

## **Virginia Community Practices Grassroots Participatory Democracy 17 September 2007**

### **Twin Oaks uses long consultative process, rotating managers and planners**

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Washington -- Much of the world is governed by professional politicians entrusted to make decisions on behalf of their constituents. However, one community in Virginia is taking advantage of its small size to engage in "participatory democracy" -- making decisions based on direct input from members rather than delegating the actual governance to others.

The roughly 100-member Twin Oaks community near Louisa, Virginia, was founded on the principles of "nonviolence, equality and ecology." The 40-year-old community is sustained by manufacturing hammocks and casual furniture, as well as indexing books and making tofu, a staple food of some Asian diets. Members also provide for many of the community's collective needs such as growing food, educating children and providing non-emergency health care. Its membership constantly fluctuates as new members arrive and others resume their lives in contemporary society.

There is no "leader" to decide community policies or practices on behalf of others. The goal is to allow everyone equal access to decisionmaking. But, with a population comparable to a small village that might otherwise be governed by a mayor and town council, how is this accomplished?

#### **COMMUNITY PLANNERS SEEK TO ENACT COLLECTIVE WILL**

"We're not hierarchical. We want everyone to have a voice," Valerie Renwick told USINFO. Renwick, a native of Ottawa, has lived at Twin Oaks for 15 years. She explained the "planner-manager" system that guides community decisionmaking.

Both managers and planners serve rotating one-and-a-half year terms. Managers are in charge of specific work areas, such as the production of hammocks or community meals, while planners decide issues that affect the community as a whole through a lengthy consultation process. "[Planners] are synthesizing information, trying to determine the collective will of the community on a given issue at a given moment in time," Renwick said.

Issues of concern range from membership decisions to business relations with outside retailers who sell Twin Oaks products.

Community members can propose new ideas or policy changes by posting a message on Twin Oaks' "Opinions and Ideas Board" and soliciting expressions of support or opposition. Planners use that information to decide whether to pursue the proposal. Planners also may distribute surveys on the issue "where they ask very particularly pointed questions," Renwick said.

Members eat together

Members and visitors gather for dinner on the deck in the main kitchen dining center. (Twin Oaks)

In such a small community, the planners also can talk directly with people to determine the collective will or hold meetings to discuss the issue and allow for further input.

Following this process, "the decisions are always left to the planners and they will take all these various forms of information," Renwick said. Rather than having planners serve in a "hierarchical position where they are making decisions for the community ... the voice of the people is being brought to the decisionmakers," she said.

Even after a decision has been made, there is an appeals process, allowing the planners to reopen an issue if a community member feels all factors were not considered. But, she added, "That hardly ever gets used because we do generally do such a good job of going through [the process]."

#### LONG CONSULTATIVE PROCESS SUITS COMMUNITY

Renwick acknowledged the length of the participatory democracy process. "It can range from weeks to months to years, depending on the scale of the decision." Quick decisions "cause more problems than they solve and it's important for us to do a very thorough job so we try to make sure all the bases are covered."

In emergencies or on time-sensitive issues, the three planners "will just talk among each other and do what they feel is best, but there are very few situations that actually require an immediate decision within a day or two or a matter of hours," Renwick said.

Much of Twin Oaks culture is based on complete trust between members, making interpersonal conflicts rare. However, when they occur, conflict resolution starts small at the individual level and progresses to wider concentric levels such as groups of friends or co-workers. Some community members also specialize in mediation techniques. "If it gets really big, the last step is [the planners] will ask the person to leave the community," she said, "but that's happened maybe two or three times in the 15 years of me living here because we have all of these other systems in place to address the problem before it gets so big."

So while there is no "community leader," at Twin Oaks, "certainly the planners provide leadership for the community such as setting policy, and responding to problems."

#### LEADERSHIP SELECTION OCCURS THROUGH GROUP INTERVIEW

The three planners' terms of office are staggered to ensure varied levels of experience at all times. When a term nears its end, interested community members go through an interview process at a public meeting where they are asked about their administrative and interpersonal strengths, and how they would deal with conflicts, stress and sensitive issues. For the next 10 days, community members can express support or opposition to the candidacy through an "input box," and the planners use those comments to decide whom to appoint. Even after an individual is designated, a "veto box" is available for the following 10 days as a last chance to voice objection.

Twin Oaks' style of democracy might appear impractical for larger groups of people, but it is nevertheless a working example of grassroots democracy designed to embody the community's egalitarian philosophy.

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