²

Do not confuse bylaws and articles of incorporation. Bylaws are the rules that govern a group and are not usually legally binding. Articles of Incorporation

² *This information is provided for your convenience and shall in no way be relied upon as a legal opinion or advice.*

are the primary legal document of a corporation. Articles are filed with the Secretary of State through the local office of probate to begin corporate existence. Bylaws are not filed with the Secretary of State.

Individuals are not generally held liable if the association is incorporated. If your group finds itself the target of a lawsuit, incorporation can provide welcome peace of mind. Incorporation protects the personal liability of group members and officers. That is, their own money, homes, vehicles or other property isn't at risk. That's not true of an unincorporated association. A provision in the bylaws may be included in order to indemnify-to secure against hurt, loss, or damage-board members in the event they are sued as a result of board decisions. Indemnification promises that the corporation will repay the board member for costs of defending themselves in lawsuits and/or for costs of judgments against board members. However, such indemnification is useless if the organization does not have funds available to cover the board member's legal expenses.

Many organizations seek the financial benefits of tax-exempt status. In addition to qualifying for public and private grant money, most nonprofit groups seek the status to obtain exemptions from federal and state income taxes, and therefore can devote a larger proportion of their resources to achieving their particular goals. The status can also be beneficial to those groups who'd like special rates for services such as postage. Also, donors prefer to give contributions to these groups because they can deduct their gifts on their own taxes. On the other hand, the IRS restricts lobbying activity, political activity is prohibited, and the organization's activities must be limited to the charitable purpose. Each individual group must weigh the pros and cons of the status carefully in light of their organizational goals and values.

Examples of Neighborhood Association Projects and Activities

- Block Parties
- Community Gardens
- Concerts
- Crime prevention initiatives
- Directories and telephone trees
- Fix-up projects
- Historical Teas
 - Many neighborhoods are in transition, and it is important to preserve a sense of neighborhood history for the newcomers. One neighborhood sought to preserve its history by sponsoring small, single-block neighborhood teas. One household on the block volunteered to host the event and invited a long-time resident as the guest of honor. The guest of honor and the host invited other neighbors to participate. The host provided refreshments. To ensure that all the teas are similar, a three-person committee helped to coordinate each of the teas. A television producer in the neighborhood recorded each of the events
- Holiday celebrations
 - lights contest
 - Create a holiday celebration based on the traditions of the different

ethnic and religious groups represented in the neighborhood. Ask neighbors to bring a food item and a decoration item used in their own celebrations. You may end up celebrating Christmas, Chanukah and Kwanza all at once!

- Home tours
- Leadership projects
- May Day Festival
 - A neighborhood association in Denver, Colo., celebrates spring with a May Day Festival. The association hosts the event in the park and hires musicians from the neighborhood to play folk music. A potluck dinner is served, and one neighbor with a passion for Maypole dancing teaches the traditional dance to children. All participants are invited to make floral wreaths to wear in their hair with materials and instruction provided by the association. Consider celebrating other festivals that have special significance to the people in your neighborhood.
- Murals/art projects
- Neighborhood clean-ups
- Newsletters
- Park Developments or adopt a local park
- Picnics
- Pot luck dinners
- Progressive Dinners
 - Groups of five or six households share a potluck meal with one course at each person's house. The dinner is organized so that guests can walk from one home to another. Serve dessert at a central location so all of the households can gather for the final event.
- Scholarship programs
- School supply drives
- Security lighting projects
- Street improvements
- Tree plantings
- Yard-of-the-Month programs
- Youth activities

Tips for Building a Strong Neighborhood Organization

The most common complaint of neighborhood leaders is that they can't get people to participate. Questions you should be asking yourself are: is your group inclusive? Does your group demonstrate effective teamwork, recognizing the needs, interests and skills of all its residents?

Most tasks will continue to fall on the shoulders of a core group of leaders. However, there are many ways for neighborhood leaders to get people involved and keep their interest. Here are some suggestions:

- **Be Inclusive:** Too narrow of a focus and extreme positions can often alienate the very people you'd like to get involved.
- **Welcome New People:** Make sure people attending a meeting for the

first time are welcomed, listened to and given opportunities for becoming involved. Get the names, phone numbers and emails of newcomers, give them an opportunity to sign up for a task that interests them, and follow up with newcomers.

- Recognize Your Assets:** Conduct a survey to identify the particular skills of residents that might be hidden assets.

- Stay Focused on the Bigger Picture:** Set goals each year and stay focused on those goals. Utilize subcommittees to handle the bulk of the work. Ask subcommittees for a report. Don't spend time at regular meetings on issues that can be considered by a subcommittee.

- Bring in Young People as Constructive Participants:** Activities that let young people know that there is a neighborhood group that cares about them will build their respect for the community's values. Such activities might include a recreational function, a youth summit, a school supply drive or a scholarship program. Ask your neighborhood school principal to provide ideas and appropriate activities.

- Host Productive Meetings with Relevant Topics:** Start meetings on time and keep them brief. Use an agenda with amounts of time established for each item. When time runs over for a topic, ask the group whether the issue deserves more time. Topics for meetings should be varied to attract new people. Limit the number of business meetings per year. Instead of a meeting, host an activity.

- Listen and Let Everyone Speak:** Asking for introductions at the beginning of a meeting can often break the ice for people who might be afraid to speak up. An open forum for half an hour can make a big difference in whether someone stays involved.

- Work with Other Community Organizations:** Don't forget to capitalize on the resources and skills of other community organizations. An inventory of the neighborhood might uncover a variety of helpful organizations, such as churches, schools, service clubs, nonprofit organizations and youth organizations.

- Be Flexible:** More progress will come from a group whose leader is a facilitator rather than a domineering chairperson. If most of the people in a meeting want to carry a discussion in a new direction, effective leaders will swim with the tide rather than fight it.

- Anticipate Issues:** By staying in touch with issues, you can often identify a potential zoning change, crime trend or other problem before it becomes so large that it is too hard to battle.

- Act Quickly and Decisively:** "Strike while the iron is hot" is an important

reminder in times of crisis. This is when other people are most likely to get involved and give their time.

- Set Clear Time Lines and Responsibilities:** Many internal conflicts occur because leadership is not clear in summing up discussions, identifying who is responsible for follow-up work and deciding a time line for action. Ask the secretary to help you summarize discussions and clarify decisions.

- Develop New Leaders:** Term limits for officers are helpful in forcing leaders to make way for new people. Committee chairs and project leaders are important positions for testing new leaders.

- Admit and Learn from Mistakes:** Recognize mistakes and move on.

- Celebrate Accomplishments:** Too often we forget to celebrate accomplishments or to even notify people of the results of our work. Even small victories can encourage people to attend neighborhood functions and give their time more freely.

- Recognize/Reward Personal Achievements:** Newsletters are great places to recognize people for awards, graduations, new babies and important anniversaries. Good Neighbor awards are a great technique for reinforcing certain actions, whether it is an individual contribution to the group or community-minded activities like a business cleaning up its grounds.

Working with Diverse Populations

"We can't get young people to participate."

"The renters really don't care about our neighborhood."

"Some of our residents only speak Spanish and don't come to meetings."

Have you heard some of these complaints from your neighborhood association board members? Working with diverse populations is one of the biggest challenges for neighborhood groups. Here are points to consider when meeting the challenge of diversity:

- Listen to ALL of your residents.** Find out their interests, talents and needs.

- Offer a diverse set of activities.** Don't expect everyone to attend activities all the time. Some residents may not be able to or want to come to monthly business meetings.

- VALUE diversity.** By capitalizing on the skills and experiences of all people in your neighborhood, the association will benefit from the rich diversity of the population.

•**TRUST** is essential. Trust doesn't come until you have the chance to interact with one another. Sponsor activities that bring neighbors together. There are as many differences within ethnic and racial groups as there are between racial and ethnic groups.

•**Neighborhood Activities:** A key to cultural diversity in neighborhoods is finding common ground among citizens.

Teamwork

Teamwork is about building relationships with people. Here are some things to keep in mind when building a strong team:

- Ask open-ended questions. People love to talk about themselves. Ask your neighbors about their families, pets and jobs.
- Be trustworthy. Follow through on your promises. If you announce a meeting, plan to hold the meeting. Following through shows you are about action and that you are trustworthy.
- Recognize the needs of your neighbors. When you plan, consider the needs of your neighborhood.
- Share information. Let people know what resources are available.
- Be honest, respectful and responsible.
- Recognize Accomplishments
- Remind the neighborhood association of all the great successes as a team. Some of your accomplishments might include:
 - Getting to know more neighbors.
 - Recruiting five, 10, 15 people to join the team.
 - Getting good publicity in the paper about your neighborhood.
 - Planning a social event for the neighborhood.
 - Conducting a neighborhood-wide survey.
 - Checking on a homebound neighbor.
 - Producing a neighborhood newsletter.
 - Creating a welcome wagon for new neighbors.

Ideas for Honoring Volunteers

Volunteers make the neighborhood association a success. Appreciate whatever level of commitment a volunteer can make. Some volunteers may have more time to get involved than others. Recognizing the efforts of all volunteers is important. Here are some suggestions for thanking them. Add your own creative ideas.

- ▣ Treat to a soda or coffee.

- ▣ Send a card.
- ▣ Greet by name.
- ▣ Say we missed you.
- ▣ Promote a volunteer-of-the-month program.

Sources

www.ci.irving.tx.us/community_affairs/toolbox.asp
www.wichita.gov/CityOffices/CityManager/neighborhoodservices/ToolBox.htm
www.neighborhood-center.org/faq.htm
www.plano.gov/Departments/Neighborhood+Services/resources.htm