



Making the most of your housing co-op's elections

A guide for Ontario housing co-ops

Elections are a key feature of housing co-op governance. Democratically electing a board of directors to assist the membership in governance makes co-ops different than other types of housing. Recent changes to the Ontario Co-operative Corporations Act have changed the way elections must be conducted.

Making the most of your housing co-op's elections is an educational series to help your co-op have the strongest and well-planned elections possible. Each issue in the series is designed as a stand-alone resource that covers a specific part of the election process.

This first issue gives an overview of elections and how they fit into co-op governance.



Issue #1: Election overview

How often have you been at a housing co-op meeting and the election process seems to be made up on the fly? No one knows how many directors need to be elected. Members have not considered whether they will run for the board or what makes a good director. There is no set description outlining the duties of directors. Members are nominated just to fill the vacant positions, and once the board is full, the job is done. The board is full, the job is done. In the weeks and months after the election, some directors resign because they didn't know what the job involves, or realize they don't have the time or energy for this commitment.

If you've ever been part of an election like this, or heard a similar story, you know it isn't good enough.

Co-ops can do better because elections are at the core of co-op governance. Co-op members have an important role in how their co-op runs and electing directors is one the most important governance decision members get to make each year. The co-operative

Democratic member control

A resident board of directors elected by the members is the foundation of a co-op and its democratic functioning.

- electing directors is one of the most important responsibilities of co-op membership
- elections give members a chance to influence decisions about their housing
- the election process ensures board accountability

In this way, housing co-ops are controlled by their members. Each member has one vote. Housing co-ops give members the information they need to make good decisions and take part in the life of the co-op.

Ownership of a housing co-operative should rest with those who use its services. Non-member households should be limited.

Members of housing co-operatives should have equal voting rights. Membership should be distributed in a manner that encourages equal participation in the co-operative.

Democratic control of housing co-operatives is enhanced by the full sharing of information and the provision of equal opportunities for involvement.

From Co-operative Housing International Interpretation of the Statement on the Cooperative Identity 1995

Democratic member control is key in a membership association like a housing co-op. When members elect directors, they entrusting these members to act as directors to ensure the safekeeping and successful operation of the co-op. The members give them legal authority to make decisions.

The well-being of your housing co-op depends so much on your board of directors. You may have a good manager, members who care about their co-op, a competent auditor, sound advice from the co-operative housing sector, and any government partners – and it can still all go wrong if the board isn't doing its job properly. This is because the board of directors

can make decisions and recommendations and take actions, that have an enormous effect on the co-op—for better or for worse.

Elections are important and the stronger your elections are – from your elections format, to nominations process – to onboarding the better your board will be and the better your co-op will be. There are many other reasons to have elections. First, elections are a way to renew your co-op’s leadership. Great elections will encourage participation from the entire co-op membership and help ensure that the board composition reflects the membership of the co-op. New directors can also bring fresh ideas to help move the co-op into the future to ensure its ongoing success.

Finally, there is a legal reason for elections. The Co-op Act and your by-laws require that elections be concluded at a member’s meeting. It is a legal requirement, so make the most of it.

This series, ***Making the most of your housing co-op’s elections*** is all about how to avoid that scenario at the beginning of this tip sheet and have great elections that set up your co-op for success.

The other issues in this series include:

- Changes to voting and your election system
- Election committees and the importance of planning
- Getting nominations
- Learning about the candidates
- The election
- Housing co-op elections step by step

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