

THE NOVEMBER GM: MEMBER MISCONDUCT, GLUTEN-FREE LABELS, AND THE NEED FOR A ROOMIER ROOM

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Illustration by Valeria Trucchia

By Dan Bergsagel

The November General Meeting (GM) was livelier than expected. The agenda promised and delivered two “leisurely” discussion items on member misconduct procedures and gluten-free labeling. However, the GM opened with an unusual “extraordinary action,” an accompanying discussion on bylaws, scrutiny of the Coop’s investment strategy, and an impressive account of the food purchased over Thanksgiving.

AN EXTRAORDINARY ACTION

The General Coordinators (GCs) took an “extraordinary action” this month: They removed an item from the GM agenda. The Agenda Committee had placed an item on the agenda that read, “Requesting a zoom meeting, or other venue, to discuss the possibility of boycotting Israeli products in the Coop.”

BASED ON PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH MEMBER DISCUSSIONS OF ISRAEL BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT, AND SANCTIONS, THE GENERAL COORDINATORS KNOW THAT A VENUE THAT CAN ACCOMMODATE AT LEAST 2,000 MEMBERS IS REQUIRED.

The primary reason the GCs removed this item from the agenda was that, due to the high level of member engagement with the issue, a larger venue than the Picnic House would be needed to accommodate those interested in participating in the discussion. As GC Ann Herpel explained, “Any discussion or decision that occurred in a space that did not let all who wanted to participate *to participate* could possibly delegitimize the discussion or decision, regardless of which side you stand on.”

It isn't easy to find a suitable venue. Based on previous experience with member discussions of Israel Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS), the GCs know that a venue that can accommodate at least 2,000 members is required. In addition, any prospective venue would need to be informed of the meeting agenda in advance, and this can narrow the list of available venues. The Coop is currently searching for a suitable venue. Once this search is successfully completed, they will inform the Agenda Committee to bring items from the pending list to the next GM agenda.

Member Liz Latty raised that in the memo from the GCs explaining the “extraordinary action” an additional justification for postponing the agenda item was that the New York Police Department (NYPD) would also need to be notified. “Is this something that would still need to be considered?” Herpel clarified that this was direct feedback from

the NYPD following a 2012 meeting that discussed BDS and that the Coop is obligated to communicate with them about similar meetings in the future. This requirement did not result from behavior inside the meeting, but from activity in the public space outside the venue, which is the responsibility of the NYPD.

BYLAW: NO VIRTUAL MEETINGS

Meeting Chair David Moss asked Herpel to explain why such a meeting could not be held virtually? Herpel acknowledged that, after the GM was held virtually for nearly three years during the pandemic, it seems counterintuitive that meetings can't now be held virtually.

NOW THAT THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY AND ACCOMPANYING LOCKDOWN ARE OVER, THE BYLAWS THAT MANDATE THAT MEETINGS ARE HELD IN PERSON MUST ONCE AGAIN BE FOLLOWED.

This is due to the Coop's bylaws, which require the Board to meet in person at a time that members are invited to join them. All public spaces were closed in March 2020, so, in consultation with a member who gives legal advice to the Coop upon request, the Board confirmed that the bylaws mandating in-person meetings could be temporarily set aside. Now that the public health emergency and accompanying lockdown are over, the bylaws that mandate that meetings are held in person must once again be followed.

Member Morgan Vo asked "What does it take to amend by-laws?" Herpel quipped that this takes an in-person meeting, before elaborating that the process would require an amendment to be placed on a GM agenda, discussed, and voted on. If the amendment passes, then it would be in effect until the next annual meeting, where it would need to be presented as a ballot to members through the annual meeting mailing, with the results of the ballot then ratified by the Board to continue to be in effect.

The current by-laws can be viewed on the Coop's website.

UNDERUTILIZED INVESTMENTS?

Holtz shared the treasurer's report, which indicated that the Coop's finances are healthy. Member Cynthia Payne questioned whether the Coop should expect a better rate of return on their \$7 million investments, and asked for clarification on how investment decisions are currently made. Holtz explained that the current low return of \$113,000 on the \$7 million investments could be attributed to some investments having been made before interest rates rose to their current rate, and that interest income is expected to rise to over \$200,000 in the next fiscal year.

Holtz personally makes the investment decisions in consultation with a financially astute individual Coop member, and keeps the GCs informed of his decisions. These investments are made with socially-minded community organizations that are divesting from fossil fuels, and with investment safety as the primary goal.

LEADING UP TO THANKSGIVING, THE COOP SOLD 629 TURKEYS, WEIGHING A TOTAL OF 7,161 POUNDS.

A LOT OF FOOD

As if to reiterate the healthy finances of the Coop, GC Elinoar Astrinsky gave a Thanksgiving-themed food report that summarized the impressive quantities of produce sold in the single week leading up to the holiday. Astrinsky estimates that the pumpkin, eggs and cinnamon purchased at the Coop in the week before Thanksgiving would have made three or four pies each equal in size to the Guinness World Record largest Pumpkin Pie ever made: a 20-foot diameter and 3,699-pound pastry beast created in Ohio in 2010. This would be nearly 1,000 square feet of pie—larger than many Brooklyn apartments! The Coop also sold 629 turkeys, weighing a total of 7,161 pounds. This is the equivalent of one enormous turkey the size of a female African elephant.

MANAGING MEMBER MISCONDUCT

After an hour of the meeting had passed, the chair introduced the two “leisurely” member-raised agenda discussion items. The first item was brought by Deborah Magocsi, Grace Protos and Helen Koh from the Dispute Resolution Committee, regarding “revisions to the procedures that govern the Coop’s disciplinary process.” The proposed changes to the procedures are to: create more accessible language, better define what constitutes member misconduct, elevate mediation as the first option for all cases, and replace the 15-member hearing group with a 3-member panel selected from the Hearing Officers Committee. The goal is to make the disciplinary process “clearer, simpler, less legalistic, more transparent and more humane.”

THE STRICT RESTRICTIONS ON FOOD PROCESSING NEEDED TO ALLOW FOR GLUTEN-FREE CERTIFICATION MAKE IT EXCEEDINGLY CHALLENGING FOR THE COOP TO MEET THE REQUIREMENTS.

BETTER SERVING CELIACS

The final discussion item was brought forward by Coop member Andrew Winfrey to discuss the possibility of including gluten-free labeling on items in the bulk aisle. Winfrey is impressed by the breadth of well-labeled gluten-free products available throughout the Coop, with the exception of the bulk aisle. Winfrey suggested that of the 82 products available in the bulk aisle, 54 of these products—such as almonds—are unlikely to contain gluten but are not labeled as gluten-free.

Members at the meeting attempted to clarify some of the challenges they saw, and offer a range of practical solutions. GC Joe Szladek noted that staff member Elly Dittmar has been working on an ingredients list for all items in the Coop, and that this would be available on the Coop website soon. It currently does not flag gluten-free items, but this could easily be added to the list in a later revision. Szladek also noted that the Coop operates in a very small space and with a very high turnover of prod-

ucts. The very strict restrictions on food processing needed to allow for gluten-free certification make it exceedingly challenging for the Coop to meet the requirements.

A member suggested a common-sense solution could be to label suitable items as *mostly* gluten-free, so that gluten-intolerant people could consider those items even if they did not meet the strict requirements necessary for celiacs.

Dan Bergsagel is a structural engineer from London. He likes to talk about the unexpected things hiding in plain sight.