



Community Governance

Lessons from Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust



November 2025

Written by Celia Wandio



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Neighbourhood
Land Trust



Contents

- Introduction 1
- Designing Community Governance 1
 - Dual Organizational Structure 2
 - Members & Membership Categories 3
 - Board of Directors 3
 - Committees 4
- Sustaining Community Governance 5
 - Recruiting Members 6
 - Engaging Members 6
 - Cultivating Members 7
- Adapting Community Governance 7

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Introduction

Community governance is core to the community land trust (CLT) model. In this resource, we explore how the (Parkdale) Neighbourhood Land Trust (referred here as PNLT) has created a community governance model that suits their particular community context, and how they have supported, adapted, and mobilized this model to meet their needs.

Community governance is important for CLTs, including PNLT, for many reasons, including:

- Providing a concrete process for community members to make decisions about how land is used and developed;
- Ensuring community-owned land is managed in a way that is accountable to the community;
- Enabling the CLT to build trust with community members.

As will be explained below, PNLT's model is heavily influenced by the traditional CLT tripartite governance model. Under this model, there are three member classes: one for those who live on CLT land, one for those who live/work in the CLT's service area, and one for representatives of local non-profits and other relevant institutions. Each member class makes up one third of the board of directors, hence the term "tripartite" meaning "three parties." The intention of this model is to ensure that "all interests are heard but that no interest is predominant" ([Davis, 2007](#)).

Further guidance on governance development can be found in CNCLT's **CLT Start-up Guide**, along with further detail on the classic CLT governance model.

Designing Community Governance

Toronto's Parkdale neighborhood has long been known for its relatively affordable rental housing. However, the financialization of market rental housing, speculative investment tactics, and illegal evictions have rapidly reduced what is known as naturally occurring affordable rental housing, leading to the displacement of many Parkdale residents.

United by a vision of preserving the neighbourhood's affordability, a coalition of community organizations and residents established the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust as a non-profit organization in 2014. A provisional board was formed with representatives from seven local non-profit organizations and resident groups; this board was tasked with creating a democratically-run CLT that would be representative of the Parkdale community.

To start, the board and other volunteers conducted interviews with CLT practitioners across North America. They also consulted community members to develop the purpose, vision, and values set out in PNLT's first Strategic Plan.

Based on this research, PNLT selected four qualities to ground the creation of their community governance model:

- **Equity:** Fairly representing and balancing diverse and unequal interests
- **Efficacy:** Operating effectively to accomplish its goals
- **Sustainability:** Continuing outreach efforts to maintain and grow membership
- **Practical Feasibility:** Balancing desired outcomes and processes with financial, legal, and other constraints

The governance model that was finally developed and agreed upon involved a *dual organizational structure*, an *open membership* with three membership categories, a *tripartite board of directors*, and a series of *working committees*.

Dual Organizational Structure

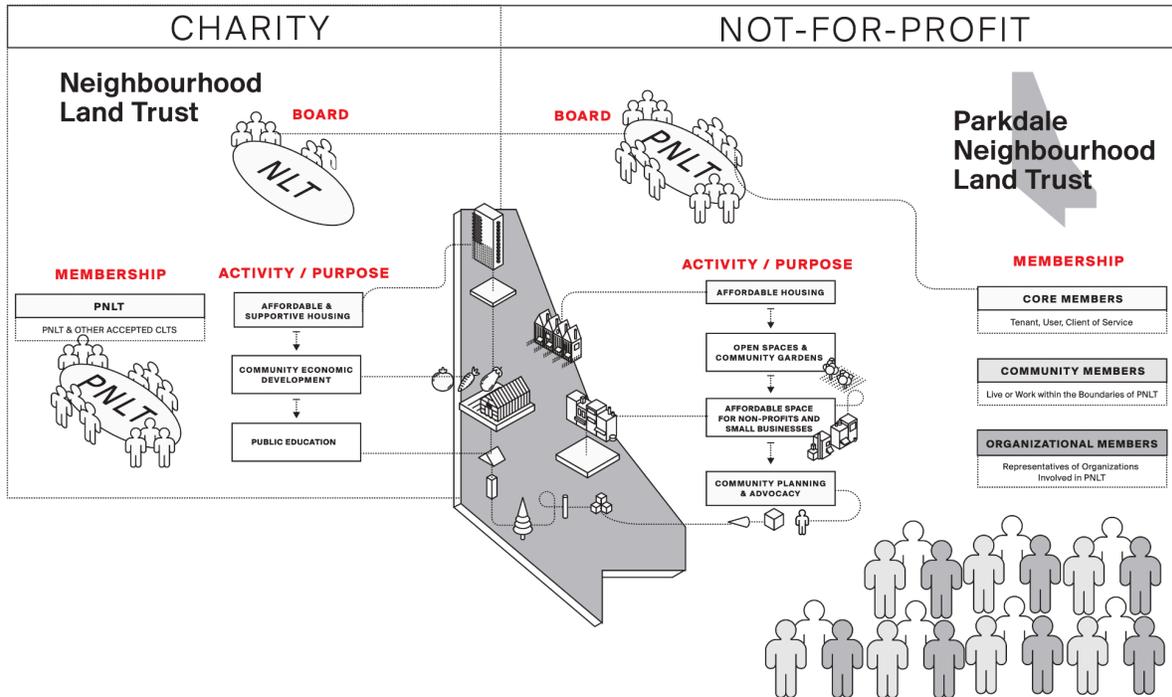
The dual organizational structure entails two non-profits: the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust (PNLT) and the Neighbourhood Land Trust (NLT). The PNLT is a non-profit organization with an open membership and democratically elected board. The NLT is a non-profit registered charity with a closed membership that currently consists solely of PNLT (though other CLTs could become members in the future). NLT's board is therefore elected directly by the PNLT board.

This dual organizational structure was chosen because it would enable NLT to benefit from being a registered charity (in particular, increased fundraising capacity resulting from the right to provide charitable tax receipts to donors of land and money) while enabling PNLT to conduct activities outside of NLT's charitable purposes. As a charity, NLT's resources must be used on activities deemed charitable; this includes leasing land to other charities to provide affordable housing, supportive housing, and space for community economic development. PNLT, on the other hand, can undertake a broader set of activities outside of NLT's charitable purposes, including leasing its lands to co-operatives, non-profits that are not charities, and locally serving for-profit corporations. *For more information on charitable status and CLTs, refer to [CNCLT's legal guide](#).*

While PNLT is directly community-governed by a broad membership, NLT is still ultimately governed by the community through its relationship to PNLT. Furthermore, this dual organizational structure allows community members sitting on the PNLT

board to gain governance experience and capacity prior to being considered for the NLT Board, ensuring the charity is well governed.

The diagram below illustrates the relationship between NLT and PNLT.



Members & Membership Categories

PNLT is a membership organization with over 1000 registered members. Members may join by filling out a membership application and endorsing the organization’s Purpose, Vision and Values. PNLT has three voting classes of membership. *Core Members* are those who reside or work on NLT properties. *Community Members* are those who live or work within the geographic boundaries of PNLT. Finally, *Organizational Members* are representatives of local non-profits serving equity-deserving community members.

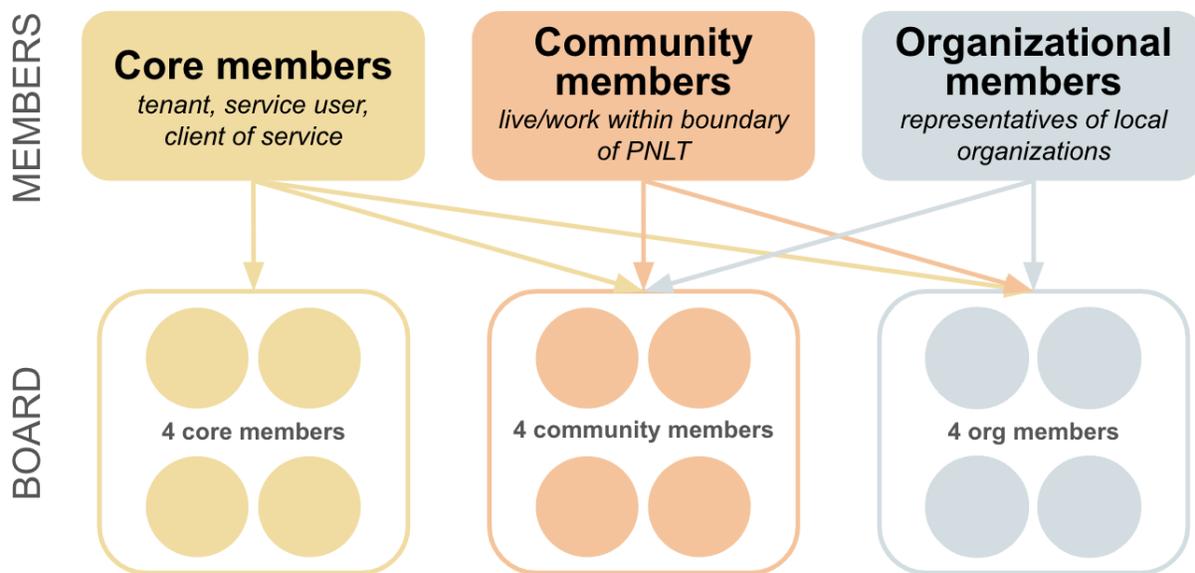
PNLT has one additional non-voting class of membership. *Supporting Members* are those who are not eligible for other membership classes but who want to support the organization by endorsing the organization’s Purpose, Vision and Values. *Supporting Members* can participate in committees and member meetings but cannot vote.

Board of Directors

The Board of Directors is the decision-making body of PNLT. Directors are community leaders who are nominated from and elected by the membership. The Board meets regularly (generally monthly) to discuss and make important decisions on topics

including strategic planning, policies, budgets, acquisitions, contracts, and hiring staff. Decisions are made collectively, primarily through consensus, or through majority rule if consensus cannot be reached.

PNLT's 12-15 person board of directors is tripartite (three-party), referring to director seats being assigned to the three different membership groups. One third of directors are elected by and from the Core Members; one third are elected from among Community Members, with all voting member classes eligible to vote; and one third are elected from Organizational Members, once again with all voting member classes eligible to vote. This arrangement is illustrated in the graphic below.



New board members are elected by the membership to fill open seats on the Board at the Annual General Meeting. If in any given year there are not enough nominees in one of the membership types, PNLNT's bylaws allow members from other membership types to fill these seats.

NLT's board consists of 3-5 directors elected by PNLNT's board.

Committees

PNLT has a series of working committees that enable members to contribute to the implementation and governance of the CLT. Committees have work plans that are linked to the organization's strategic plan and emergent needs, and they have the authority to make recommendations to the Board. Any PNLNT member can apply to join a committee, but some committees are invite-only.

PNLT's committees include:

- **Governance & Equity Committee**
 - Leads in developing partnership agreements and other documents that provide a framework for property stewardship
 - Guides any changes to the dual board structure
 - Ensures PNLT/NLT's work is approached with an equity lens, including leading the annual equity auditing procedure
- **Communications & Community Engagement Committee**
 - Develops and delivers leadership development workshops for core members
 - Supports core member board participation
 - Translates organizational materials into additional languages and into plain English
 - Develops and delivers public workshops
 - Supports staff in organizing other community events, including AGMs
- **Resource Development Committee**
 - Leads fundraising campaigns for core operations
 - Works with staff to identify grant opportunities and to build relationships with funders and donors
- **Acquisitions & Due Diligence Committee**
 - *This committee is invite-only; invitations are extended to members with proven interest and capacity in this area*
 - Conducts research to identify and pilot new lines of revenue generation
 - Reviews due diligence reports, pro formas, and business plans created for acquisition projects
- **Finance Committee**
 - *This committee is composed of the executive committee of the NLT board*
 - Leads financial assessments to ensure the organization is practicing a prudent financial strategy

Sustaining Community Governance

PNLT has found that a successful community-governed organization requires ongoing and intentional community engagement. Broad-based community engagement can be a means to recruit individual members, identify potential committee or board volunteers, and build trust and interest within the community. Below, we list some methods PNLT uses to recruit, engage, and cultivate its membership.

Recruiting Members

- Community-based research

Community-based research (CBR) is a research method that empowers those with lived experiences of the issue being researched to act as community-based researchers, collecting and interpreting data. Both the community-based researchers and others consulted in the research process gain insight into the CLT's work and may go on to engage with the CLT in other ways. In addition, CBR leads to crucial findings and related actions that shape and support PNLT's work. It is common for community-based researchers to join the Board to continue to contribute to the organization's work after research projects end.

- Street outreach
PNLT initially built up its profile by establishing a consistent physical presence in Parkdale. Street outreach was used to recruit members and raise awareness of the CLT's work.
- Targeted recruitment
PNLT staff and board/committee members also engage in targeted recruitment, identifying and engaging with individuals or groups that have skills and experience that would be beneficial to the CLT's governance. This has included reaching out to local residents associations, grassroots groups, co-operatives, legal clinics, and local residents who are experts in fields relevant to the land trust's work.
- Building trust
Unlike a traditional non-profit housing provider, those who live in PNLT's buildings are not just tenants, but also potential members. When acquiring tenanted buildings, it is important to build trust in PNLT as an asset manager and land steward before asking tenants to volunteer their time to support PNLT's governance. This is an important first step to building a supportive and active Core Member class.

Engaging Members

- Public events
PNLT has held semi-regular events that are open to the public and promoted in the Parkdale community. These educational events may focus on a specific hot-button issue - for example, a particular development in the area - but also serve as an opportunity to educate the community on PNLT's work.
- Newsletters
NLT has maintained a low-barrier, consistent connection to its broad membership and other supporters through a regular newsletter. This newsletter

includes updates on the CLT's work, ways to get involved, and broader community announcements.

Cultivating Members

- Leadership development
PNLT employs a “leadership ladder” approach when recruiting and engaging members. This means that individuals may initially begin their relationship with PNLТ as an engaged member; they then might be encouraged to join a committee or community research project; and from there, they may be supported in running for and joining PNLТ (and, sometimes later, the NLT) Board. This “leadership ladder” approach enables the organization to identify and support community members with valuable lived experiences and leadership skills.
- Board support & training
PNLT provides various training opportunities for board members and other engaged members. This has included training on affordable housing development, anti-oppression and anti-black racism workshops, and more. In addition, new board members receive an in-depth orientation to the organization itself (its work, policies, etc.) and to the overall role of a board member. These training opportunities ensure that members have the knowledge and support they need to participate fully in PNLТ's governance.
- Public speaking & professional experience
PNLT gives board members the opportunity to attend various events and speak on behalf of the organization, including speaking to the press and presenting at conferences. This approach provides useful networking and professional experience for board members.

Adapting Community Governance

The community-based governance model set up a decade ago has served PNLТ well. However, as PNLТ has acquired new properties, the original model has needed updates to effectively represent PNLТ's core members in line with its mission, vision, and values.

As of 2022, PNLТ had acquired four projects, each of which varied in terms of size, needs, and capacity to engage in governance - these projects ranged from a small community garden to an 82 property portfolio acquired from Toronto Community Housing.

Following a detailed report by its Governance Committee, in 2022 PNLТ adopted by-law amendments that allowed for core member board seats to be allocated separately to each of PNLТ’s projects/portfolios. As per the amendments, seat allocations would be reviewed and adjusted annually to ensure equitable representation across projects. These amendments have been successful in increasing Core Member representation on PNLТ’s board.

The Governance Committee report also recommended the formation of Tenant Advisory Committees (TACs) for specific projects, where needed. TACs are a forum for tenants to advise PNLТ and its housing partners on asset management, operational issues, and strategic decisions. The TACs also serve as a means to encourage core member engagement, adding a low-barrier entry point into the “leadership ladder” described above.