

Community-scaled Conservation in Planned Communities



A How-to Guide to Working with Homeowners Associations to Promote Nature-friendly Landscaping

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Prepared by:
Shannon Dougherty, Conservation Coordinator
San Diego Audubon Society
dougherty@sandiegoaudubon.org
858-273-7800 x101

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This guide has been compiled for use by conservation practitioners, municipalities, individuals, and residents of common-interest developments who have an interest in implementing community-scale conservation projects on common property. It serves as a guideline for creating and implementing sustainable, nature-friendly landscaping projects within common-interest developments (herein referred to as a planned community or CID) administered by a homeowners association.

This handbook is based in part on our experience working with a planned community in Chula Vista, California. The goal of this

project was to promote native, drought-tolerant landscaping at the community level to reduce threats to the adjacent, locally endangered coastal sage scrub ecosystem. With the support of a diverse team of project partners, community members, and volunteers, we installed a 1.4 acre demonstration habitat garden and hosted a series of four workshops aimed at promoting nature-friendly landscaping, water-efficient irrigation, and other sustainable landscaping practices. Lessons learned throughout the project process have been collated and compiled in this document.



Our project's resident landscape designer (in foreground) oversees volunteer planting activities.

WHAT IS AN HOA?



An HOA, or homeowners association, is a formal organization created by a real estate developer for the purpose of developing, managing, and selling a development of homes. Typically, the HOA is created after a pre-determined number of homes within the community are sold. The creation of this organization allows the developer to relinquish the financial and legal responsibility of the community, usually by transferring ownership of the association to the homeowners. HOAs are typical in various forms of common-interest developments (CIDs), including single family homes, condominiums, and cooperative apartments.

The HOA is a democratically-organized entity in which community residents may both elect and serve on the HOA's board of directors, which is exclusively composed of community residents. The Board is charged with maintaining common areas and enforcing deed restrictions as

outlined in the Covenants, Conditions, & Restrictions (CC&Rs), a pre-determined set of rules that each homeowner must abide by. While many associations are governed and managed entirely by their members, large associations will employ professional property managers, attorneys, and accountants. HOA membership is mandatory for all property owners and a compulsory membership fee is usually charged.

The benefits of living in a development governed by an HOA include maintaining property values, providing recreational amenities such as pools and tennis courts, maintaining common areas, and offering a heightened sense of resident safety and security. Drawbacks include the fact that the homeowner must cede control over various aspects of their property to the association, which may or may not be restrictive in their interpretation and enforcement of the CC&Rs.

WHY DO WE WANT TO WORK WITH HOAs?

There are many reasons why conservation professionals should consider working with homeowners associations. HOAs are essentially a governing body for a specific community of residents in a given area and thus similar to a municipality. No matter what form your conservation project will take, it is essential to involve those with management authority and decision-making capability. Thus, if you would like to work with or engage a planned community in your project, you must consider the HOA as a primary partner.

Homeowners associations govern an increasingly significant portion of the residential populace. Association-governed communities, or CIDs, have grown exponentially in recent decades. In 1970, there were only 701,000 units with 2.1 million residents in these communities which include condominiums, cooperatives and other planned communities. As of 2009, there were 24.4 million housing units occupied by an estimated 60.1 million residents. These numbers show the kind of explosive growth of planned-unit developments that has taken place in the U.S. This growth is projected to accelerate, with an estimated four out of five new housing units included in a homeowners association. This trend indicates that we must learn to work effectively with planned communities in the future if we are to successfully promote conservation behaviors and activities at the community level.

Many HOA-governed communities are located in semi-rural, ecologically sensitive areas. From the regional conservation perspective, CIDs tend to be developments that push

the boundaries of urbanization and thus are often located in areas that may be ecologically significant and/or threatened by rapid urbanization. Because trends in CID development increased as a result of housing policies and preferences rooted in the post-war 1960s, after the cores of most cities were already well-established, much of the land that has since been developed as a planned community is peripheral to the urban core. Because these developments allow the local municipality to increase its tax base without having to provide the level of public services that would be required in non-homeowner association developments, these are attractive developments for struggling local governments. This facet, along with a combination of rising land prices, population





growth, and trends in urban to suburban migration, has fostered the rise of CIDs, and ultimately, urban sprawl. Planned communities are most common throughout the sunbelt states and in the southwestern U.S., where high levels of population growth and residential construction have taken place in recent decades.

A centrally-organized community can be beneficial for reaching a large audience in a target location. The organizational structure of HOA-governed communities is conducive to reaching a large audience in a specific geographic area. In comparison to a municipality, HOAs are comparatively more accessible, may have less arduous decision-making processes,

Sprawl is the primary cause of habitat loss and fragmentation in California, where 188 of 286 imperiled or endangered species are in areas vulnerable to development.¹

and will likely have a vested interest in your project as a result of living in the target community. In addition, many HOAs utilize media such as email blasts and community newsletters that are optimal ways to inform and engage the target community in your project.

¹ Green Infrastructure: linking landscapes and communities. By Mark A. Benedict, Edward McMahon, Conservation Fund.

WHO ARE HOAs?

Organizational Structure of Planned Communities

Board of Directors. The Board of Directors is a body of elected community residents that oversee the activities of the community, including those occurring at individual residences. The Board is composed of a President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer, along with several at-large Board members. Members are elected to these positions by community residents and serve as volunteers.

Committees. Committees are often created to effectively delegate decision-making responsibilities relative to a specific issue or community

interest. Committee members are most often appointed by the Board President. Depending on the size and needs of the community, there may be only a few or multiple committees. However, most planned communities have at least two committees: the covenant committee (the rule enforcement branch of the HOA) and the landscaping/architecture committee. Depending on the focus and scope of your conservation project, a committee's support may be essential to the success of your efforts. If your target community has a landscaping/architecture committee, it may be advisable to first vet your project with this group and solicit their feedback and suggestions, before approaching the full board with your proposal.



Karen Straus

A STEP BY STEP APPROACH FOR WORKING WITH HOAs

1) Know your audience.

Whether you're working with an external organization or a resident who is advocating for community-level changes, it is important that you understand the target community's needs, interests, concerns, and values. It is also important to understand your target audience so that you can communicate your message in the most effective way.

Research Community Demographics. Before you begin your project, carry out baseline research to determine the degree to which your audience will be receptive to your message and program. You may want to find out what the demographic makeup of the community is, education level, income level, etc. This may be accomplished by using websites such as www.census.gov and www.city-data.com. It is also recommended that you speak with other community members that have lived in the area for several years and may have a more well-rounded understanding of the inner workings of the community.

Community Surveys. You may also want to survey a small sample of residents to learn about their level of awareness of the project or program you're proposing and their willingness to participate. This may help you more fully understand potential barriers, both behavioral and structural, that may affect the implementation of your project.

Build Strategic Relationships. One of the

Steps for Working with HOAs

1. Know your audience
2. Identify potential partners and assemble your project team
3. Obtain HOA Board approval for your project
4. Develop your project action plan
5. Engage the community in your project
6. Transition to sustainability



most important sectors of the community you will need to learn about and gain as a necessary ally is the homeowners association's Board of Directors. Before you start your project, they will need to be on board and support what you are trying to achieve. In many cases, this means building a relationship with Board members and effectively communicating your intentions. Oftentimes, the best way to gain Board support for a conservation initiative is to frame it in terms of cost savings and what it will mean to their bottom line. No matter what your project aims to achieve, your message will almost always be better received if it emphasizes the costs that will be reduced or eliminated as a result of taking part in the project.

2) Identify potential partners and assemble your project team.

These partners may be outside or within the

community, depending on your project's needs. In most cases, a mix of internal and external partners will work best. Internal partners might include the HOA Board and committee members, the Property Management Company, and key residents that will be likely champions of your project. External partners may include non-profits, municipalities, businesses, and other relevant groups and organizations that service the community. It may be in your best interest to actively involve the municipality as a partner since this may increase the potential for public recognition and in-kind support for the project, especially if your project supports one of the municipality's existing programs or objectives.

Diverse Project Team. A variety of roles are necessary for successful project implementation at the community level. Although each of these roles is important, they do not necessarily have to be exclusive to any one individual and can be



Participants sign in for a morning workshop and volunteer planting event.

shared by multiple team members and/or multiple roles can be held by one team member. The diagram below outlines some of these roles and suggestions for recruiting a diverse base of participation in your project team.

3) Obtain HOA Board Approval for your project.

If your project involves working with residents in a planned community or working on land

within a planned community, you will need to seek Board approval before you proceed.

Formal Presentation. Board approval is usually sought by presenting your project goals, objectives, and intent to the full Board of Directors at one of their regularly scheduled meetings. You may contact a Board member or Community Director to secure a place on the agenda.

Team Roles

Role	Needed Because...	Example
The Organizer	This is the project lead/coordinating agency of the entire project. It is usually the initiator of the project and the party responsible for acquiring funding, uniting and organizing the project team, and coordinating the project from start to finish.	Environmental non-profit, municipality, or individual
The Messenger	The messenger is essential to project success. Ideally the messenger is someone from within the target community that supports your project and its goals and can effectively communicate them to the target community. It is important that the messenger has an established relationship with the target community as well as a clear understanding of the project benefits.	Board member, project partner, or other respected community member
The Liaison	The liaison will likely be a community staff position that has been appointed to administer community relations and communications. This person will understand the constraints (according to the CC&Rs) and opportunities that may exist within the community. They will have access to community email lists, newsletters, etc. that will help you reach your target audience.	Community Director, Board member, or Property Mgmt personnel
The Champion(s)	The champions are your project advocates, both from within and outside the target community. They are anyone that supports the project, has status with the community, and is willing to contribute resources, time, etc. to implementing the project. They also serve as messengers since they often have relations with community members.	Local municipality, contributing business partner, Board member, other respected community member
The Sustainer(s)	For a project to be truly sustainable after the project term, it is essential to think about how to build sustainability into the project model. For landscaping, this may be accomplished by establishing or working with a member of the community's landscaping committee, which will oversee/direct landscaping-related efforts after the project concludes.	Community member, Board member



Utilize strategic relationships. As mentioned above, it is highly advisable to vet your project with a Board member, a committee member, a resident, or other influential member of the community before you present your idea to the full Board. This vetting process will provide you with an opportunity to solicit feedback and make any final modifications to your project that may make it more favorable to the Board. Most importantly, it also provides you with an opportunity to identify your project ‘champions’, or those individuals that will support and speak in favor of your project at a Board meeting and other venues.

Clear & Effective Communication. This meeting will be your opportunity to effectively communicate your intent and to engage Board members in your project. It is essential that your presentation be delivered in a way that fully describes the project and the Board/

community’s role in it, highlights the project benefits (both to the community and to the cost savings that will result), and engages the Board members in supporting your program. It is important to keep in mind that for many Board members and residents, this will be their first time interacting and learning about a community-based conservation project and so good communication is a must!

4) Develop your Project Action Plan.

The next step is defining your action plan with partners to decide how and when your project will be implemented and who will be responsible for the required tasks. All project partners, including Board members, Property Management staff, and primary partners should be invited to participate in this process. Because the success of your project will likely be contingent on the contribution of partners, it is

important that all partners are on board with the project implementation plan and understand commitments they may be making both in terms of time and resource support.

As with most multi-faceted projects, flexibility and the project team's ability to adapt to changing project conditions will be very important throughout project planning and implementation. As the included case study illustrates, flexibility and adaptive management can allow your project to adequately adjust to modified on-the-ground realities such as imperfect planting conditions and audience outreach challenges, while accommodating positive developments such as the engagement of new partners.

5) Engage the Community in Your Project.

It is very important that all individuals with a stake in the project have an opportunity to participate right from the beginning. At the start of a project, this may be accomplished by hosting a community meeting in which the project plan is presented to residents and their input is sought. This is a great way to increase community support and outreach, while establishing credibility in a community.

Consistent communication with project partners and residents during the implementation phase of the project is essential. Elected HOA Board members and residents must be aware of what your project will achieve, over what timeline, and what benefits it will bring to the community. This can be achieved through website updates, email blasts, and newsletter articles. The HOA's Community Director can usually assist in helping you access these outreach tools. If a Community Director position does not exist, you might contact the HOA



Karen Straus

A typical community association that overwaters by just 25% wastes an estimated \$875 per acre per year.²

Board President to inquire about available, community-focused outreach tools. Remember that one or two communications will not be sufficient. You should take every opportunity to inform and engage your target community throughout the duration of your project.

6) Transition to Sustainability

A successful project is one that sustains itself long after the active project term has concluded. Because sustainability is multi-faceted

² San Diego County Water Authority



and dynamic, it should be considered at the outset of your project. For a landscape-level project in a planned community, sustainability may include continued human and/or resource support.

Human support might include the development of a landscaping committee or a local school group that is dedicated to the continued maintenance of the project and may even consider expanding your project's model to additional HOA-managed lands. At a minimum, it is essential to engage a small group of residents or volunteers in continued care of your landscape project to ensure it is maintained after the project term (e.g. community garden that requires regular watering until the plants are well-established). This is where a project 'champion' can be essential to the long-term outcome of the project, since they will likely take on the responsibility of sustaining the project into the future.

Resource support that promotes sustainability can come in many different sizes and

shapes, depending on the type of project you're carrying out. If you're working on a planting project, an irrigation system may be very helpful in sustaining your plantings until they are established. If you're removing an invasive plant species or would like to maintain a planting site, HOA support of targeted landscaping work by their contracting company might achieve this.

Above all, the HOA Board's support is fundamental to project sustainability. As the lead decision-maker and allocator of shared community resources, your project's sustainability will be greatly enhanced if they remain supportive and committed to your project's success. Once the project is completed, it is highly advisable to provide the full HOA Board (as well as all project partners) with a summary of your results. A results summary may include metrics relating to on-the-ground work accomplished, volunteer participation, and amount of in-kind support received throughout the



The HOA Community Director gets his hands dirty during a spring planting event.

project's duration. This is an important opportunity to highlight project achievements, re-engage Board members in the project and hopefully, re-establish their continued commitment to sustaining the project. In addition, if project leads will be changing as a result of the project's completion, this is a fitting time to introduce these individuals and their new roles.

If possible, it is advisable to periodically visit your project site and re-connect with project partners. This is a good opportunity to show your continued commitment to the project, maintain key relationships, and even scope out future project opportunities that might build on your initial project achievements.

References

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CASE STUDY

The following case study formulated the basis of understanding for this guide and provides a summary of the project process and lessons learned that resulted from our unique experience working in the community of Eastlake in Chula Vista, California. This one-year project, generously funded by a TogetherGreen grant, was designed to build public support and resident capacity for implementing sustainable and ecologically significant landscaping in the planned community of Eastlake, an area of high ecological priority. The project aimed to achieve both on-the-ground conservation results as well as behavior and attitude modification regarding sustainable landscaping to support wildlife and conserve water.

Project Information

Project Title: “Linking Communities, Habitat, and Wildlife along the Wildland-Urban Interface”

Project Lead: San Diego Audubon Society

Primary Partners: City of Chula Vista Conservation Division, Eastlake III HOA, Garden Retreat Design, Recon Native Plants, and National Wildlife Federation/Flyway Cities Coalition

Secondary Partners: City of Chula Vista Environmental Services Division, City of Chula Vista Parks Department, Otay Water District, and Master Gardeners

Objectives

1) Create a viable wildlife habitat for

public demonstration and conservation.

In partnership with the Eastlake III HOA, the project team will convert a community greenway into a native habitat garden that supports local species. Native plants and their specific benefits provided to local wildlife, as well as water conservation benefits, will be highlighted by educational signage.

2) **Build Community Capacity & Awareness.**

Community residents will participate in a series of Naturescape workshops aimed to educate residents on the value of native plants for wildlife habitat, water conservation, and sustainable landscaping. This will be coupled with hands-on training in water conservation techniques, composting, and planting.



Process

1) **Know your audience.** At the beginning of the project, our project team had a basic understanding of our target community and what factors may motivate them to be a part of our project. Basic demographic research was undertaken to obtain a better understanding of how this community may respond to our proposed activities. In our case, a majority of residents were of Hispanic descent, indicating the importance of delivering our messaging in ways that emphasized the values of family and environmental health. For example, instead of focusing solely on benefits to local wildlife, we also highlighted the benefits of sustainable, chemical-free lawns to families and especially children. We also considered that many residents were working families and professionals that would likely have little time to devote to lengthy workshop



Timeline

Fall 2009/Winter 2010

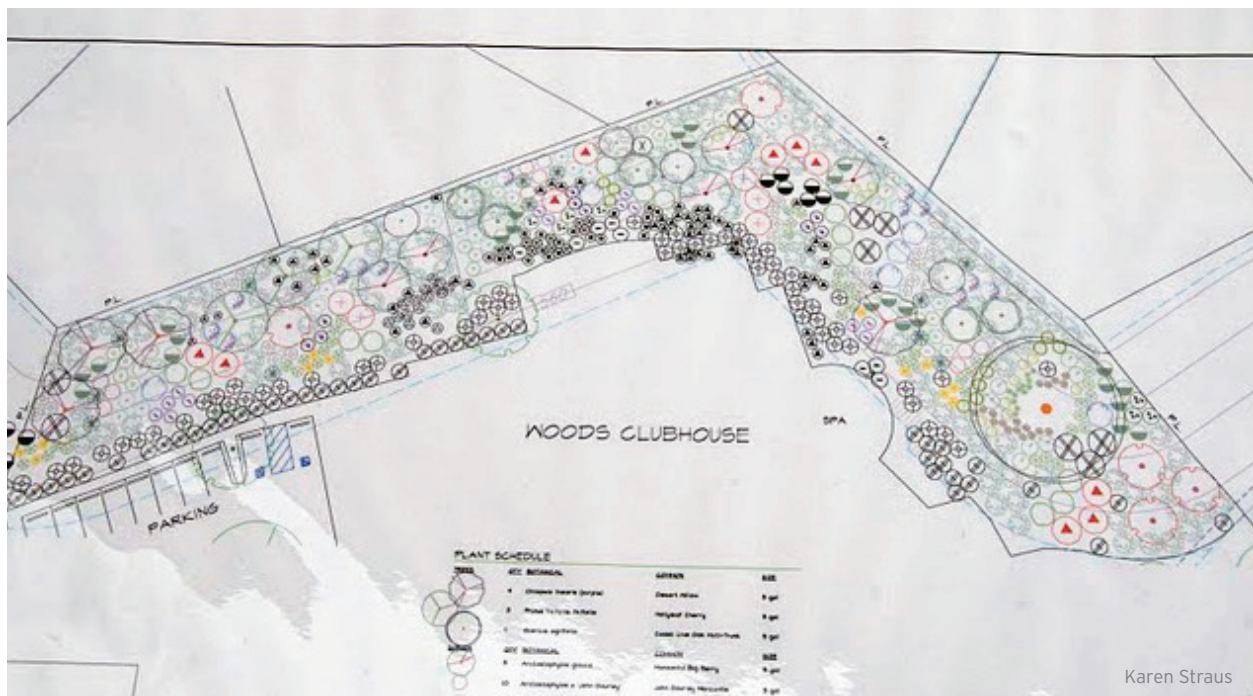
- Presented project to the HOA Board and received project approval.
- Identified and met with primary partners to discuss action plan and project timeline.
- Garden design was completed by landscape designer.
- Hosted two community meetings to introduce project and solicit feedback from residents.
- Met with the HOA's landscaping contractor to discuss the project and maintenance regimes required to sustain the new plantings.
- An article on the project was published in the HOA's community newsletter.

Spring 2010

- Hosted three volunteer work days to complete 1.4 acre demonstration habitat. One-hour workshops were held prior to the start of each volunteer work event.
- A fourth 2-hour workshop was held exclusively for HOA residents to provide our target community with an opportunity to learn more about sustainable landscapes and how to create them.
- Articles on the project were published in the community newsletter and city newspapers.

Summer/Fall 2010

- Developed and installed educational signage for the demonstration habitat garden.
- Created a handbook for working with HOAs based on the experience and results of this project.
- Coordinated a final planting event to replace plants that didn't make it through the dry season.



sessions. Therefore, workshops were scheduled for no more than 1-2 hours on a week night and weekend morning to offer the greatest flexibility for residents with time constraints.

2) Pick your partners. Our project partnerships evolved as the needs and direction of our project were further refined. Our primary project team was selected during the initial project conception phase and grew as we were able to reach out and seek support from the Eastlake III homeowners association, a local native plant supplier, the local Water District and the Master Gardeners. This project was largely successful because the project objectives directly aligned with and supported the mission of each partner, thus providing a strong incentive for active participation throughout the project lifespan. The success of this project was certainly due in large part to the mutually-supporting nature of our partnerships.

3) Obtain HOA Approval for your project. Initial contact with key Board members was

made through one of our project ‘Champions’, our resident landscape designer. This project had been conceived in collaboration with our landscape designer who is a resident of the target community and had been actively promoting sustainable landscaping in the community before this project was even proposed. Before our initial meeting with the Board, our designer had spoken with several receptive Board members and had set the stage for success. This demonstrates that it is truly important to lay the groundwork for project support by communicating with key members of the decision-making entity before a formal request is made. Through this strategic contact, we were able to get this agenda item included in their monthly meeting and make the case for supporting this project.

In our case, timing also proved to be helpful. On the day we presented our project to the Board, water rates had just been increased. Framing our desire to promote drought-tolerant, native landscaping in terms of cost savings to the Board and residents proved

to be quite convincing and timely.

In addition, visuals were very helpful in ‘selling’ our project to Board members that were not familiar with what we were proposing. A handout was distributed to Board members prior to my presentation that showed examples of attractive, sustainable landscapes. Basic project information and facts related to water savings were also included on this information sheet.

Lastly, we had a representative from the City, a supportive resident, and our landscape designer attend the meeting to voice their support for this project. It was important that the Board understood that this was not a singular interest, but one that is and will continue to be supported at all levels of the community.

4) Develop your Project Action Plan.

Although an initial action plan had been proposed in the original grant application for

this project, this was adjusted as necessary, with input from each of the primary partners. It proved to be especially important to include those partners that were providing resource support to the project in the decision-making process. The more each partner was given the opportunity to participate, the greater their ownership and commitment to the project was.

5) Engage the Community in Your Project.

We engaged residents in our project by promoting it through several community outlets including various community newsletters, a resident email list, and the Association’s website. In addition, two community meetings were held prior to project initiation to solicit feedback and input regarding the project and its implementation. Social marketing sites such as Facebook were also used to get the word out to local high schools, churches, and other community hotspots.



Local students and residents learn how to create wildlife-friendly ‘NatureScapes’.

Results

Habitat Restoration & Conservation

- Planted 1.4 acre hillside with drought-tolerant, native plants.
- A total of 472 native shrubs and 16 trees were planted.

Community Participation & Education

- A total of 92 volunteers participated in three volunteer planting events, not including project partners.
- A total of 71 participants attended a total of 4 workshops.
- A total of 14 homes and three community areas have been certified in the target community since the beginning of the project.

Partnership Building

- A total of 8 partners were involved in this project throughout its duration.

Publicity & Media

- Articles on the project have been published in three local newspapers.
- A short film based on video taken at two planting events is being created for local and national distribution.
- The project was publicly recognized by a City Councilmember.

Funding & In-kind Contributions

- A total of \$22,000 was provided by two grants. In-kind and matching contributions from project partners totaled well over \$27,000.



***Some native plants require
up to 75% less water than
non-native varieties***

Lessons Learned

- ✓ **Mass mailings.** Certain CC&Rs stipulate that the Board is not permitted to send mass mailings to their residents, even if they are from a municipality or other reputable source. However, mailings can be sent to specified addresses through the local municipality or a direct mailing service.
- ✓ **Focus on sustainability.** Focus on how you can build sustainability into your project throughout the lifespan of the project. This may be accomplished by establishing a committee dedicated to sustaining your project, creating educational signage with a lasting message, and by providing project leaders with information (email lists, flyers, etc.) that they might need to continue the project independently.
- ✓ **Public recognition.** Local media is an important tool for community outreach, volunteer/participant recruitment, and most importantly... recognition! Project recognition will not only benefit the project, but also win the good graces of the HOA Board and community members that may not be as receptive to change.

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