

## Lewiston-Auburn

# Group sees cooperative housing as one cure to Lewiston housing ills

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[SCOTT TAYLOR](#), Staff Writer

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LEWISTON — What started as a downtown experiment in cooperative living — a group of people sharing ownership of their home and everything that means — is expanding into a new building, and maybe beyond.

"It's about leveraging the capacity of everyone there, to help create something bigger than any of them, individually, would be able to create," said Craig Saddlemire, one of the founders and only remaining member of Faire Op, Lewiston's first cooperative housing development. "Whether it's just clearing the driveway and the sidewalk or having a painting party to make someone's apartment better."

The Faire Op cooperative has been a good enough experience that Saddlemire and a new group have formed Raise Op, a new downtown housing cooperative. The group has purchased its first new building — what they hope will become one of several in downtown Lewiston.

But instead of stopping at one, the group would like transform several buildings.

"We formed Raise Op to create something that had a broader sense of community ownership," Saddlemire said. "Faire Op is its own thing and it's been going for a while and it's owned and directed by its members. But this could be more."

An interim, 11-member board, including Saddlemire, is starting things off. The group bought its first building in November at 79 Maple St.

So far, they've replaced the building's roof and are gearing up for more renovations. They are also looking for new member-tenants. They are accepting applications for membership via a form at the [www.raiseop.com](http://www.raiseop.com) website.

Members need to purchase a share in the cooperative — currently \$750 per share. That gives them one of the units and a say in decisions about the building.

They'll pay monthly "carrying charges" of about \$650 — rent, fees for utilities and whatever the building members' group decides needs to be set aside for repairs and maintenance.

The group is also there to decide house rules, divide up chores, such as who shovels the walks on a given morning, and help settle member disputes.

"A lesson for me from the co-op is that boundaries are important," Saddle mire said. "To live in a nice co-op, you don't all have to be best friends. But you do have to figure out what your mutual self-interests are, what's important to you and then let go of the little things. You save the hard conversations for the meetings. Don't try to let them bleed into your personal life."

Saddle mire's Faire Op group bought its robin-egg blue building at 75 Maple St. in 2008. It was three stories and three units purchased jointly by the group. Members purchased shares in the cooperative, earning the right to occupy a unit. Over the next seven years, they would decide house rules, pay for repairs and build equity.

Members came and went and Saddle mire, a filmmaker, made a funny and instructive video series about the experience, "[My So Called Housing Cooperative.](#)"

The new building — yellow, three-stories and three units — sits next door.

The plan is to have 79 Maple St.'s member-tenants selected in January. Then, they'll have a say in some of the building's renovations going forward.

Board President Shaad Masood said they should be able to move into the building in April and the board will begin looking for its next cooperative building.

"The things people are most dissatisfied with in traditional housing, cooperative housing has an answer," Masood said. "They have more say about what they are doing, they can see where their carrying charges actually go and they have a voice and can see things getting done in a timely manner. It's different than putting in a phone call and then waiting for things to get done."

Saddle mire said they plan to purchase at least 15 more housing units and have them occupied by 2016.

"Then we'll see how that all goes, and let things settle out a little bit," he said. "And then we might expand again."

Member-tenants from all of the buildings will help select a new board of directors, who will guide the overall co-op.

"It's not just handing it over to them at some point," Saddle mire said. "There will be people who continue to be involved, integrating them into the

cooperative process and economics as well as overseeing maintenance."

Board member Melissa Dunn said she thinks it's a good model.

"It's important because of the economy," Dunn said. "The way it is now, a lot of families are choosing to live together."

Board member Adilah Muhammad, a downtown landlord, said it could be a new experience for members.

"It's not like living in a condo, where the management and maintenance are outsourced," she said. "It requires more understanding. You have to know that to make it to work the next morning you have to really work with your neighbors to make sure the sidewalk is plowed. It's understanding how to live more interconnected."

[staylor@sunjournal.com](mailto:staylor@sunjournal.com)