Part 1: Determining
the Group's Focus

Deciding what issues to focus on can be a challenge – especially with so much exciting work on the table and so many diverse voices. (The activities in this section and the **Checklist for Choosing an Issue** can help.) Working through the decision-making process to determine your group's issues and actions can be a great way to create a more cohesive group and innovative program. There are two basic methods for choosing topics: consensus and voting.

Consensus is a process of group decision-making. This method requires that everyone come to an agreement. With consensus, people can and should work through differences and reach a position that's satisfactory to everyone. No ideas are lost; each member's input is valued as part of the solution. Just be aware that in consensus situations, as in any group discussion, one person's strongly held beliefs can sway the whole group. The **Consensus Level System** on page 79 of this tool kit is a helpful tool to guide your group through this process of decision-making.

Voting is another option for decision-making. A simple version is a poll of everyone's opinion after a discussion. Voting assumes that the majority's position is the best decision for the group. It's a win-or-lose model. In our experience, voters are more often concerned with the numbers it takes to "win" than with the issue itself. Voting does not take into account the feelings or needs of individuals.

It's possible to use both methods of decision-making to develop a framework for determining the focus of your group's activities. The tips below will help you craft a decision-making model that works for your community.

- Begin with conversations about what the group is interested in tackling. Make sure that everyone is heard and helpful; use a circle format.

- Schedule one-on-one interviews with all members of the group and use those interviews to determine your group's top five topics. This approach worked for some KLCC II organizers.

- After you've had enough conversations (this will vary by community), list the possible topics on a flip chart for your entire group to read. Have all group members indicate their top three choices by starring them on the flip chart.

- Continue having conversations that allow all group members to explain why they're interested in a particular issue. Again, a circle format may be helpful. These discussions should help you narrow your choices to a manageable number.

- Try to involve everyone in the decision-making process. Make sure that everyone is heard and feels listened to.

- Present your own position clearly but avoid arguing for it. Listen to other group members to assess their understanding of your position. Consider their comments carefully before you press your point of view further.

- When a discussion reaches a stalemate, don't assume that someone must win and someone must lose. Instead, look for the next most acceptable alternatives for all parties. Think creatively. Explore what possibilities exist if certain constraints are removed.

■ Don't change your mind simply to avoid conflict or reach agreement. When agreement seems to come too quickly, be alert: Explore the reasons and be sure that everyone truly accepts the solution. Yield only to positions that have objectively or logically sound merits.

■ Avoid conflict-reducing techniques such as majority voting, averaging, coin tossing, and bargaining. When dissenting members finally agree, don't feel that they have to be rewarded or accommodated by having their own way on some later point.

■ Seek out and value differences of opinion; they're natural and expected. Disagreements can improve the group's decision. With a wider range of information and opinions, there's a greater chance that the group will come up with a more satisfactory solution.

For more information on building consensus in a group, check out this link from ACT UP, a New York-based AIDS coalition: **http://www.actupny.org/documents/CDdocuments/Consensus.html.**

ACTIVITY: ROCK ACTIVITY FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE

Whatever issues the group chooses, we've found it helpful for the group to create a collaborative definition of that issue. Big Creek People in Action sites used this "rock activity" to define, in a written and visual manner, the community issues on which they chose to focus.

The activity itself is simple: Place a large rock in the center of your workspace – a table, a circle, etc. On that rock, write the words your group is going to define (e.g., community change). Give smaller rocks to all the participants as tablets on which they'll write a word that describes community change (or whatever you've chosen to define). Give all participants time to read their word aloud and explain why it relates to community change. You should reevaluate the definition at different stages of your group's efforts. Bring out the rocks and discuss whether the words written to describe community change still hold true, or whether group members would choose to change their definition in any way.