

# Discussing Complex Issues

When an Association addresses issues affecting the neighborhood, typically members have an open informal discussion about issues. A systematic approach, like the one illustrated below, can sometimes be used to help focus the discussion, identifying and addressing Aroot causes rather than symptoms@ of an issue. The following guidelines represent time-tested ways to make group decisions.

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- 1. Identify the Issue:** Be as specific as you can in describing the issue. If your true problems are not identified, you may not find the right solution. For example, there might be an issue about the appearance of the neighborhood. The symptoms may be poor landscape maintenance, dilapidated homes, or junk cars left around, etc. However, the true problem is that properties are not being maintained.
- 2. Clarify the Issue:** Explore all aspects of an issue. You may discuss how a problem manifests itself as noted above. Who are the key players involved with or contributing to a problem? Are there any legal aspects to be considered? Etc.
- 3. Analyze the Cause(s):** To effectively look for solutions, you must understand the causes of the specific issue. It is important to ask is AWhy@. AWhy are the properties not maintained?@ One response might be that many of the properties in that area are owned by absentee landlords. After identifying a potential cause then follow that cause to its source, asking, A Why does the presence of absentee landlords affect the way properties are maintained?@ Keep asking AWhy@ until you have thoroughly explored the origins of all of the potential causes.
- 4. Search for Alternative Solutions:** Remember that multiple solutions can apply to most problems. Look at all of the Acauses@ that you have identified and discuss solutions that may eliminate or alter any cause. Be sure to consider all community Aassets@ in this discussion. Be creative! No matter how Afar fetched@ an idea may seem, share it. A Crazy idea@ may trigger the start of a very realistic solution.
- 5. Choose One or More Good Alternatives:** At this point, identify the criteria that the solutions must meet and then discuss the pros and cons of the proposed alternatives. For example, one set of criteria applied to potential projects for the City=s Empowerment Zone application included: (1) ease to accomplish (A piece of cake@); (2) maximum results for minimum financial investment (A biggest bang for the buck@) and (3) what will benefit the most people.
- 6. Develop an Action Plan:** Decide what actions are necessary to execute the chosen solution(s). Again be thorough and make sure everything is covered.
- 7. Establish Commitments:** Define who will be responsible and set a completion deadline for each action. One person should commit to over all follow up (like a project manager).
- 8. Follow Through by Evaluating Results:** Include updates at subsequent Neighborhood Association meetings. Try to track changes by doing periodic comparisons (like measurements of success). For example, you might note that 5 out of 10 neglected properties have been cleaned up. If the results are not what you

want within the desired timeframe, you may periodically re-evaluate and possibly revise your action plan.

## EXTRA TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL ASSOCIATION DISCUSSIONS

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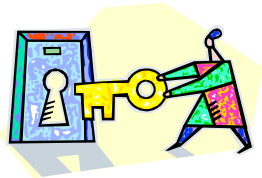


Have a **FUN** warm up activity. If there are a number of new group members, you might want to do introductions, but make it fun. For example, you might pair people up to meet and then have each person introduce the other to the larger group. You can even spice it up further by having each person give an adjective to describe themselves -- such as Serious Sam or Pretty Pat. If most people already know each other, you might use an Aice breaker@ like having someone tell a joke.



Use a **Flip Chart** with large paper to record what people say.

This way ideas are not forgotten and everyone has a chance to comment on the accuracy of what is recorded. Too often, people will agree to something that they don't fully understand. Putting it in writing helps to clarify what is being agreed upon.



Use **ABreak Out Sessions@**

when having large group discussions. Participants can be divided up randomly, by specific interests or expertise, or simply self selection. Try to have an equal number in each group and avoid groups of more than 10 people. Each group can discuss a different aspect of an issue or the entire problem.



Keep people energized with an **AEnergy Break@!** For long

discussions, people get tired. It helps to move around once in a while. In addition to brief breaks, you may want to appoint one person to watch the groups' energy level. If people are getting tired, that person will call out for an AEnergy Break@. For one or two minutes, everyone will stop their discussions and follow the Aenergy monitor=s@ directions. They may have people stretch or jump & sing or something fun that gets the blood circulating again. Participants can then go back to their discussion with more energy.