

## **How to Make the Most Out of Your Coalition: Know How Decisions Are Made!**

In the Steps Coalition, there are two (2) different kinds of decisions that we must make:

1. **Issue-related decisions** related to the issues around which the members and affiliates of the Coalition wish to collaborate, and
2. **Internal decisions** related to the Coalition as an official (incorporated) non-profit organization with a Board of Directors and a staff.

Following is a discussion of both kinds of decisions:

### **Issue-related Decisions**

#### ***One Social Justice Vision***

The idea behind the creation of the Steps Coalition was to assemble a single Vision for the MS Gulf Coast (and perhaps Mississippi as a whole) built upon the interconnecting values of affordable housing, economic justice, human rights, environmental justice, and community preservation. We have needed every one of our 50+ member and affiliated organizations to bring their expertise in each of these areas so that all of us can become as knowledgeable as we must be in all of the issues. However, with so many individuals and organizations bringing their separate versions of vision to the table, our question from the beginning has been: *How do we create that single Vision?*

***What steps has the Coalition taken over the past year in preparation for the work of constructing a single, over-arching Steps Coalition Vision?***

#### **1. We have stabilized our center and energized for Action**

- Every dancer knows that in order to coordinate the arms and legs and release them into motion, one must stabilize the torso. Likewise, the Coalition has created a nonprofit **core** organization (the Board and staff) with the mission to assist Coalition members to work together effectively and the authority to solicit funding to support that mission.
- With help from the Board and staff, our Coalition membership has organized itself into five interest-related groups or “**strategic alliances**” that reflect the values identified as Steps Coalition values: affordable housing, economic justice, environmental justice, human rights, and community preservation. Each of these alliances creates a space for Steps Coalition members to come

together with like-minded souls, to build relationships, to dialogue with each other on issue-specific concerns, to plan for action, and to act.

- ❖ **Decision Point:** *The Coalition needs to decide whether we want to continue to work in issue-specific strategic alliances or whether a different kind of organization would serve us better. If strategic alliances are desired, then the Coalition needs to decide how chairs will be selected and how we will make sure that each strategic alliance always has a chair.*

## 2. We have bridged from small group, issue-specific thinking to big picture awareness and Coalition-wide action

- During the early months of our existence, participants in each of our strategic alliances explored the issues related to that interest area and discovered common ground within the smaller, issue-specific group.
- Later, we began to strengthen our potential to work together as a single team that unites all of our members and all five of our strategic alliances. Creating a big picture view involves **uniting our issues**. The history of this evolution followings:
  - **Designating Steps Coalition Campaigns:** In the Fall of 2006, the Affordable Housing Strategic Alliance was the only strategic alliance in operation. When the members of this strategic alliance were invited to work with the Governor's office to construct the policies for Phase II of the Governor's homeowners' assistance grants, the project took on the status of a Steps Coalition campaign without question or official action. As other strategic alliances became active, it became apparent that the Coalition needed a formal process for designating projects as Steps Coalition campaigns.
  - **First attempt at the creation of a Council that unites the alliances:** In the Spring of 2007, we initiated our first experiment in Coalition-wide dialogue and decision-making with the creation of the Council of Alliances. This Council was composed of the chairpersons of all of our active strategic alliances. It was tasked with
    - (1) designing the decision-making process for designating projects as Steps Coalition campaigns and
    - (2) designating Steps Coalition campaigns.

Before the Council of Alliances dissolved in the Summer of 2007, it had made considerable progress in designing a workable decision-making process for identifying Steps Coalition campaigns. It had also designated the Phase II Outreach project and a letter in support of the Small Rental Rehab Program as Steps Coalition campaigns.

Coalition members who participated in Council of Alliance meetings included:

Anthony Thompson, Amos Network  
 Sam Arnold, Amos Network  
 James Crowell, NAACP  
 Jinnie Trabulsi, GCUUF  
 Jolie Machado, ECD Hope Credit Union  
 Sharon Hanshaw, CWC  
 Buck Lawrence, Humanity  
 Stephanie Powell, Gulf Restoration Network  
 Sr. Martha Milner, Mercy Housing  
 Toshja Brown, Gulf Coast Fair Housing Center

- **Second attempt at creating a unifying Council** - The Council of Alliances was destabilized during the summer when several of its members either moved away from the area or found themselves unable to attend meetings and no one stepped in to fill their places. In order to stabilize the structure, our next experiment with a Council will position it as a committee of the Board and include as members some Board members and some Coalition community members.

The tasks of the new Council will be:

- (1) to finalize the construction of a Council decision-making process,
- (2) to host the process of creating a broad, Coalition-wide Vision, and
- (3) to designate projects as Steps Coalition campaigns.

In time, non-Board council members will be identified and brought on as part of the decision-making team. For the moment, however, the Council needs to become operational so that the work of designating Steps Coalition campaigns can move forward again.

The following Board members have volunteered to serve on the new Council:

Jolie Machado  
 Roberta Avila  
 Buck Lawrence  
 James Crowell  
 Marva Tanner or Jason Mackenzie

- ❖ *Decision Point: The Coalition needs to participate in the decision of how to identify non-Board members to serve on the Council.*

### **3. We are in the process of streamlining parts of our issue-related decision-making through email-based member endorsement**

As soon as the Council becomes operational, it will consider an experiment with on-line organizing. This experiment is an attempt to provide a streamlined process of decision-making that will allow specific events to be advertised as Steps Coalition events. The process will require a form that will be available on the Steps Coalition website. It is proposed that if an organization wishes to have a specific event designated as a Steps Coalition sponsored event, then the organization fills out the form and submits it by email to the membership. If a specified percentage of the membership votes positively, then the event is authorized to use the Steps Coalition name, logo, banners, and press contacts.

Exact details will be forthcoming once the plan is approved.

### **4. We are shifting from short-term crisis mode to long-term planning**

- A year of concentrating on policy analysis has demonstrated that “the system” is broken. This realization releases the Coalition to consider dedicating more resources to longer-term strategies such as organizing and education
- Presentations at our Assembly of Allies in February highlighted the various strategies (advocacy, community organizing, and coalition capacity-building) that our members bring to the task of creating an effective Coalition. Since then, Coalition members have returned to the idea that advocacy, organizing and service must *all* be present for any of them to be effective. It’s time now to devise a plan that will coordinate these strategies and unfold over time.
- The Board has also discussed the possibility that an extensive educational effort is necessary to build leadership and the capacity to work effectively in coalition.

## **Internal Decisions**

### **Board of Directors decision-making responsibility:**

Since Board Members of any official nonprofit organization must take personal responsibility for the financial health and direction of their organization, our Board of Directors must keep final decision-making authority for issues relating to finances, development, and direction. These decisions include:

- Setting the mission for the Board;
- Determining whether staff is needed and, if so, hiring an Executive Director;
- Providing general direction for how resources will be collected and expended; and
- Adopting a grievance procedure and other essential policies

**Steps Coalition Members may influence these Board level decisions in one of 2 ways:**

1. Coalition members elect the Board members who make these decisions, and
2. The Coalition membership provides ideas and feedback to the Board.

**1. *Coalition Member Voting***

There are only two times that the Bylaws *require* a vote from Coalition members: (1) to elect Board members and (2) to make official changes to the Steps Coalition's Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation. When this kind of vote is called for, the election process is carefully arranged to make sure that each Member Ally has the opportunity to vote once. So far, this voting mechanism has been activated twice. Once in February, 2007, when the first formal Board of Directors was elected at the Assembly of Allies, and once in September, 2007, when the Coalition amended the Articles of Incorporation in order to comply with 501(c)3 requirements.

**2. *Coalition Member Feedback***

Board members and staff are available to hear feedback and ideas from Coalition members at just about any time. In addition, Board meetings are open and advertised on the website to facilitate attendance. Providing feedback to the Board ensures that member concerns are considered in Board decisions and dialogues.

Our General Assembly in July, 2007 provides a good example of one way the Board solicits ideas and feedback from the Coalition at large. This meeting was *not* about voting. It was an intentionally created opportunity for Coalition members to hear from the Board on the matters that were under consideration at that time and for Coalition members to give the Board feedback. The fact that almost *every* member and affiliated organization sent representatives to that meeting—and that many stayed through 5 hours of dialogue to help clean up—suggests that Steps Coalition members, in general, find the system workable.