

A SECOND LOCATION FOR THE COOP: STATUS REPORT

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ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

Illustration by Maggie Carson

By Christopher Cox

The pandemic was a great wrecker of plans, large and small. In early 2020, long-time member and Squad Leader Jonathan Farber and the committee studying the possibility of opening a second location of the Coop was ready to address the General Meeting. But then there were no General Meetings, and the report the committee had prepared was set aside. The Coop was fighting for its survival, not looking to expand.

In the months that followed, the Coop lost over 5,000 members. Financial losses rose as high as \$120,000 a week. But gradually, as members returned, first as shoppers and then as workers, the Coop's finances stabilized. New members began signing up. "We've had over 2,000 [prospective] members express the desire to join," General Co-

ordinator Joe Holtz said. “We haven’t let them all in yet.”

Farber concluded that, with the Coop growing again, it’s time to return to the subject of opening a second location. “I’m of the opinion that the Park Slope Food Coop is an amazing institution with a great history and a great mission. And I felt that because we were very successful, it was part of our mission to expand, to share what we have with others.” Holtz echoed this idea: “When you have something good, you should share it.”

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In November 2021, Farber asked to be put back on the agenda for a General Meeting so that he could present his committee’s report on the possibility of opening a second location. He said he wanted to save any details from the report for discussion during the meeting but did reveal the report’s final recommendation: “We do think it’s feasible to open up a second location somewhere in Brooklyn.”

A Multiyear Process

The second-location committee was established by a vote of the General Meeting in 2016, but Farber says he’s been thinking about expanding the Coop since 2010. He began talking with one of the general coordinators about the idea. At the time, the Coop was overcrowded and orientations were being limited to reduce the number of new members joining each year. “We had basically grown to our full size and we didn’t have the plan for what came next,” Farber said. “It’s taken us a decade of really hard focused work and attention to detail to get us to this point.”

Farber, who joined the Coop in 1993, ended up going in front of the General Meeting four times before the proposal to create the committee passed. “I introduced it as a

discussion item in, I believe, 2012 for the first time,” he said. “We didn’t get so far.” But he was determined. In his professional life, Farber is a farmer and a landscape architect, and he knew from talking to organic and sustainable food producers in the region that they would cheer on an expansion. “The stronger the Coop is, the better for our food system in general,” he said.

Finally, at the General Meeting on November 29, 2016, a nine-person committee was elected to begin an 18-month feasibility study. The committee’s original members—Kubi Ackerman, Eugenia Di Girolamo, Andrew Kimball, Michael Freedman-Schnapp, Adam Lubinsky, Dan Miller, Margaret Stix, Thomas Storck, and Farber himself—were drawn from a pool of over 50 applicants. The committee also includes General Coordinators Holtz, Elinoar Astrinsky and Joe Szladek.

Opening and operating a grocery store is devilishly complicated, and the committee members were chosen to represent each of the areas of expertise required to accomplish the task. “They were leaders in real estate and planning and architecture and finance,” Farber said. One was a real estate attorney, another worked in the Department of City Planning.

The 18-month process ended up requiring more than three years to complete. They began by mapping where the Coop’s members lived. They wanted a location that was more convenient for some existing members but that could also bring in a new cohort from elsewhere in Brooklyn. They also didn’t want to undermine the original location: “Close but not too close,” as Farber put it.

When the committee was created, they assumed they would buy rather than rent the location of the new store. Now, Farber says, both options are on the table. Holtz said that in either case, the Coop should be prepared to lose money on the second location in its first few quarters of operation, until enough shoppers arrive. “If you pick the right neighborhood, you could have a tremendous number and you could get up to speed pretty quickly,” he said, “but it’ll still take a little while.”

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Farber was confident that the expansion wouldn't risk the Coop's financial stability. And, ultimately, by increasing the Coop's buying power and storage capacity, the second location could help lower prices for everyone.

What's Next?

The report may be ready to present to the General Meeting, but that's no guarantee that it will be on the agenda anytime soon. Fran Hawthorne, who serves on the Agenda Committee, said that they are working through a backlog of discussion items that keeps getting longer and longer. That's the result of several factors: General Meetings are shorter in the Zoom era; pandemic-related updates take up a lot of the allotted time; and many other proposals delayed by the disruptions of the last two years are now coming up for discussion.

Hawthorne said that because of a longstanding rule that big changes to the Coop aren't put up for discussion during the summer General Meetings, the second location wouldn't be on the agenda until the fall at the earliest. Farber said that though he was eager to present the committee's work, he was prepared for the delay. "It is very difficult to get items into and through the General Meeting," he said. "It takes a tremendous amount of tenacity and there are a lot of rules."

The report itself will be the same one that was ready in March 2020. Though both Brooklyn and the world are different places now, Farber said the committee's underlying recommendations remain the same. "We're going to speak to how things have changed," he said, "but we're not going to update the proposal."

Once the report is presented, members will have a chance to offer feedback. If the committee's recommendations are adopted, a new committee will be formed to enact

them. If that sounds like another in a nearly interminable series of steps, Farber doesn't seem discouraged: "My hope is that a year from now, we will be looking at real estate."

Christopher Cox is the author of The Deadline Effect, out in paperback on July 12, 2022.