GM FEATURES FINANCIALS, FOOD, AND FRICTION OVER BLM STATEMENT

July 19, 2020



Illustration by Maggie Carson
By Hayley Gorenberg

The June 30 GM veered from troubling financials, to a mouthwatering description of what luscious summer produce is on offer, to an online near-uprising over public positioning on Black Lives Matter.

From the outset several hundred attendees learned there would be no open forum or voting, though Zoom polling figured prominently and became the subject of many

members' ire.

Financials

Joe Holtz, the Coop's General Manager, General Coordinator, Co-founder and first staff member, presented a preliminary financial report, walking GM attendees through 16 weeks of the new fiscal year (through May 24, 2020, as the Coop's previous year closed February 2). The figures showed sales a whopping $3.4M lower than sales for the same period last year.

The Coop's gross margin figure, representing sales proceeds used to pay operating expenses, edged a bit over $2.5M, as compared to over $3.2M; for the corresponding period this year, the Coop had $709,000 less to pay expenses. Meanwhile expenses were about $366,000 higher than last year, primarily due to hiring temporary staff, when the Coop suspended its member labor requirement for the first time in its 47-year history.

(The temporary staff are Coop members working at New York's $15/hour minimum wage and receiving the benefits required by the City and State. Previous weekly payroll neared $100,000; temporary staffing has added approximately $27,500 per week.)

"This is not a good combination, obviously," Holtz said. The "bottom line," he said, was a negative $734,000 for the period, as compared to a positive $264,000 for the period last year, constituting "a $999,000 swing to the negative."

Another way to view the problem, he offered, is that the Coop is experiencing a weekly "cash burn of $95,000."

That background was needed to explain financial concerns despite the fact that the Coop's statement of cash flow reflects that the organization started the year with $3.9M and increased that total to $4.3M. "How could we be growing our money in the

bank when we had all these terrible things happen on page 1?" Holtz asked rhetorically. The answer lies in the Coop's Payroll Protection Program loan (over $1.4M, which the Coop calculates should be forgiven) and $286,087 in net proceeds from member-owner equity investments—as compared to last year's MOEI of just $22,000. With a freeze on new members joining, the whopping MOEI increase comes from concerned and supportive members voluntarily increasing their commitment to the Coop.

Holtz underscored that without the PPP loan and MOEI commitments, the Coop's bottom line on a cash flow statement would stand at only $2.5M. Holtz noted that "members continued to rise to the occasion" subsequent to May 24, sending an additional $380,000. While a few members made outright donations, Holtz stressed that the MOEI, as an investment, can be returned upon request, after a couple weeks' processing time. He pitched for all present to consider an additional investment, if financially able, "in any amount," noting that with 17,000 current member-owners, "If everybody put in $100 we would raise $1.7 million, and at this point we really need to have more money to weather any future emergencies." (The Coop website's home page, www.foodcoop.com, has an "MOEI Campaign" button toward the top right corner.)



Illustration by Deborah Tint

Over the course of the financial discussion, members were polled, and results immediately shown, on topics such as whether they were planning to increase their MOEI (and if so, by how much). Attendees were asked whether they were currently shopping at the Coop, whether they were in town or away, whether they would come back and shop if certain precautions were in place, and whether they would consider extended work shifts. The extensive polling would return to become a subject of contention in the latter part of the meeting.

Glorious Food



Illustration by Deborah Tint

General Coordinator Elinoar Astrinsky took the floor for a mouthwateringly colorful paean to summer produce, trumpeting, “In the produce aisle it is finally, finally local season!” She pumped local greens from the Lancaster Farms Cooperative, Hepworth Farms’ cornucopia, and Hudson Valley harvests. New Jersey blueberries got their star turn, as did black raspberries (“They’re delicious!”). Rock bottom strawberry prices and “every kind of cherry” (except eagerly anticipated sour varieties), “fantastic stone fruit,” picnic-prominent watermelon, and “great, great peaches” drew her rapturous praise.

From a bit farther afield, four different kinds of mangoes were featured, as well as “beautiful” cuts of meat, charcoal for cookouts, and “great deals in cheese,” including

Forever Cheese's one-pound log of goat cheese, "for, like, three dollars." All in all, a "wonderful selection for your picnic baskets," Astrinsky enthused.

Smaller vendors are "coming back," she said, highlighting Il Forno's pizza dough and "the best babaganoush in town, from Tripoli on Atlantic Avenue." And for those who are "still baking," even in summer heat, the Coop has "all that you need, lots of flour, lots of yeast!"

> GENERAL COORDINATOR ELINOAR ASTRINSKY: "IN THE PRODUCE AISLE IT IS FINALLY, FINALLY LOCAL SEASON!"

Astrinsky included in her report a video tour of the bulk aisle, including easy-shop changes like pre-bagged items to cut down on individual scooping from bins, for a new grab-and-go dynamic. With peppy music playing in the background, GM attendees got a video glimpse of a new mechanical bagging device, a hopper Astrinsky claimed to have dubbed "Dennis."

She closed out with news that the Coop had switched refrigerants to a gas compliant with the Montreal Protocol for addressing climate change, "another feather in the environmental cap of the Coop."

Membership Services

General Coordinator Jess Robinson recommended that members use the Coop website to activate their member services account for password-protected communications and virtual opportunities the Coop will offer behind the member services wall.

Black Lives Matter



Illustration by Maggie Carson

The GM plunged forward to address a proposed statement by the PSFC in support of Black Lives Matter, composed by member Toisha Tucker: “The Park Slope Food Coop unequivocally supports Black lives and the dismantling of all systems that propagate and empower systemic racism #BlackLivesMatter.”

(Please see a BLM support statement that the PSFC’s Diversity and Equality Committee drafted.)

From the outset, tensions abounded at this part of the GM—many of them feeding a trenchant critique of the Coop’s procedures as advancing structural racism. Before beginning the substance of their proposal, Tucker noted and specifically objected to the fact that the Zoom online “chat feature” had been disabled. They expressed outrage at having been told just a couple of hours before the meeting that the GM would not vote on the proposed statement, instead engaging with the topic for discussion only, and deferring to a future GM for a vote.

To support this sequencing, Coop procedures old and new were cited, including the stated need for the Coop to figure out how to ensure that any voting at a virtual GM via Zoom could be verified to ensure members were those casting the votes. Tucker and people attending the GM (who, lacking the chat feature, took to creating a river of comments in the "Q&A" feature of Zoom) responded that the copious Zoom polling earlier in the meeting showed the Coop was crediting polling as valid information for Coop decision-making. Staff objections that a better or more validated method for GM voting would take additional time met biting critiques that "surely" the Coop membership included tech-savvy people who could trouble-shoot valid voting.

A member since 2014, Tucker reflected that their experience at the Coop had been "mostly good… but not a utopic bastion free of racism" or of microaggressions. Tucker expressed deep dismay at an initial statement Holtz posted June 7 deferring to future GM decision-making to address the movement for Black lives, and his subsequent statement for himself and the other General Coordinators, Tucker calling the initial posting "inadequate" and stating "that any actions the General Coordinators initiate to support the Black Lives Matter movement and to address systemic racism would be supported by the Coop's member-approved Mission Statement: we are '…committed to diversity and equality. We oppose discrimination in any form. We strive to make the Coop welcoming and accessible to all….'" The Coop post concluded, "Black Lives Matter."

Tucker opined that every day the Coop lacks an explicit statement in support of Black lives "is a sign of violence and complicity." They reeled off the names of numerous Black people killed by police, observing, "I could read names for the rest of the night and not be done," and noting that PSFC has been "silent on all."

Objections abounded in the moderated Q&A feature. An anonymous attendee posted, "Could you please enable the chat? It was available for the previous meeting and members should be able to speak to one another. It need not be moderated nor affect the running of the meeting proceedings (similar to how in person, people are able to speak to their neighbors)." Committee Chair David Moss responded, "The chat was

not available for the previous meeting. I'm afraid the decision is final not to allow an unmoderated chat."

Another attendee wrote that while Holtz's two statements were "I'm sure well intentioned… I think ShopRite did a better job discussing this issue than the Park Slope Food Coop. History has arrived and we are on the wrong side."

Other notes included, "I'm not sure I can continue to be a member if these voices are silenced. We have to do better."

One attendee pressed that with more than 300 people at the meeting, and a sense that most would vote for Tucker's statement, the agenda should be changed, and a vote taken.

At that point a poll was taken asking attendees whether they would be willing to support a statement regarding Black Lives Matter, and the results showed Yes-95%, No-5%.

In the Q&A, one attendee asserted, "Those 5% of members who do not support a BLM statement do not need to be members. That is not what the Coop is about. That should have been 100%!!!!"

Board member Imani Q'ryn proposed to submit the results of the poll to the Board to "take under advisement," and reiterated ongoing effort to ensure some form of secure voting.

Tucker objected to polling only to "say that information is only valid when I say it is." They reasoned, "If it's not useful, then don't poll us on anything…then you can't use it at all for anything," concluding, "You're doing everything possible to silence us." If the virtual GM with polling "is not a platform to have a voice, then why are you doing it?" They offered that in the alternative, the staff could simply message, "Shop at the Coop!"

Board member Rachel Asher said the Coop was contacting vendors and assessing modes for voting, and talking with IT specialists, and that the Coop is "struggling with day-to-day operations," as well as "different levels of comfort using Zoom." She conceded, "I know we should be able to do better and move faster."

An attendee responded, "I disagree with Rachel, this is an issue of our mission statement. All the people talking about logistics right now are completely obtuse. Black Lives Matter has nothing to do with pre-COVID times. It is a part of our human rights statement that the Coop was founded on."

In the accompanying Q&A, an anonymous attendee wrote, "the Board is subordinate to the membership. They should not censor speech of members in attendance. Chat should be enabled. This 'procedural' silliness is institutionalized white supremacy in practice—it functionally silences people of color's voices."

Responding to points about the need for additional technological expertise, one attendee wrote, "Please invite member labor so that you can improve these meetings. A group of us offered you support for this and were ignored."

"Many members have offered their skills and expertise on online meeting facilitation," another wrote. "It's OK if you don't have the expertise to do better. But you need to be able to support member contributions to make things better for everyone, not get defensive and hold onto your control."

Q'ryn concluded that the Board, having "heard advice of the membership," would meet the following day with the General Coordinators "and can come up with a statement or review Toisha's."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Following the June GM, Linewaiters Gazette reporter Hayley Gorenberg, a Coop member since 1993, has agreed to co-sponsor Toisha Tucker's proposal to vote at the July 28 GM on a statement of support for Black Lives Matter."