

THE OCTOBER GM: MASKING AT THE COOP, CHILDCARE AND A LOT MORE

November 27, 2023



By Zach Schiffman

The Coop's October General Meeting was well-attended, with more than 125 members in attendance at the Prospect Park Picnic House, many of them in costume, as it was Halloween. The bulk of the meeting was spent discussing and voting on a partial return to masking at the Coop. Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) was up first.



BOYCOTTING AND DIVESTING

An open forum item was brought forward by floor monitor George Olken about resuming the discussion of a referendum for the Coop to join the BDS movement, which calls for boycott, divestment and sanctions of Israel. The resolution failed in 2012 and has not been discussed since.

The BDS comment was met with applause. General Manager Joe Holtz responded by recounting the aftermath of the 2012 meetings. Brooklyn Tech, which then hosted general meetings, told the Coop they were unwilling to host meetings that discussed boycotting and divesting.

While the item was put on the Coop's agenda through the "democratic pipeline," Holtz said that the Coop has since been unable to find a venue that will house this discussion, despite continued staff efforts to find a location. "It's everyone's right to put an agenda item in," Holtz said, "and the Coop administration will take it seriously... we also feel an obligation to tell the location we are renting from what it's about. It's a difficult conundrum."

Holtz concluded by saying, “We just want to fill you all in on the difficulty we have had since 2012. We’ve been thwarted when we’ve tried to do it again.” The open forum discussion was then closed after Holtz’s explanation, albeit a few minutes ahead of schedule. The early end of the open forum discussion was met with cries of “shame” from the crowd. The meeting chair defended the choice to end the discussion early because the agenda was jam-packed as is.

POST-PANDEMIC FINANCES



Earlier this year, the General Meeting voted to maintain the Coop’s base markup at 25%. Members receiving income-based assistance can get an exemption, resulting in a 21% markup.

For Fiscal Year 2025, which begins at the end of January 2024, the base markup will go down to 24%. While there were some questions at the GM about keeping the markup that high, Holtz explained that the markup will remain at that level to keep the Coop’s reserve fund in the \$7.5 to \$10 million dollar range.

The gross margin for the year was 19.64%, which is above last year's, and is in line with the financial health of the Coop.

Between current sales, progress toward reaching a membership of 16,000, and the \$6.1 million dollars pandemic aid received from the government, the Coop is in a good position to maintain its level of savings. While the reserve fund target is notable, Holtz also stressed the importance of having savings in case there is another emergency like the COVID pandemic.

A new member asked how often the board projections are correct. Holtz shared that last year, when the Coop had lower membership, we did about \$20 million in sales during the last 20 weeks of the year. The Coop is on track to do 13% more than that during the last 20 weeks of this fiscal year.

Historically, the Coop leans toward making conservative projections, while assuming the actual finances will probably be better, in the interest of being "a robust, financially sustainable organization without a big bottom line."

Other new profit initiatives include plans for a robust home delivery service and the shift to electronic labels.

DESPITE A VOTE TO RESUME CHILDCARE AT THE COOP, IT WILL NOT BE POSSIBLE.

CHILDCARE IS STILL A NO GO

General Coordinator Lisa Moore told the crowd that, despite last year's vote to restart childcare in 2023, it will continue to be unavailable at the Coop. The facilities that previously housed the service do not meet the stringent requirements for New York State licensing, and the Coop's former insurer no longer offers policies to unlicensed facilities.

The General Coordinators worked with a broker and began a search in May to find an insurance provider willing to offer policies to providers that lack official licensing. However, as the September 30th deadline (set by the General Coordinators) came and went, the broker was unable to find a provider willing to carry the Coop. Holtz attempted to escalate the situation to a senior broker, but non-NYS carriers are not covering unlicensed childcare providers.

Moore said the broker had “essentially given up hope on securing insurance and does not believe the situation will change.”

MASKING TO RETURN TWO DAYS PER WEEK

**IN CASE OF
SHOPPING
ON WEDNESDAY
AND THURSDAY**



**BREAK
GLASS**

Donohue

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

Member Kristina Bassi brought forward a proposal to require masking for both workers and shoppers on the same two days each week to make the Coop accessible and safe for our medically vulnerable, immune compromised, and disabled member-owners. The idea behind masking two days a week came from the results of the survey sent out earlier this year to the membership, which showed 28% of members were in favor of masking.

A lot of the discussion was centered on how the vote should be carried out. John McNally, an IT coordinator, proposed an amendment that the vote be conducted as a referendum to include members at home, especially those who are immunocompromised and unable to attend a GM in person. Bassi, however, objected to the idea of a referendum instead of a GM vote. If the item were moved to a referendum, the membership as a whole would give it less thought, she suggested. In person, it was said that the present members could listen to one another and understand why they fought to bring this agenda item to the table. Bassi worried that “the process of doing an online system would delay and delay and delay it.” The amendment to make the vote into a referendum ultimately failed.

Many staff members at the Coop objected to the proposal. Kathy Hieatt, a bookkeeping coordinator, said if she were required to wear a mask all day two days a week, she “would consider working somewhere else.” Brian Robinson, a receiving coordinator, mentioned that the sixteen months of the pandemic without member labor were “the most challenging of his life. It was really hard to do all of this physical labor in a mask,” he said, adding that he “didn’t like the idea of making these shifts less appealing to sign up for.”

Kristina Bassi and Sophia Tu’s proposal also did not fully acknowledge who would be enforcing the two-day mandate. Membership Coordinator Anna Adelson reminded the audience that when masks were completely required, “people were jerks.” General Coordinator Ann Herpel added “It’s not just difficult for the staff. People were spit on, people were called names, people were kicked out of the Coop after how they acted

when they were asked to comply with the mask mandate.”

Another membership coordinator, Jason Weiner, who says he has voluntarily continued to mask himself in the Coop, added that he was against the item because he feared the Coop becoming an “arbiter of free will,” posing “how does this affect everything going forward.”

One concern during the meeting was the data used to come to the two-day-a-week proposal. The online poll was from earlier this year, and it’s unclear if that 28% would still be true today. Additionally, that poll was simply for or against masking writ large and included no language about partial masking. The “anti-democratic” nature of this in-person vote sparked emotive speeches. A retired coordinator Allen Zimmerman, who has been a part of the PSFC for 28 years and himself is “severely immunocompromised,” mentioned that over the years, he has voted against agenda items that he emotionally supported because he didn’t think they were best for the Coop. He said he feared that bringing back masking two days a week would harm the PSFC financially.

Shortly after, member George Olken brought forward the amendment to restrict masking to only the shopping floor, which no one objected to. After the robust discussion, the motion succeeded with an in-person vote of 72 yes to 50 no.

AGENDA COMMITTEE RE-ELECTION

While none of the three members up for re-election for the Agenda Committee were present, as it was Halloween night, Allie Essinger, Dominique Bravo and Kate Spota were all re-elected for their positions on the Agenda Committee.

COMMITTEE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE’S SCOPE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The final discussion item of the evening, brought forward by Member Coordinator Jana Cunningham, surrounded this nascent committee. She posed the following discussion items:

1. The Committee Oversight Committee (COC) was empowered to supervise committee reporting requirements, including scheduling updates and tracking work credit. Some of the Coop Initiative Committees are less transparent and may benefit from the assistance of the COC. However, there are many committees that are directly under the supervision of staff, who already account for members' attendance and work, and don't need additional oversight.
2. Is the COC empowered to investigate other committees? To what end? Or were they commissioned to assist new and current committees with structure and scheduling reports to the Membership?

Cunningham outlined the lengthy formation process that the COC underwent, during which the committee was repeatedly unable to clearly address its purpose, saying there was "endless resistance about clarifying what this committee was meant to do." She added that in the midst of this confusion, the COC also does not save the PSFC staff time or money.

The discussion, which was left unresolved as the meeting was running long, sought to determine which committees need oversight from an additional committee. The Committee Oversight Committee has taken on the role of a policing system with ongoing investigations, which is not something clearly outlined in the committee's mandate. The current chair of the COC, Brian Shuman—the fourth chair this year—added that the investigations began after the suspension of Joe Holtz, and have grown from there. The discussion was left unresolved but will resume to sort out the actual powers of the COC and how to make it more "harmonious with the staff."