

GREENE HILL FOOD CO-OP NEEDS NEW MEMBERS TO STAY OPEN

January 11, 2022



Joel Henríquez, manager of the Greene Hill Food Co-op

By Leila Darabi

Founded a decade ago and now located at 1083 Fulton Street near the corner of Clason Avenue in Brooklyn, the Greene Hill Food Co-op could be described as a miniature version of its older and far larger Park Slope sibling. With just two aisles divided neatly into sections by hand-painted signs, it resembles more of a neighborhood bodega than a full-fledged supermarket—a very curated bodega, stocked nearly exclusively with local and organic goodies.



Ian Carr, a Greene Hill Food Co-op member

As it has with many small businesses, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on the Greene Hill Food Co-op, with some members leaving the city and fewer members shopping in person. The loss of labor and sales now threatens Greene Hill's future.

"Keeping the store staffed has been a challenge. And it's a cycle. If it's not staffed, it's not stocked, and people don't want to shop there," board member Hannah Weitzer explained.

Weitzer said the board merchandising committee had crunched the numbers and determined that Greene Hill needs to increase its active membership from 350 to 500 people in the next couple of months to stabilize.

RISK OF PERMANENT CLOSURE

On December 4, the five-person Greene Hill board sent an email to their Co-op's full

membership sounding the alarm:

Dear Member-Owners,

As we come up on the Co-op's 10-year anniversary, we should be very proud of the community and store that we've built together, the tough times we've made it through, and the way we've supported each other and rallied around our shared values during the crises of the last couple of years.

Unfortunately, 2021 has been a particularly challenging one, and it's testing our ability to stay in business. After disappointing sales through the summer and fall, our savings are almost completely depleted, and our financial situation is dire. As it stands, we could run out of funds by the end of December. If we can't turn this around, we won't be able to pay our bills, and will likely have to close the store permanently.

Along with this note, the board reopened a GoFundMe campaign launched over the summer to replace a broken refrigerator, upping the fundraising goal from \$15,000 to \$30,000. At the time of this writing, the campaign had received a total of \$25,000 in donations from 309 contributors, including a recent \$5,000 anonymous donation that Weitzer said pushed the Co-op out of danger of closing before the new year.

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BOARD MEMBER HANNAH WEITZER

“We have also seen a slight increase in sales, not to where we need them to be, but keeping us above water,” Weitzer said.

If they reach their fundraising goal and are also able to increase membership, Greene

Hill hopes to hire an assistant store manager to assist their only salaried staff member, the general manager.

MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

Like the Park Slope Food Coop, Greene Hill relies on member labor to stay afloat. Members work 2.5-hour shifts every four weeks either in the store as stockers or cashiers or behind the scenes helping out with marketing, new member outreach or buying and merchandising.



Joel Henríquez, manager of the Greene Hill Food Co-op, and Ian Carr, a Greene Hill - Food Co-op member, in the Co-op's produce aisle

“We have recently also developed a sliding scale for membership, which makes joining Greene Hill very accessible, starting at just five dollars,” said board member Stefanie Steele. Steele is a member of the outreach committee, which creates and distributes flyers, postcards and other promotional materials to spread the word about

the Co-op and its benefits. “We all have to play a role in getting us going again,” Steele said.

The new sliding-scale member investment ranges suggest that families that qualify for government assistance contribute between \$5 and \$25 as an initial investment, and those households making more than double the Brooklyn median of \$60,231/year pay \$200-\$300 as a one-time non-refundable investment. Members can also join and contribute only labor for the first six months before committing to an investment fee.

As another marketing measure, the board also recently voted to initiate open shopping on the third weekend of each month, allowing anyone who wants to check out the store to shop there without joining.

GREENE HILL PERKS

At the end of a recent Tuesday night shift just before Christmas, cashier Cara Welch tallied up \$567.05 in sales between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. from about ten shoppers, including the three people working the last shift. She and shift leader Sarah Kraemer described the night as typically quiet.



Bulk spices shelf at the Greene Hill Food Co-op

Between customers, they filled their own shopping baskets, pointing out favorite items from ACQ Bread to small-batch hummus to the bulk spices, which members spoon into paper bags that are weighed at checkout.

Greene Hill also boasts a few other items not found at the Park Slope Food Coop, including a self-service kombucha machine, SheWolf Bakery bread, bulk Castile soap and hand soap that members can pour into reusable glass jars, and a new freezer section item: frozen cookies from the famous Levain Bakery (a delightful and dangerous treat, as this reporter can confirm).

COOP/CO-OP SOLIDARITY

On December 9, Park Slope Food Coop members received an email enlisting volunteers to sign up to work shifts at Greene Hill by emailing shifts@greenehillfood.coop. (Volunteering there will not get you any shift credits at the Park Slope Food Coop.)

What Park Slope Food Coop members may or may not have known is that they can access the Greene Hill Food Co-op anytime simply by signing in at the store.

“I live much closer to Greene Hill and I discovered it in the winter, because it was just much easier than going all the way to the Park Slope Food Coop,” said Amy Gilstein at the end of a volunteer shift in late December. “There’s no line, ever, here [at Greene Hill]. So I come here every week and go to the Park Slope Food Coop once a month for a bigger shop.”



Gilstein also remarked on the convenience of Greene Hill staying open until 9 p.m. on weekdays. While the smaller Co-op might not have the variety of the larger Coop (“- Greene Hill has only one or two varieties of mushrooms whereas Park Slope has about 25”), she found alternating between the two saved both time and money, noting that she was more likely to come home with unplanned purchases when shopping at the

Park Slope Food Coop.

SPREADING THE WORD

Greene Hill board members Weitzer and Steele are quick to express their love for the Park Slope Food Coop and to clarify that their membership drive does not seek to draw loyalty away from the latter (Weitzer is a dual member and Steele a former Coop member). Their ask for Coop members who want to help the smaller Co-op stay afloat is to get the word out in several ways:

- Let Park Slope Food Coop members know that they can volunteer to do shifts at Greene Hill. (Park Slope Food Coop shift credits are not given to volunteers.)
- Let Park Slope Food Coop members know that they can shop at Greene Hill any-time.
- Let non-Coop-member friends and family members know that Greene Hill has open shopping the third weekend of every month.
- Let friends and family—especially those who live in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Clinton Hill or Fort Greene—know that the Greene Hill Food Co-op is open and taking new members.

Leila Darabi joined the Gazette as a reporter in 2016 and often posts photos of the food she makes with Coop ingredients @persian_ish on Instagram.