

APRIL GENERAL MEETING REPORT

May 23, 2023



Proposal to Return to Live GMs Is Highlight of April Meeting

By Frank Haberle

The April 2023 General Meeting focused on two questions: whether the Coop can re-

turn to in-person General Meetings in the fall and how to structure the work-slot credit for attending members. With no committees scheduled to report, and brief reports by the General Coordinators on finances and the shopping floor, the well-managed Zoom meeting of 83 members and staff wrapped up in a crisp 90 minutes.

Open Forum

The April GM began with an open forum, where members weighed in on a number of concerns. Many were related to the reinstatement of elements of the Coop that were put on hold during COVID. A repeated theme was whether the Coop planned to restart the Terracycle plastic collection that was conducted prior to the pandemic, and concerns over increased plastic containers and plastic packaging on the shopping shelves today. General Coordinator Elinoar Astrinsky responded that the Terracycle recycling program was a member-led effort and would be challenging to re-create at this time due to the lack of storage space within the Coop and the enormous cost of shipping. Astrinsky added that Coop buyers are trying to find products that have less plastic packaging. Unfortunately, items such as zucchini blossoms and olives are shipped in plastic to protect their contents.

A member asked several times about the new mask mandate guidelines that allow members to not wear masks on the shopping floor, creating what she perceived as an unsafe environment. Astrinsky invited open discussion of the mask policy at a General Meeting, noting that any actual change of the mask policy would be decided on by members. Astrinsky also invited the member to bring this issue back to the Agenda Committee if she thinks it should be explored again.



One member asked if there was an update to the Coop's bringing back the child care room. Astrinsky stated that plans are being drawn for creating physical space for it. (The former child care room was converted into a bulk food processing work space during the pandemic.)

Coordinator Reports

With Coop Treasurer and General Coordinator Joe Holtz away at a National Co+op Grocers conference, General Coordinator Joe Szladek reported on the Coop's finances. Szladek highlighted some early promising trends in terms of sales: the Coop's net sales for the first eight weeks of FY24 were \$8.39 million, a 16% increase from the \$7.24 million raised in the same period last year. The gross margin dollars of \$1.64 million produced by these sales exceeded the \$1.61 million in actual expenses. Increased enrollment is helping with sales and membership has expanded by 3,500

over the past 52 weeks, with more than 70 members joining each week. At the same time, the Coop has kept staffing levels relatively flat, which helps to keep expenses down.

Questions included a request for a status update on the part-time workers who were hired during COVID. Szladek reported that, with the return to member labor, this program has been largely phased out. There is still a group working in food processing, filling the role of squad leaders in guiding different duties like cheese and olive processing. The Coop does not plan to lay these workers off and, instead, hopes to eventually absorb some of them into Receiving Coordinator positions.



ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

Astrinsky opened the food report with a shout-out to staff who are working very hard to keep everything flowing through the Coop. She then reported that the spring season is often a challenging time for produce. Fall produce like pears and apples are dwindling; nonetheless, “we have beautiful spring flowers and perennials from Glover Farms coming in; we are bringing in soil and compost. Every week more local items will be added.” There are also a lot of new cheese products available.



ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

Questions from members focused on concerns about chocolate products that contain cadmium, arsenic and lead that are still on Coop shelves. Szladek responded that the chocolate question is a complicated one and the Coordinators will bring more information to the next meeting.

Agenda Item: Work Slot Credit for General Meeting Attendance

With General Meetings (GMs) moving back to a live setting (in person at the Prospect Park Picnic House, starting on September 26, 2023), the Coordinators put forth for discussion a proposal that in-person attendance be re-established. As presented, the proposal suggested that up to 75 members could earn work slot credit for each General Meeting and members would be limited to earning work slot credit at one General Meeting per calendar year.

As Szladek explained, “In the past, and per a previous GM vote, as many members that went to a meeting could receive credit for attending—and for up to two GMs a year. This was voted in by the membership at a GM during a period of tremendous growth in the early 2000s when the Coop expanded and had surplus labor. Currently we don’t believe the Coop has enough member labor available weekly at a six-week cycle to support this same structure. We think it’s best to start with a cap of 75 work slots per meeting and one credit per member per year. When the Coop can afford to, we can look into increasing those numbers.”

Szladek added that the discussion of this proposal at this time will not include a hybrid option (Zoom and in-person) because the technology would be challenging.

Questions revolved around the numbers of members who could attend live meetings, and the costs and accessibility of the Picnic House. Szladek responded that up to 250 people could safely attend a meeting in the Picnic House and it was considerably more affordable than other venues.

In discussion, some members spoke in favor of only one shift per year, but thought that the number of 75 could be higher. Others felt that two credits would encourage more members to come regularly. Many members felt strongly that there must be a remote “hybrid” option for members who may have challenges getting to an in-person meeting. “It’s a new world out there,” one member added, “and a lot of people are now operating more remotely. We should consider hybrid.” Another member added that “changes in work culture have changed our sense of accountability to each other. As a member organization of 15,000 we will still only have 250 members attending these meetings. We need to offer more incentives to come to the GM, not less.” Another member expressed concern that without a remote option, people who are at high risk of infection and those with physical challenges will feel that their contribution via the GM are not as welcome.

Szladek noted that this agenda item was not intended to address the issue of a hybrid model, but rather to discuss continuing to unwind emergency COVID protocols and re-

turning the GM to the way it was run for decades prior to the pandemic—in person and with some shift credit available for attendance. He encouraged members who were interested in a hybrid (remote and in-person) General Meeting to request that the Agenda Committee include that topic at a future GM.

Frank Haberle works for New Settlement in the Bronx and is the author of the novel Shufflers.