

# HOW A COOP MEMBERSHIP BECAME THE HOT TICKET

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*By Anita Bushell*

Has joining the Coop become as hard as getting Springsteen tickets?

Several of my friends and neighbors wish to join the Coop but recount stories of frustrating midnight computer sessions as they try—and fail—to sign up for new member enrollment, the first step to becoming a member.

In a simpler era, you registered for an orientation session, which included a tour, and paid your member-owner equity investment, all of which now seems quite quaint. In the same way debit cards have replaced checks at the Coop, technology has come to

supplant some of the in-person steps.

Apart from tech, what's changed since my family joined the Coop in 1997, when the highest member numbers were in the 19,000s—the most recent new member number issued was 93,534, according to Membership Coordinator Matt Hoagland. Is it harder to join post pandemic or does it just seem so?

I spoke with Membership Coordinator Karen Mancuso, who said the Coop “is limited by our relatively small space so we have to limit the number of people who can join, and we do that by limiting the number of spots available for new-member enrollments.”

**RIGHT NOW, WE ARE AVERAGING 15-20 MEMBERS LEAVING PER WEEK. WE ARE AVERAGING 40-50 MEMBERS JOINING PER WEEK.**

The General Coordinators have always strived to balance the number of members with available workslots and the Coop's shopping capacity. As far back as 2009, when pre-registration became mandatory to attend orientation, the number of orientation spots has been modulated based on these needs. The current pause on new members is a result of this need for balance, and it reflects the new digitization of the member labor system.

So, let's compare getting Bruce Springsteen tickets—which I attempted to do last summer—to the mechanics of joining the Coop.

Getting Springsteen seats, back in the days of paper tickets, also meant showing up in person, waiting in line—possibly overnight in a tent—and eventually emerging victorious the next morning, with envelope in hand. More recently, my first step was logging on to the Ticketmaster website and becoming a “Verified Fan” (to prove I wasn't a robot or reseller). I received an email with a slot—a specific date and time—when I

could buy tickets. All in all, two steps. Pretty straightforward, unless Ticketmaster crashed as it did for Taylor Swift's *Eras* tour. Luckily, I was able to complete all the steps.

Now let's look at joining the Coop. First, you need to go to FoodCoop.com and read "The Essentials of Coop Membership." Next, you watch a brief video. Then you must read the Coop "Joining Agreements." All doable. The final step, scheduling an in-person appointment, is where things get a little tricky. Currently, the Coop's web page says: "In-person appointments are currently paused. We plan to resume in-person appointments in January 2024. Please check back in the New Year."

At this point, we have to talk about some numbers. According to General Coordinator Ann Herpel, the Coop currently has 15,821 active members, a figure which does not include those who are on a "definite leave of absence or unassigned."

"Members on a leave of absence cannot shop at the Coop during their leave, and we do not count them in our membership or shopping numbers," Herpel says. "Unassigned members are not counted in the membership numbers but could still shop if they have a grace period or use a suspension override pass." Members become unassigned when they are three or more cycles behind. They remain unassigned for 12 weeks and if they do not schedule and complete work they will be moved to "dormant" status. Once a member is dormant, they no longer have access to Member Services, cannot schedule shifts or shop and would need to rejoin the Coop, if they were interested."

Anyone who worked and shopped at the Coop pre-pandemic remembers how crowded it got. In the most recent issue of the *Linewaiters' Gazette*, longtime Coop member Bryce Komaroff said, "My number one issue with shopping before the pandemic was that you just couldn't fit anywhere. Now that things are a little more regulated, I feel like it's a better shopping experience."

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Now let's look at some more numbers. When I asked about how many members are leaving versus how many are joining, Herpel gave me statistics for the last six months:

"Right now, we are averaging 15-20 members leaving per week. We are averaging 40-50 members joining per week," although these numbers tend to diminish in the winter.

So, when your friends and neighbors vent their frustration at not being able to currently join the Coop, you can tell them the reason is that we are currently striking a good balance between workers, shoppers, and the physical limitations of the space. 15,821 current members fill all the available workslots. Due to the low member turnover, the number of admitted members over the past six months has been averaging 40-50 a week, leaving more than 1,800 people who have registered to take the orientation. Only a small fraction of those are able to secure an appointment.

The silver lining of the pandemic is that the member labor system has been optimized. In the past, member attendance at shifts varied wildly resulting in overbooking to ensure there was enough labor to, say, unload the trucks and stock the shelves. Currently, "the self-management system," says Herpel, "of scheduling and canceling efficiently keeps the Coop running at optimal staffing. Almost every cancellation gets filled by someone looking to work. It's remarkably stable and provides a steady, known quantity of member-workers."

Should your friends and neighbors give up? Absolutely not. Persistence always pays off. It just takes time. Come the new year, new appointments will open up again as attrition allows. From the Springsteen standpoint, there are only so many seats at so

many stadiums that can be sold. Currently the Coop is a sold-out tour. With concerts, promoters can add dates when the demand is high but eventually they run out of time and space to stage more shows. In the end, the Coop is currently as popular—and sold out—as a Taylor Swift show.

Oh, one more Springsteen note: I wasn't able to get my first choice venue—Madison Square Garden—and went to see him at the UBS Arena on Long Island. By the same token, you can always suggest your friends and neighbors join the Greene Hill Food Coop.

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