Consensus Decision Making Tip Sheet
Prepared for the King County Metro Access Task Force

There are many types of consensus decision making. The type of consensus decision making the King County Metro Access Task Force (KCMTF) uses is called, "Agreement Seeking Consensus with Fall Back Voting."

Background on "Agreement Seeking" Consensus Decision Making
Agreement-seeking is kind of a hybrid form on the spectrum between consensus and majority voting. It's used by the Pacific Green Party (Oregon), among others. Basically, one uses a bunch of consensus techniques to refine a proposal. Then, if consensus is not reached after a few tries, the group goes to a vote. The book *Roberta's Rules of Order* by Alice Collier Cochran is on agreement-seeking, though it doesn't use that term.[1]

What is Consensus?
Consensus is a method of searching together for what solution will best meet the needs of the group at a given time. The term "consensus" is distinct from the common usage of the word as meaning "agreement among some broad portion of people involved."[2]

The search for consensus relies on every person in the circle seeking unity. Group members don't need to think the same, have the same opinion, or support the same proposal in a unanimous vote. Rather, what is earnestly sought is a *sense of the meeting.* This is the essence of what the group agrees on, the common ground, the shared understanding or desire.

Basic principles of consensus decision making are:

- Full empowerment of all participants in the decision making
- Deep listening
- Emphasis on continuing to ask questions until unity is reached
- Honoring of dissent as a "piece of the truth" pointing to something the group needs to learn and integrate
- Dynamics of working with all input rather than purely rational analysis (e.g., emotions, intuition, spirit)
- Choice to allocate more time if needed before the decision point in order to ensure maximum support for acting on whatever decision is reached

What is the process of making a decision by consensus?
The process starts with the presentation of an issue or proposal: its history and the goal of the discussion. As the facilitator integrates comments, a sense of group direction emerges. While diverse individuals may start out asserting their positions, as underlying needs and assumptions surface, they are worked with toward synthesis and/or creative breakthrough. If the group gets stuck, the issue may be sent to committee, discussed outside the meeting, or set aside for a future meeting. The container is a transformative one, both relying on and leading to individual and group shifts in consciousness.

Once substantial airing of the issues has occurred and every member has made a good-faith effort to find common ground, there are three responses available to each participant at the point of decision:

- **Agreement:** This may range from tolerance ("I can live with it") to zesty enthusiasm. Standards for what level of support constitutes adequate agreement may vary depending on the group and situation.
- **Standing Aside:** This option is invoked due to personal conscience or strongly differing individual opinion. It allows someone who holds a position of dissent to let the group move forward without sacrificing their own beliefs or values.
- **Blocking:** Called "standing in the way" by Quakers, blocking gives an individual authority to prevent the group from taking action if (and only if) the proposal is perceived to be against core values of the group or might jeopardize the group's ability to fulfill its purpose. Inappropriate use of blocking is the mistake that most often gives consensus-based groups a poor reputation; personal values or preferences, no matter how strongly held, are not a reason to block. Anyone considering blocking a decision is obligated to thoroughly explain the reasons and work hard to find an acceptable solution.[3]

If a decision is required in the moment and someone or several people continue to "block" the decision everyone else is in agreement with, then the group can take a vote. The voting results will be noted in the meeting minutes, along with the reasoning behind those in favor and those against the decision.

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[1] From "Quick and Dirty Guide to the Biodiversity of Consensus Decision Making Processes," by Tree Bressen, see http://treegroup.info/topics/types_of_consensus_biodiversity.pdf. Creative Commons License 2011 by Tree Bressen.
[2] From "Consensus Decision Making," by Tree Bressen, 2007, The Change Handbook, 16, p. 212-217. Copyright 2007 by Berrett-Koehler.
[3] From "Consensus Basics," by Tree Bressen, see http://treegroup.info/topics/A1-consensus_basics.html. Creative Commons License by Tree Bressen.