

Cost, Number of Years, Number of Founders, Qualities of Founders

(1) Cost:

It can take from several hundred thousand dollars to several million dollars to start a new community, depending on how much land you want to buy, your plans for the community, and the land prices in the area where you want to start the community.

In the mid-1990s Abundant Dawn Community bought their 97 acres in rural western Virginia for \$130,000, with \$13,000 down and no bank loans.

Most cohousing communities cost 4 to 5 million, sometimes more. And of course they have bank financing for construction loans and mortgages on each housing unit.

If you own a house you can sell, or you can afford to buy a house in the area where you want to start the community — and you can get friends and others in the same situation to go in with you — together you can probably afford to start a community.

There's a much cheaper alternative, which is for you and your friends and colleagues to save up enough money for first and last month's rent and a security deposit, and rent a large house together or two or three large houses.

I did this in Honolulu in the 1970s. It's a relatively cheap and satisfying way to experience community. You can also do this in several rental houses on a street, or on a city block. You can also do it in several apartment units in an apartment building.

(2) Number of Years:

It can typically take from about two to about four or five years – sometimes much longer — to start community. By "start a community," I mean from the time you start meeting to talk about it to after you've moved onto the land. Of course there's really no "end" to the community-building process.

A much faster way to do it is to get together with friends and rent a large house. This can take from a few weeks to a few months or a year to find the right place.

(3) Number of founders:

Usually it doesn't work with one or two. It can work with three. The usual number I've seen is four to about seven founders, who then get the ball rolling. They create the community's mission & purpose statement. They choose and learn to use their decision-making method. They craft their first basic agreements. They come up with site criteria for the property they want to buy. After they get the ball rolling, they of course will attract more members.

Dancing Rabbit started with four. OAEC started with seven. Earthaven started with four, grew to 20 over the four-year period they were looking for land. Then when they found the land it dropped to one person. She got the ball rolling on a that land by getting 11 more to join her — some them from the first group, some new — who got the ball rolling some more. Nine more people joined them, or 21 altogether — by the time they bought the land.

(4) Qualities of Founders:

(This comes from Hank Obermayer, who founded, financed, & developed Mariposa Grove in Oakland.)

1. **Vision.** The ability to see what's not there yet and have faith it will happen. To keep seeing it and believing it will happen even when there are big problems. Patience and persistence and continuing to hold the vision. It takes a kind of spiritual power.
2. **People skills.** Patience. The ability to listen from the heart, ability communicate cleanly (no loaded phrases), and from the heart. It takes a kind of heart power.
3. **Organizational skills.** How to manage projects and set up procedures. Keep track of time, money, tasks. Entrepreneurs often have this. It takes being sharp, disciplined, and focused.
4. **Financial skills.** The ability to work with money, financing, borrowing, lending, and keeping track of money without being intimidated. It can mean having money yourself, or being able to borrow it and work with it. Entrepreneurs always have this. It takes brains and confidence.
5. **Time.** It's a full-time job for one person, or several part-time jobs for several people. By the time a group is real serious about starting a new community it needs to dedicate enough time for it. Bi-weekly meetings to start with, then weekly meetings, with committee members doing tasks in-between meetings.

Sometimes communities have failed not because they didn't have enough money, but because they didn't have enough time.

Hank started Mariposa Grove by himself, and he does not recommend that others do this. He happens to have all five qualities, but most people don't. I sure don't. In a group, various people will have several of these qualities. So together, as a group, your group will probably have all of these qualities.