

THE BEACON PERSPECTIVES

COMMENTARY

A look back at cohousing

By David A. Hoffman

I've been wondering," an Acton neighbor told me recently, "what kind of community is on Half Moon Hill?" The community, New View Cohousing, has been part of Acton for 15 years, and yet it remains unknown to many – even to those, like my neighbor, who live only a few blocks away.

New View is one of approximately 120 cohousing communities in the United States – ten of these are in Massachusetts. The purpose of cohousing is to create a neighborhood in which people know each other and help each other out. Most cohousing communities, like New View, also try to be environmentally aware in their home-design and land-use decisions.

New View got its start in 1989, when three of the original members of the community met at a party in Boston and began to discuss a book about cohousing. They decided to explore the idea and invited interested people from the Boston area to join their discussions. Soon meetings were scheduled on a regular basis with a gradually growing group.

From 1989 to 1995, meetings were held approximately every ten days in Watertown, Cambridge, and Concord. Decisions – on such topics as bylaws, site selection, architect selection, home cost and design – were made by consensus, and all points of view were heard

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and considered.

New View's 20-acre site – located on Central Street – was a farm dating back to Colonial times. The original homestead, still standing, was built in 1735, and has now been subdivided into two homes, surrounded by 22 additional single-family and two-family homes.

Each family contributed money for the purchase of the land, and then paid separately for their homes after construction of each home was completed in 1995-96. New View's legal structure is a condominium, and therefore each home has its own kitchen, dining area, etc.

By 1998, the community had saved enough money to build a 5,000-square-foot common house – one of the most important features of a cohousing community. The Common House has a large kitchen and a dining area large enough to fit the whole community, as well as a children's play room, a wood-working shop, and an alcove for mailboxes and a community bulletin board. New View uses the Common House for social events – such as plays, musical performances, and slide shows – and regularly scheduled events, such as yoga classes and meals once or twice a week.

In addition to the 24

households on the New View site, a dozen other nearby households participate as community members or associate members (depending on their level of involvement). In the 24 households on the site, there are 44 adults and 25 children (including some in college), and with the associate and community members included, New View has a total of 62 adults and 31 children.

One of the most important links that binds the community together is e-mail. This may seem ironic, since one of the goals of cohousing is to recreate a village-like feeling of personal connection. Last week one of my New View neighbors sent out an e-mail late on a Saturday night asking for computer help as soon as possible because of a deadline. I called to offer assistance about an hour after the e-mail was sent, and was happily told "problem solved" – several neighbors had already contacted her.

Helping each other is one of the joys of community. When our children were young, my wife and I were able to go away for a weekend on our anniversary every year because two of our dear neighbors offered to spend the weekend at our house. Over the years, those

neighbors became like aunt and uncle to our children.

In fact, family is a good metaphor for what New View has created. The hallmark of life at New View is that we are a mutually supportive community that has shared many joyous events – and several sad ones – together. Three community members have died since 1995. Nine children were born here. The community has helped families in crisis, including a fire in one home.

Before my wife and I moved here, we wondered whether we would be sacrificing privacy and feel social pressure to participate in all community events. We worried about whether the value of our home would hold up. None of our concerns materialized. Home values have been strong, and we found that our neighbors value privacy as much as we do.

To live in a community with people that we care about and respect – to share in the work of being architects and builders of a tiny village, set off just a bit from the main path but nevertheless part of the larger Acton community – has been a joy and adventure for 15 years, and we look forward to more.

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