

WHY NOT CURBSIDE PICKUP?

May 17, 2020



Photograph by Mia Tran

By Louis Lavelle

I've been deeply impressed, and eternally grateful, for the hard work, dedication, and creative thinking that have gone into the Coop's response to the coronavirus pandemic. We all owe the Coop leadership an enormous debt of gratitude.

That said, I was deeply disturbed by the April 12 "Report to the Member/Owners" by Treasurer Joe Holtz. As Joe explained, we are hemorrhaging cash at an alarming rate, in large part because fewer people are shopping at the Coop. Many people, turned off by the long lines and dangerously cramped conditions inside the Coop, have begun

shopping elsewhere. Simply put, if we want the Coop to survive, we have to get them back, and the only way to do that is to address their concerns.

To that end, I would like the Coop to reconsider a proposal that apparently has already been found wanting: curbside pickup. This is an idea that has been implemented by coops throughout the country, and a few have launched the service during the pandemic. There's no reason we can't do the same.

As I envision this, members would place orders online that would be fulfilled by the Coop's new part-time employees. Once filled, the order goes through checkout, and the member would receive an email or text telling them their order is ready. Payment would then be made online. Upon arrival at the Coop, the member shows his or her ID and receipt and receives the order.

This solves numerous problems. It eliminates the outside lines. With no members inside the store, you've effectively reduced the possibility of virus transmission between members to zero. Without constant interaction with hundreds of members each day, employees and Coop staffers would be safer. With the precautions already in place, they could come to work each day reasonably assured that their lives are not being put at risk. We might even be able to reinstate a limited member work requirement, eliminating the need for some paid labor and reducing payroll costs dramatically.

Adapting the Building

Without members inside the store, the building could be transformed to better serve its new purpose. Both the shopping floor and the basement could be used for order fulfillment, and one or more coolers can be used to store orders awaiting pickup.

We wouldn't be starting from scratch. I'm sure other coops that have switched to a curbside pickup model would be happy to share information about how they did it, and what they learned. Given the vast number of products the Coop sells, we might

have to initially limit the products sold online. To increase efficiency, we might have to set a minimum order of perhaps \$75 or \$100, resulting in fewer but bigger orders. Since there will be no more shopping in the traditional sense, we could experiment with a 24-hour model, with cleaning, restocking and other tasks taking place during an overnight shift. We could even add a small fee for curbside pickup that would help put the Coop on firmer financial footing.



Areas currently reserved for breaking down containers could be repurposed for a curbside delivery model. Photograph by Mia Tran.

This won't be easy. In fact much bigger retailers with established e-commerce sites have struggled to fulfill orders in recent weeks. But if this works—and I recognize that it's if, not when—Coop members who are shopping elsewhere will return. Right now they're overpaying for groceries, waiting two weeks for delivery, and getting half the items they ordered. We can do better than that.

This is a radical departure from the Coop as we know it. But if we succeed, we'll be resilient. We'll have a working e-commerce website and a curbside pickup service that we can use whenever we need to, whether it's a resurgence of COVID-19 in the fall, as some predict, or some other pandemic that sends New York City into extended lockdown mode. We could even explore the possibility of continuing the curbside pickup service after the pandemic restrictions are lifted—perhaps in a dedicated facility of its own—leaving the Union Street store for in-person shopping. It would provide a second shopping option and relieve some of the overcrowding in the store.

Doing nothing to reverse our dire financial situation is a luxury we don't have. As Joe pointed out, if things keep going the way they are we'll be nearly broke by August. I'm not ready to give up yet.■



Illustration by Rod Morrison