VOTING FALLBACKS

Consensus-based groups sometimes have voting fallbacks. In the case of cohousing groups, the most common reasons are to satisfy bankers, who aren't accustomed to consensus decision-making, and/or to reassure community members, especially those less experienced with successful consensus process. These groups normally have a super-majority fallback (typically 75%) rather than a simple majority (51%).

Voting fallbacks may be seen as a subset of the category "robust responses to inappropriate blocks." There are many possibilities for how to fulfill that function in consensus process, and it can be useful to consider which of them is the best fit for your group. See more information at:

http://treegroup.info/topics/A11-inappropriate_blocks.html
http://treegroup.info/topics/handout-consensus.pdf

Some communities also use a form of voting such as ranking priorities in order to allocate resources (e.g. for the annual budget), or multi-voting (aka "dot voting") on a list of priorities for an annual group retreat. These techniques may be used to give input to a committee or the full group before a final decision is reached, in which case they are usually seen as a tool within the regular meeting process, rather than a departure from consensus.

When to Go to a Vote

If you are going to have a voting fallback, it's essential to have clear guidelines on when it can be invoked. Examples include:

- After "x" number of meetings on an issue without resolution
- If 2/3 of the group want to vote
- If the group consenses to a vote

If a vote is needed arising from an unresolved consensus meeting, the vote is usually taken at the next meeting, with adequate notice.

Sharingwood Cohousing (in Snohomish, Washington) has adopted the following guidelines to distinguish when to vote and when to use consensus.

Use consensus:

- When the issue involves or affects the whole group or the future of the community
- When there are one or more individuals who have a personal stake in the outcome
- When the issue relates to ideals or principles

Use voting:

- When the greater good of the community is not at stake, AND
- When the issue has no individual stakeholders (people whose property, family, finances or well-being would be directly affected by the outcome)

Assuming the above two conditions have been met:

- When there is a time deadline more important than resolving everyone's preferences
- Design and detail issues which have conflicting but equally valid opinions