

## So you're interested in Council...

*Thanks for joining us!*

The Free Geek Community Council<sup>1</sup> is the keystone of Free Geek's governance, and we try to have people from all parts of the organization represented in it. So yes, we want you here.

The Council's purpose (explained more below) is making big-picture decisions. If those things bore you and you're more of a hands-on, immediate-problem person, you may want to look into some of the workgroups that govern various aspects of Free Geek's operations to find your niche. If you have a concern and you're not sure whether you should take it to the Council, ask a staff member<sup>2</sup> about it. They may be able to help you put your idea into action or get your concern addressed even before the Council next meets!

To get a sense of the scope of the Council and what's currently on our plate, check out the email list archives<sup>3</sup>. They contain minutes from past meetings and discussion that occurs between meetings, and are *highly recommended* reading for new council members. (And required reading if you want to participate fully.)

### ***The purpose of Council***

From the Bylaws<sup>4</sup>:

The Free Geek Community Council (the "Council") shall be organized from members of the Free Geek community. The function of the Council is to provide general guidance and vision to Free Geek. This includes both short term and long term vision and goals. The Council normally meets on a monthly basis and shall meet to elect members to the Board at least once per year. The Council shall not have the authority to act for or on behalf of the Board.

Despite that last line, the Council does some things that in other organizations are traditionally the job of a board of directors. Importantly, the Council sets the organization's priorities and long-term goals. The Board's<sup>5</sup> role is mainly to ensure that the organization's decisions are financially and legally responsible. Board members are required to participate in the Council in



**Underlined terms in this text refer to separate resources that can be found online. The URLs for those resources are in the footnotes at the bottom of each page.**

1 Free Geek wiki page on the council: <http://wiki.freegeek.org/index.php/Council>

2 Free Geek staff: <http://www.freegeek.org/staff>

3 Council email list, to subscribe and read archives: <http://lists.freegeek.org/listinfo/council>

4 Free Geek's bylaws: <http://wiki.freegeek.org/index.php/Bylaws>

5 Free Geek board: <http://wiki.freegeek.org/index.php/Board>

order to help them perform that role, and to make sure they stay in touch with what's going on.

The Council generally tries to stay away from deciding on *implementation* issues, which are left to the staff to determine in line with the directives of the Council. You will find the staff highly represented at the Council, too, because of the information and responsibilities they have.

Council needs broad input from the Free Geek community to make decisions. This requires openness to many views and good judgment about how to use meeting time.

## ***What to expect***

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Despite its importance, the Council is actually a pretty casual group - it's made up of Free Geeks, after all! So no need to wear a tie to the meeting. If you come to a couple of meetings, you may find that the people in attendance will vary. If there are big issues to discuss, you may find more people there. Ideally, those most impacted by a decision will be the ones involved in discussing it. As mentioned above, reading up on the email list is a good way to prepare for your first Council meeting. There's also a document called Doing stuff before meetings<sup>6</sup>, which is a good checklist for later meetings you may attend.

Council meetings have a facilitator to make sure things roll along, and a minute-taker (“scribe”), to keep a record for those who can't make it and for future reference. These roles rotate among Council members to make sure that no one person is overburdened and to allow more people to develop those skills. If you're interested in trying out those roles, observe a few times first, read Meeting Tips<sup>7</sup>, and either volunteer or talk to someone you've seen doing it about volunteering. These roles are common to almost all Free Geek meetings, so it's a really good skill to learn.

There will be an agenda (posted to the email list, and usually also written on the whiteboard). That agenda usually starts with introductions and check-in. You may want to briefly say what you normally do at Free Geek, what brought you to Free Geek, why you're interested in the Council, how the weather's been making you feel, or who your favorite Beatle is. It's a chance to get a sense of who's who, and get comfortable talking.

Please note our Conflict of Interest Policy<sup>8</sup>. As a council member, you're a decision-maker, so you should familiarize yourself with this policy. Don't feel like you have to sign anything immediately, but if you become a regular attendee, it would be good to get a signed copy of that policy to a staff member.

## ***Being part of Council***

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### **Attendance and Membership**

Council meetings are open to guests from the public. Any active Free Geek volunteer, paid

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6 Doing stuff before meetings, a guide to preparation [http://wiki.freegeek.org/index.php/Doing\\_stuff\\_before\\_meetings](http://wiki.freegeek.org/index.php/Doing_stuff_before_meetings)

7 Meeting tips for how a meeting may be run using formal consensus: [http://wiki.freegeek.org/index.php/Meeting\\_Tips](http://wiki.freegeek.org/index.php/Meeting_Tips)

8 The conflict of interest policy applies to all those involved in decision-making at Free Geek. This could be you! Be sure to read it. [http://wiki.freegeek.org/index.php/Conflict\\_of\\_Interest\\_Policy](http://wiki.freegeek.org/index.php/Conflict_of_Interest_Policy)

worker, or board member is welcome to participate fully except as limited by our conflict of interest policy. Council membership<sup>9</sup> is attained at a your third consecutive meeting, and is lost if three consecutive meetings are missed. (See the next two sections for more about participation and member rights.)

## **Participation and Preparation**

Full participation in council meetings includes reading reports in advance, attending attentively and contributing to conversation. To use time well, participants are expected to prepare for meetings with reading and outside discussion. If a participant has detailed questions or needs a lot of background information, the facilitator may ask her to refrain from taking meeting time for these needs. Guests (attendees who are not active volunteers, staff, or board members) should minimize their speaking time, and not weigh in strongly on concerns not shared by the rest of the group. In other words, guests should not slow deliberations by being lone representatives of concerns.

## **Decision making**

If you haven't been involved in other groups at Free Geek, you may be new to the decision-making process we use, which is called *formal consensus*<sup>10</sup>. It's a method of decision-making intended to make sure that the whole group understands and supports decisions made. In a majority-rule situation, a proposal may be put forward and voted on as it stands: some will win and some will lose. In a consensus situation, we want to hear all concerns or questions that members of the group may have so that we can ensure we're not missing an important flaw in the proposal. We won't go forward with a decision until concerns are addressed. That may sound time-consuming, but it actually works pretty well. Because it requires some skill and lots of practice to really do well, we have little trainings at each council meeting to help expand various aspects of people's understanding.

One important way to keep the discussion from dragging is to avoid saying things that just support or repeat others' points. "Me too!"-ism is a pet peeve of many Council members.

One of the key concepts in consensus-based decision-making is the *block*, where a strongly-held concern exists, perhaps held only by one group member, that a proposal is not in the interests of the group, and that concern cannot be resolved. Since the core focus of consensus is finding a path forward that all members can support, blocking is rare, as it effectively signals a conviction that there is no common compromise or approach. All attendees at Council meetings are welcome to participate in discussions, but only Council members are permitted to block.

## **Commitments**

As decisions are made, people will volunteer to take responsibility for making sure they are acted upon. You, too, can volunteer! These commitments will be listed in the minutes, and we'll

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<sup>9</sup> More on council membership: [http://wiki.freegeek.org/index.php/Eligibility\\_for\\_Council](http://wiki.freegeek.org/index.php/Eligibility_for_Council)

<sup>10</sup> More about the formal consensus decision-making model: <http://wiki.freegeek.org/index.php/Consensus>

check in on them at the next meeting. Please feel free to ask for help if you want to commit to something but don't feel like you have all of the knowledge required. Working together is a good way to get to know your fellow Council members.

To keep track of commitments, we often enter them into our to-do software, RT<sup>11</sup>. If you plan on taking on multiple responsibilities and would like an account on RT to keep track of the stuff you're doing at Free Geek, ask a staff member about it.

## ***Welcome***

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Thanks again for joining us at a Council meeting. This may seem like a lot to process, and the group a large one to speak to, but we're generally friendly people. If you have a question or a concern about anything in this quick introduction, about how Council works, how formal consensus works, or how Free Geek as a whole is organized, please feel free to approach someone who looks like they know what they're talking about, before or after the meeting.

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<sup>11</sup> RT is the name of the software that holds our many to-do lists. Check it out at <http://wiki.freegeek.org/index.php/RT>