

**Great Oak Cohousing**  
**Information for Prospective Members**



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**Welcome to Great Oak Cohousing!**

Thank you for your interest in Great Oak Cohousing. We hope this document will answer many of your questions. To find out more, ask any resident, call us, or click “contact us” on the Great Oak website.

## **Vision**

The Great Oak vision statement is “to create a sustainable community that is diverse and joyful. We seek to thrive in harmony and dissonance with one another. In this place we value and cultivate our strengths and our differences.”

## **Residents**

Great Oak is a community of about 60 adults and 30 children, ranging from newborns to seniors. Great Oak welcomes diversity in age, race, religion, background, sexual orientation, parenting, taste in food, and in all the things that make people unique. Household sizes range from singles to families of five. Community members include social workers, teachers and professors, doctors and nurses, counselors, engineers, writers and designers, network administrators, carpenters, and much more.

## **History**

Great Oak started in early 2001, growing from a shared desire to create a community with an old fashioned sense of neighborhood where everyone knows their neighbors, and the streets are safe for families to play. The architectural design needed to reflect a strong sense of community, and support an intergenerational, friendly atmosphere. The local Cohousing Development Company developed the project. The planning and design process was a collaboration between the 25 households that had signed on prior to construction, authors and architects Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett (who introduced cohousing to the US from its origins in Denmark and wrote the book, *Cohousing*, which coined the term), and local architect Wayne Appleyard of Sunstructures Architects. None of the residents had any experience in planning or designing condominiums, but they worked together to shape a common vision of how the final site would function. The residents met for a series of weekend workshops, first to design the site plan, then the common facilities, and finally, the individual condo units. Construction began in 2002, using modular construction. Households began to move in at the end of July 2003.



## **Physical Features**

The features of the plan include pedestrian orientation where automobiles are parked outside of the community in parking lots or privately owned garages. The “streets” are safe and comfortable for walks, dinners, BBQ’s, and children playing. Half of the housing overlooks the wetlands to the north, and the parking is located on the south side of the site where residents leave their cars and walk to their individual condos. Benches, picnic areas, and gathering spaces are positioned to allow gatherers to have a view of nature.

The houses are clustered to maximize the amount of green space on the site. There are distinct public and private spaces in the community, which allow residents to be social when they want to, but also to have a retreat.



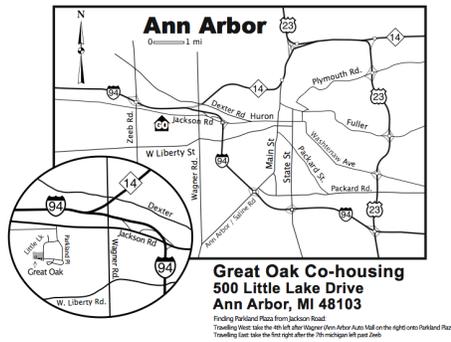
The private spaces include the condos, which are individually owned. The units have a small back yard that faces the exterior of the site, some toward the wetlands, and others toward the parking. Privacy fences surround most of the backyards facing the parking. They also have a front yard, which faces the pedestrian network in the center of the site, which can be gardened or designed as the owner wishes.



The public spaces include the Common House, the Common House lawn, community gardens, play field, parking, compost pile, and the children’s play structure. There are not any traditional “lots” on the site as all the green space is communally owned and managed.

**Site Context**

The six-acre site is located in Scio Township on the west side of Ann Arbor, Michigan, surrounded by a wetland, a successional field, active agriculture, and two other cohousing developments, Sunward Cohousing to the north, and Touchstone Cohousing to the south. It is a quiet site with ample access to wildlife and natural views.



### Schools & Libraries

Great Oak is located in the Ann Arbor Public School District (Haisley Elementary, Forsythe Middle, and Skyline High) and is served by the Ann Arbor District Library. Great Oak children may also attend charter schools or enter the lottery for the Ann Arbor Public Schools' alternative programs, the K-8 Ann Arbor Open School and Community High School.

### Public Transportation

The closest Ann Arbor Transit Authority bus stop is at Jackson and Wagner (Route 9). For schedule details, visit <http://www.theride.org/>

- The W.A.V.E. (Western-Washtenaw Area Value Express) is a service connecting Chelsea and Dexter with the #9 AATA route. It passes nearby on Jackson Rd. For more information, call (734) 475-9494.

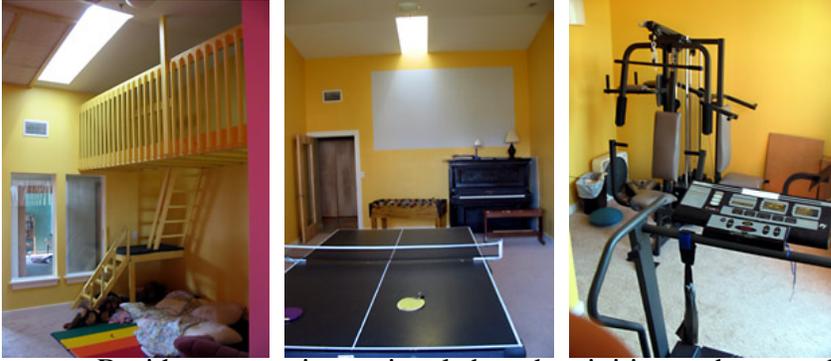
### Buildings

The buildings on site include condos, garages, and the Common House. There are 11 two-story condo buildings containing 37 units. There are three or four units per building, and the units are two-, three-, or four-bedroom condos in four different floor plans. Most, but not all units have a garage.

### Common House and Shared Amenities

The Common House, as the name implies, is a common building for all the residents. It includes a large kitchen and dining room, laundry room, game room, children's playroom, guest room, media room, restrooms, 3 private offices, sitting room, mail boxes and cubbies, shared computer and printer, broadband access, and a solar hot water heater. The Common House makes living in small condos more comfortable by providing amenities such as the guest room, which residents may schedule to use for \$5/night.





Residents organize optional shared activities such as meals, childcare, and movie night. This allows a family to be able to eat a home-cooked, healthy meal together with their neighbors up to five nights per week. Community-wide broadband access allows individual internet rates to be lower. The TV room in the common house with a large TV with satellite service makes it unnecessary for each individual condo to have one. The same is true for the computer and printer access. The laundry facility allows residents to share resources and have access to highly energy and water efficient machines.

Great Oak is also a distribution point for Family Farms Coop. Once a week, meat, eggs, cheese, and raw milk are available from these farmers. This is one of the few places in southern Michigan that raw milk can be accessed.



### **Common Meals**

Great Oak residents enjoy five optional shared meals per week (every other week, one meal is available at Sunward Cohousing instead). Community members do the cooking and cleaning. Diners sign up for meals in advance using an on-line system. Diners split the costs of the meal, which average \$4 to \$5 for adults. The price is reduced for teens and children 6 and up, and meals are free for children under six. Diners receive a bill once a month. Usually both vegetarian and meat options are offered. Visit the home page on Great Oak's website to see the meals that will be offered in the next five days. Someone once commented, "common meals are the glue that holds a community together."

### **Shared celebrations and events**

- GO Birthday Party
- Seder, Diwali
- May Day
- Impromptu BBQs
- Many others

## **Governance and Book of Agreements**

Great Oak is entirely self-governed. All owners are defined in the Bylaws as members of the Board of Trustees. Decisions are made at one or two community meetings per month using consensus decision-making. Consensus is a process in which everyone's thoughts and concerns are part of the discussion and the group consenses on the best possible solution to meet the needs of the community.

The “Book of Agreements” records these agreements, as well as all minutes. It is very important for new members to attend community meetings and become familiar with the agreements that shape community life. For example, see the Pet and Fence Policies, described below.

A Steering Committee monitors emerging issues. The Steering Committee is made up of representatives from the seven standing committees (Grounds, Buildings, Process, Finance & Legal, Meals, Common House, Membership, and Work). Anyone can attend committee meetings, which are publicly announced in advance. Several sub-committees focus on specific activities, such as the Workshop, Hot Tub, and Conflict Resolution.

## **Work System**

Great Oak residents do nearly all of the work needed to run the community, from cooking to snow-plowing to bookkeeping, although highly-skilled work is sometimes hired out. All adult residents, both owners and renters, are expected to participate in the work system. Teens may also participate. On average, adults contribute eight to nine hours of work per month. The goal of the work system is “to maximize the happiness of workers.” This is achieved through the rotation of jobs three times each year based on an on-line survey allowing residents to rate all jobs according to how much they’d like to do them. In addition, there are Spring and Fall community work days, when members accomplish larger projects, deep cleaning, etc.



## **Renters**

Some renters live in owner-occupied units; others rent entire units. Upon taking up residence at Great Oak, renters automatically become Associate Members of the Association and can participate in all community processes with the exception of making community financial decisions. Renters are expected to participate in the community work system and are accorded the same consideration as owners when exceptions to work are needed.

## **Association fees/Water & Sewer**

Great Oak owners pay a monthly Association Fee that varies in proportion to unit size. The Association Fee includes a proportional contribution to the community's annual fixed and discretionary expenses and long-term capital reserve fund, and may include a contribution toward the mortgage on the Common House (unless the previous owner has paid this off). Water & sewer charges for each unit are also billed on the monthly Association fee statement.

### **Pet & Fence Policies**

Great Oak has a detailed Pet Policy that all prospective residents should read. Most of the concerns addressed are about maintaining the safety and tranquility of the community. Some examples: dogs must be kept on a leash (unless in a fenced yard), owners must scoop up after their pets, and outdoor cats are discouraged (see details of the Cat Clause).

The Fence Policy allows backyard fences with height and materials restrictions, and allows front yard fences only up to 18 inches high. Prospective owners should understand the parameters of their Limited Common Elements (LCE's – roughly speaking, your front and back yards), and Common Elements.

### **How to Join**

There is no screening process for prospective members. We ask that you attend at least one business meeting and one social event (a meal or party) so you can get a feel for our community. We hope that you will take the time to get to know what cohousing is about and that you will choose to live here because you want to be an active participant in our community.



For more information about cohousing, visit: [www.cohousing.org/](http://www.cohousing.org/)

Special thanks to Lauren Hoffman whose study of Great Oak provided the basis for this document.

