

THE COOP IS AT CAPACITY AND CROWDED: CAN ANYTHING BE DONE?

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By Dan Bergsagel

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It's 2 p.m. on a Saturday and you are waiting to shop at the Coop. It's sweltering outside, and you joined the line on Union Street, closer to 7th Avenue than the Coop.

Finally, the "NEXT MEMBER" sign flashes for you.



A welcome sight after a long line.

But inside, the aisles are thronged. You regret taking a full-size shopping cart as you struggle to navigate the pinch point between the lemons and the bananas. The end of the checkout line is by the frozen peas cabinet.

This scene tells a story of the Coop's success, but it also speaks to the main complaint that many members have about the Coop: overcrowding. It's a longstanding challenge that the Coop's board and professional staff have periodically tried to grapple with, but there are no easy answers.

"The lines at the Coop are where all the good intentions of the community disappear and die," said member Lucy Willis. "It is a real decision to choose between a chaotic shopping experience with people barging into you, instead of a less busy, less rushed but slightly more expensive shop."

Even so, demand to join the Coop remains fierce. Currently, 15 to 25 members leave

each week, and they are quickly replaced when new membership orientation appointments are opened, which “are booked up almost immediately,” said General Coordinator Ann Herpel.

For many members, the tensions over overcrowding can lead to complicated emotions. Members are proud of the Coop, but do not necessarily want it to be an exclusive club.

This friction is not new, said Herpel, who noted that, “We have been controlling the growth of the Coop since late 2009.”



PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMAN

Traffic jams in produce are not uncommon at peak times.

The impact of these controls has become more pronounced in the last few years as the Coop has shrunk from over 17,000 members pre-pandemic to about 16,000 members today. The goal of this contraction is to try and find a membership equilibrium that minimizes “the negative impacts the staff experienced prior to the pandemic and the long lines and crowded shopping floor the members endured,” Herpel said.

General Coordinator Matt Hoagland described the Coop as a “little ecosystem,” with three key parts: the size of the membership, the efficiency of the Coop in selling food to those members and the physical capacity of the building.

Crowding at the Coop can be addressed by rebalancing the first two, reducing the number of members and improving efficiency. But when it comes to the Coop’s physical capacity, “there is only so much our store can hold,” Hoagland said.

Longtime member Jonathan Farber said, “The Coop is fantastically successful and has been for decades, but capacity is a problem.”

Farber was the architect of the Second Location Study Committee, which was conceived in 2012 with the purpose of investigating how to expand the Coop.



Stocking at busy times can add to the congestion.

He came to the question of expansion from a background in farming and politics. “If I wanted to make a positive change in our food and farming systems, there could be no better vehicle than the Coop. The Coop model solves a lot of problems, so why not do it again and spread the love?”

The Second Location Committee was formally convened at the November 2016 General Meeting. It had a number of goals, including allowing for an increase in membership to better align with the International Cooperative Movement’s goal to be “open to all persons.”

The committee prepared a detailed report in March 2020 that summarized its analysis of a potential second location, including a survey of over 3,600 Coop members, staff and non-members that assessed priorities and location preferences.

The committee also conducted a series of real estate case studies around adaptive

reuse or new construction, and analyzed the financial feasibility of a second location and potential methods to generate funds for it.



PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMAN

Expanding to other spaces on Union Street is unlikely.

Because of the pandemic, the report was not presented to the membership until the November 2022 General Meeting.

After working in detail on the topic for over a decade, the committee proposed finding another building in Brooklyn of around 20,000 square feet that the Coop could purchase for approximately \$20 million, which would roughly double the capacity of the Coop.

A vote was held at the May 2023 General meeting on a resolution to authorize a referendum on a second location. But concerns were raised about whether the committee's report was still up-to-date because it had been prepared before the pandemic. Some opponents also said they were worried about the cost of the proposal. The resolution was rejected, 74 votes to 64 votes.

If the Coop does not expand at a second location, can it expand at its current location instead? Historically, the Coop has grown incrementally, first expanding from its rented second story space at 782 Union Street downwards into the whole building, and then into adjacent buildings both east and west.

Could this approach be continued to increase the size of the Coop by further expanding next door?

This is not likely. "Union Street is zoned residential," explained General Coordinator Joe Holtz. "The Coop is grandfathered in as a 'non-conforming use'," which means it can continue to operate for commercial use.

"We were disappointed," Farber recalled. "We recognized that the vote left few avenues for us to continue our work on the expansion, and that was heartbreaking."

However, the zoning makes it all but impossible to build new commercial buildings. This means that the enticing empty lot to the west and south of the Coop—the former

playground of St. Francis Xavier School—is off limits for new commercial construction.



The Coop abuts the firehouse, which isn't going anywhere.

The station house for FDNY Squad 1, which is to the east of the Coop, would be an extreme long shot as a site for expansion. Even if the squad were ever to move and the building presented for sale, converting it to commercial use would be very challenging.

Holtz said, "We would have to get approved by the Board of Standards and Appeals. The neighbors get to weigh in, and our neighbors already have their challenges with the Coop due to our numerous truck deliveries and trash/recycling pickups."

Could the Coop add floors? This is also complicated because of zoning regulations.

Even if the regulations could be overcome, digging an additional basement level below the existing one would be very expensive, and would require temporary closure

of the Coop.

The structural work required to add additional levels above is less arduous and wouldn't necessarily require closure of the Coop to complete it. However, it would still increase the floor area of the Coop as a ratio of the lot size, which is against zoning regulations.

Zoning issues would also prevent the Coop from using its existing office space for shopping while leasing other offices nearby.

Considering the logistical challenges to these proposals, GC Hoagland quips that, "Expanding the Coop's physical size is more of a dream."

If the physical space cannot be expanded, could efficiency be improved instead?

One way to do so would be to address a main bottleneck, checkout.



PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMAN

Checkout is a main bottleneck.

The front area of the store was rearranged to add four or five new checkouts a few decades ago, increasing shopping capacity and throughflow. Another two registers were recently added to ease lines during busy periods.

Another approach would be to extend shopping hours.

“Before the pandemic, the Coop was open 100 hours a week,” recalled Holtz, with shopping ending at 10 p.m. six days a week. This compares to the current 84 hours that the Coop is open, which is closer to the shopping hours that were available back in 2002.

However, returning to longer hours is not as easy as it seems. Later closing will require members to work later shifts, and shrink the available time to clean, repair and restock.

The Coop already has “trouble getting enough members to work early morning slots starting at 5 a.m. and late evening weekend shifts for hard-to-fill jobs like lifting, cleaning and bathrooms.”

These issues may not deter the General Coordinators, and Holtz hinted at potential movement on this topic, with the possibility of extending shopping hours from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m., Monday through Saturday.



Extended hours are being considered to add capacity.

It is not clear what impact extending shopping hours would have on crowds. Shopping demand can be lumpy. The Coop could try to smooth out differences in peak and off-peak shopping numbers by encouraging people to shop more uniformly across the hours that the Coop is open, perhaps with carrot credits for early morning and late evening shopping.

Short of taking another look at the Second Location Committee's work, any of these possible changes may be relatively incremental.

Still, the Coop's professional staff continues to try to figure out innovative ways to address overcrowding. "The GCs, with the staff, will keep working to make the experience for the current members the best it can be," Herpel said.

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