

Links Housing Co-operative

Date of Incorporation: 1991
Membership: 33
Activity: Housing
Organizational Form: Member-owned housing
Area Served: Nelson, British Columbia

BACKGROUND

Co-operative housing provides security, affordable housing, a feeling of community, and a sense of control over an individual's living conditions. Housing co-ops have profoundly improved their members' quality of life. More than one million Canadians pay more than 30 per cent of their gross income on shelter, and are therefore defined by the Canadian government as part of a core need for housing.¹ Canadian housing co-operatives developed in the 1970s, and now number more than 2000. They house approximately 90,000 households and 250,000 people in all parts of Canada.²

In general, housing co-ops members benefit financially from the amount of volunteer work done by co-op members, and from the assistance (at a relatively low cost) of co-op sector federations and resource groups.³ Links member and board president Steve Thornton believes co-operative housing "saves society a little bit of money and allows ... one more member of society to be a working and contributing member [to society]" (2001).

CONSTRUCTING THE CO-OPERATIVE

In 1991 a group of five women in Nelson, British Columbia decided to form the Links Housing Co-operative. They wanted to offer a respectable and more affordable housing option for families and single people financially unable to buy through the private market. The group obtained funding for Phase 1, consisting of nineteen units, through the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) in 1992. The concept was well received by the Nelson community, and the group was inundated with applications. Interviews for the first members took approximately three months. On October 31, 1992, the successful applicants moved into their new homes (BCICS Galleria).

During the co-op's first year, Links members volunteered their time and effort building a communal garden and participating in work parties. With the exception of a part-time co-ordinator, hired for ten hours per week, the co-op members managed to complete this work themselves.

In 1992, the co-op received approval from CMHC for its Phase 2 funding. The federal government discontinued its Co-op Housing program soon after. Fortunately, the B.C. Housing Homes Program granted funding for the co-op's Phase 2 construction in 1994, and the co-op was able to increase its membership in

July 1995 (BCICS Galleria).

STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATION

Currently, Links has 33 members (31 general, 2 associate) occupying 31 households. Families usually have one membership, in the name of one adult. A spouse can become an associate member by purchasing a \$10 share. Links has 41 adults and 29 children included in its 33 members. The seven directors, elected by the general membership, work with three committees to maintain the co-op. The maintenance and landscape committee determines any work that needs to be done, receives bids, and makes recommendations to the board; the social committee organises community functions, and the member selection committee manages potential member applications.

Governance is both flexible and adaptive, and it is not strictly structured. Maintaining financial records is the responsibility of the co-op's treasurer. Steve Thornton presently acts as both president and treasurer for the co-op, although normally separate individuals would hold these positions. Occasionally a board member serves as secretary.

MEMBERSHIP

The Links Co-op story in the BCICS Galleria explains that before 1998 all work for the co-op was considered volunteer. Members painted and cleaned vacant units, completed maintenance repairs, mowed lawns, and looked after the bookkeeping. However, members felt obligated to carry out these duties even when they did not enjoy them. Consequently, participation decreased and co-op maintenance was neglected. Ideally, members contribute a minimum of four hours per month toward the co-op organisation; at present eighteen members fulfill this requirement. Board meetings and directors' business may be applied to this monthly minimum amount.

Links members have defined several factors that increase member participation. These include: clearly defined tasks, member education, financial benefits (increased participation results in decreased operating costs), encouragement (active members are recognised at general meetings and are given a gift), and food (for example, pizza provided at a work party kept 90% of Links members working for most of the day) (BCICS, Galleria).

Thornton feels that member participation in co-op decisions is "a difficult issue" (personal communication [email], 2002). Enforcing participation has been discussed at great length among members, who believe penalties for lax participation are difficult to enforce. Links' annual general meeting "draws a small crowd, about 40% max." (Thornton, 2002). Roughly one third of members are active decision makers for the co-op – otherwise this task falls upon the board and its committees.

Approximately one third of the co-op members have subsidised housing at Links. The amount of the subsidy is based on the member's annual income. Thornton explains that self-employed members must complete a tax return and any subsidy is based on the previous year's income. Employed members show proof of income (e.g. a paycheque stub).

Thornton claims he applied to Links because it is subsidized housing, not because it is a co-operative. According to research reported in the BCICS Galleria, this is a common trend in housing co-ops. However, people initially drawn to the housing co-op for its financial benefits ultimately reap other rewards. Co-op members feel a part of a meaningful project, develop a sense of community, and gain ownership and security of tenure.

LEAKY CO-OPS

In the early 1990s, Links fell victim to the leaky co-op crisis that has plagued over 50 B.C. co-operatives in the last decade. The BCICS Galleria describes how this problem arises from "premature building envelope failure." This means the buildings' barrier to the elements is "compromised of many components such as the roof and walls" (www.chf.bc.ca). The results may include toxic mold, water damage, flooding, fallen ceilings, and water-filled light fixtures.⁴ Co-ops have experienced financial difficulties because the "leaky" housing units are sitting empty and therefore are not able to generate revenue.

Most co-ops require help to pay for repairs to leaky units. These co-ops are eligible for interest-free loans from the provincial Homeowner Protection Office (HPO). However, in order to receive the loan the application must be approved by CMHC. HPO has approved 32 interest free loans, totaling nearly \$59 million dollars, but CMHC has only approved four thus far in 2002. This remains an ongoing battle between the leaky co-ops and federal government.

During the mid-nineties many members who were not comfortable living at Links moved out and the co-op endured a decreased membership and faced a challenging time.

REVIVAL

Over the next few years, Links experienced considerable changes to both its buildings and membership, and modified its method of maintenance. Managers were brought in to oversee the "leaky co-op" repairs and to breathe some fresh air into the co-op's organisation. Thornton explains how the co-op elected a new board, board chair and a new co-ordinator in 1998. Thornton says the co-op was "suffering from a lack of motivation and this kind of inertia," but the new team of people "got the office together in a really good way."

Since 1998, Links Housing Co-op has "witnessed somewhat of a revitalization in participation and morale.

Members are holding social events once again and the membership has remained relatively stable” (BCICS, Galleria). In addition to the eighteen members actively participating in the upkeep of the co-op, a few adult members are hired on rotation to paint and clean vacant units and during the summer. Youth members are employed to maintain the common grounds. There is also a hired on-site maintenance person who handles any daily repairs (BCICS, Galleria).

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

The Links Housing Co-operative has already outlasted several difficult phases and continues to improve. Links members are planning to initiate numerous new projects over the next few years. They want to increase attention to landscaping details, enhance the interior and exterior design of the co-op, and improve the current maintenance system. The co-op also intends to draft a new policy and procedures manual, and formulate a plan to attract new members who are interested in living in a co-operative environment, not simply eager to acquire subsidized housing (BCICS, Galleria).

Links Housing Co-operative has little involvement or interaction with other co-operatives in Nelson or the Kootenay region. However, the co-op has enhanced the Nelson community by providing an affordable housing alternative. Steve Thornton says the co-op has “had its ups and downs...[but] it’s in better shape now than it has ever been before.” Links Housing Co-operative has established a stable foundation as a successful co-op, and it will be worthwhile to watch Links carry on setting goals and improving in the future.

Case Study Information

This case study was developed for a report entitled *Situating Co-operatives in British Columbia –2000 -2001*, which was prepared for the Province of B.C. (Ministry of Community Development, Co-operatives and Volunteers) by the British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies, University of Victoria. To obtain the information for the case study BCICS and the co-op entered into a partnership agreement. BCICS is grateful to the co-op members for their contributions and time. The case study is published with the approval of the co-operative. Further information regarding this study includes the following:

Researcher: Laura Sjolie and Andrea Zacharuk

Date of research: 2001

Author: Laura Sjolie and Andrea Zacharuk

Date of writing: 2001-2002

Editing: BCICS editorial group

Supervision: Kathleen Gabelmann, BCICS Research Co-ordinator

For questions or comments please contact:

BC Institute for Co-operative Studies

University House 2 – Room 109

PO Box 3060 STN CSC

Victoria BC V8W 3R4

250.472.4539

rochdale@uvic.ca

End Notes

¹ For further information please see www.unesco.org

² For further information please see www.chf.bc.ca

³ For further information please see www.unesco.org

⁴ For further information please see www.leaky.coop