

A VIRTUAL GENERAL MEETING IN MAY

April 26, 2020



Illustration by Valerie Trucchia

By Christopher Cox

On March 20, 2020, a representative from the New York City Department of Education emailed Jason Weiner, the Membership Coordinator in charge of renting space for the

Coop's General Meetings. The Coop's permit to hold its March General Meeting at John Jay High School was canceled, and the possibility of holding future meetings there or at any facility controlled by the Department of Education was in question. "Please do not call the school or Borough Office for further information, as this is a time of uncertainty," the email concluded. "Be reassured that you will hear back from us in regards to next steps once schools have reopened."

The cancellation forced the Board of Directors to confront a novel issue: how do you hold a General Meeting when it's too dangerous for the membership to gather in person? The General Meeting has been a part of the life of the Coop since the very beginning—it's the only means for the Board to hear directly from the membership. According to Imani Q'ryn, who has been on the Board of Directors since 2005, there was never any question that the General Meetings had to continue: "It's very important for us to involve the whole membership, or as much of the membership that wants to be involved, in our form of government."

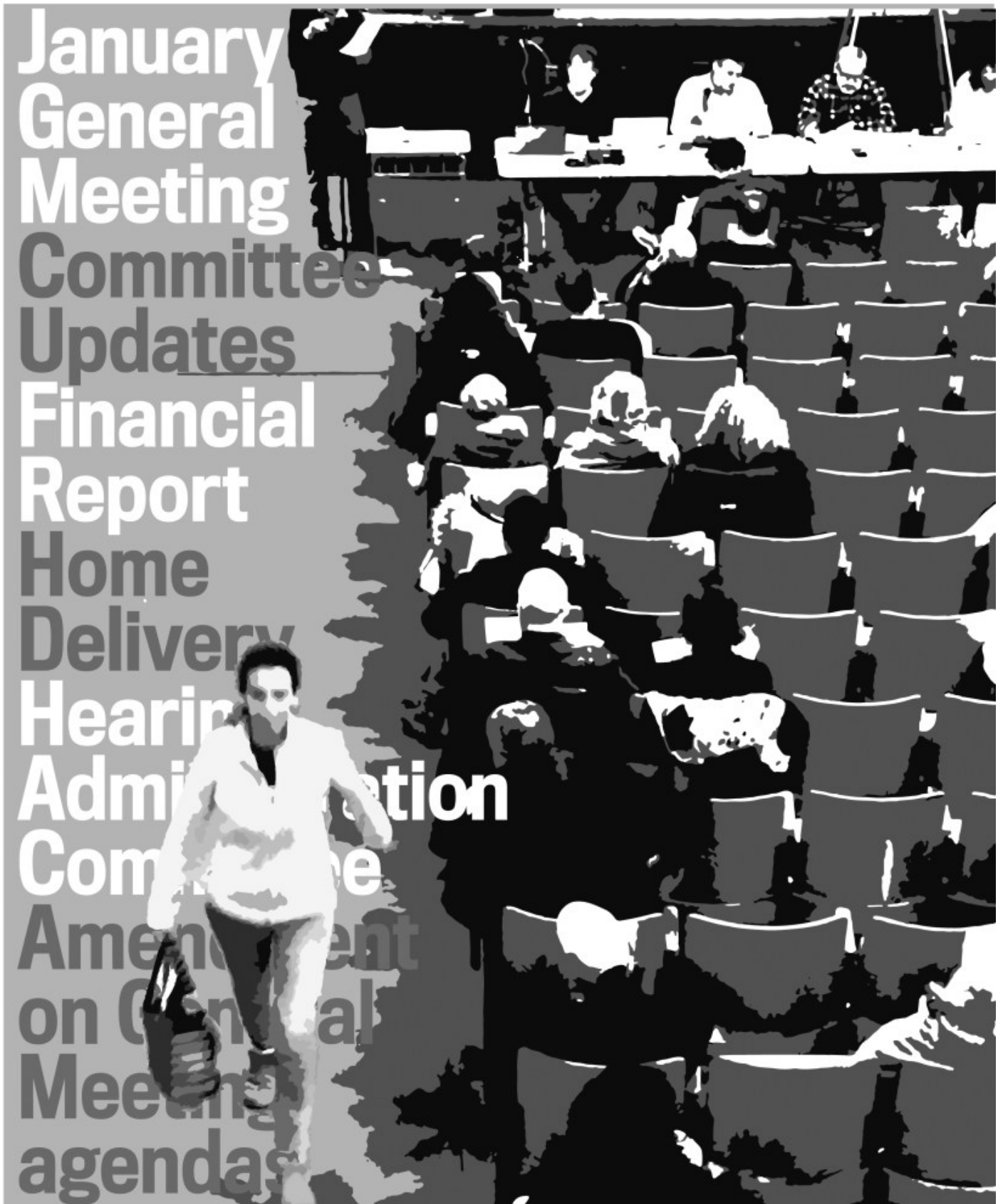


Image from January General Meeting article. | Illustration by Valerie Trucchia
Like many organizations adapting to the coronavirus crisis, the Board quickly turned

to the idea of holding meetings remotely through a video-conferencing platform like Google Hangouts or Zoom. Q'ryn and a few other members of the Board looked into options for holding the May meeting remotely—the planned April 28 meeting was judged too soon to get a new system for participation and voting in place. Q'ryn mentioned that the Board was aware of some of the privacy issues with Zoom in particular, and were looking for a virtual-meeting option that protected members' security.

The bylaws of the Coop require that the Board of Directors meets ten times a year, and that a portion of that meeting be devoted to hearing the advice of the members—this portion is called the General Meeting. Votes taken at the General Meeting are not binding on the Board but are used to poll the opinion of the membership. That distinction might be important in remaining in compliance with another of the Coop's bylaws, which states that during meetings all votes “shall be cast in person and no proxy voting shall be permitted.” The Board itself, however, is bound by the in-person requirement, which could complicate its ability to enact important changes as the Coop navigates the next several months of disruption. The bylaws could be amended to remove the in-person requirement, but that would require a vote by two-thirds of the Board—at a meeting.

Q'ryn promised to tell the membership as soon as possible how the May meeting will be conducted. Although she acknowledged that creating a new sort of General Meeting would require work and some flexibility on the part of the Coop's members, she was optimistic about what the change might mean. “This is our opportunity to finally be able to engage even more of the membership,” she said. “With all that the coordinators are discussing and the various things they want to do, I think the membership should be involved.”