

A SODASTREAM MYSTERY, HR REFORMS, AND MELONS GALORE! NOTES FROM THE JULY GENERAL MEETING

September 4, 2024



By Liz Welch

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The evening of Tuesday, July 30, was hot and sticky and my first time attending an in-person Park Slope Food Coop General meeting in years. (The last time had been pre-pandemic, back when the meetings were held at Congregation Beth Elohim.) This one was at the Picnic House in Prospect Park which meant walking through a cluster of trees, via the 5th street entrance, and crossing the busy bike and runners path to the stately brick building where the assembly started promptly at 7 p.m.

General Meeting Committee chair David Moss welcomed everyone with a land ac-

PHOTO BY LIZ WELCH

knowledge (Lenni Lenape) and the Open Forum began, where members were given the opportunity to ask questions. Queries ranged from: "Why are we still using clam shell containers and plastic bags?" to "Why aren't these meetings hybrid?"

The former inquiry echoed many members' concerns about how to lower the Coop's dependence on single use plastic, from packaging to produce and bulk bags. The latter is another perennial issue in our post-Covid era. Several speakers chimed in to state that Zoom is a dependable technology and would foster higher participation in GMs. Making at-home participation would also be a thoughtful offering to members who cannot travel (into the park and across a bike lane no less) to in-person meetings. Most members who commented were in favor of a hybrid option, prompting Moss to explain that the Coop's bylaws require in-person meetings. He assured the group that this concern and the one about plastic use were ongoing issues that the Coop will continue to address and explore.

"OUR INCOME DIPS THROUGHOUT THE SLOWER SUMMER MONTHS, BUT IS EXPECTED TO BOUNCE BACK BY THE END OF THE FISCAL YEAR."

The Treasurer's Report was the next item on the agenda. General Manager and Treasurer Joe Holtz explained why the Coop shows less income this year than it did last year. "Markup was raised from 21% to 25% during Covid," Holtz explained. "Then, just before the beginning of the current fiscal year, we lowered it 24%." In a follow-up, he explained that the power to lower it was given to the General Coordinators by the General Meeting. Holtz also noted that the Coop's income will bounce back by the end of the fiscal year and explained, "Our goal is to make food affordable, and break even."

Other highlights from Holtz included news that the Coop has engaged a company to study and draw a design for a new heat pump system to replace the air conditioner originally installed in 1991. The cost for this will be approximately \$700,000. And over-

all, the Coop's cash and cash equivalents equal \$8 million. "To be prepared for the next pandemic," Holtz added, "we need between 7.5 and 10 million."

During the General Coordinators' reports we learned that summer is a great opportunity for teens to get work experience at the Coop. The minimum age is 14 and working papers are necessary. Attendees also heard about a fleet of new shopping carts and salad bins (to prevent wilting), as well as a "findability" search for the health and beauty aisle, which you can access on the price look up computer on the side of the ice cream case. Basically, you can type the name of the product you are looking for and it will tell you the precise location.

Then there was a pop quiz: how many kinds of melons were sold in late July? Correct answer: 14! Melon types included Snow Leopard, Cavaillon, Picasso and four different kinds of watermelon. A member asked: "What happened to the vegan gluten-free pound cake?" Alas, Margaret Palca, who made those and other beloved baked goods, has retired and closed her beloved Columbia Street waterfront bakery after 40 years!

Another fascinating factoid: the Coop hands out 3,000 masks weekly. Attendees learned this when Holtz explained the snafu the last week of July when a delayed mask delivery resulted in mask-only Wednesday and Thursday shopping days not being honored.

The last item to bubble up for discussion was why the Coop no longer sells SodaStream products. The answer has nothing to do with boycotting Israeli products, Holtz explained. "[The company has] been denying credit to us—and barely communicate nor respond to the issues we raise." Hence, the Coop has parted ways with the manufacturer.

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There was a shoutout to Matt Hoagland who, after 19 years as a membership coordinator, has been hired as a general coordinator. This announcement was followed by a supercool presentation of an interactive map called Seeding Solidarity, which shows every co-op, community refrigerator, garden, credit union and other “cooperative and democratic entity” in New York City. This presentation was made by a representative from Cooperative Economic Alliance of New York City (CEANYC). Those interested in participating in the project can learn more by emailing mapcoopnyc@gmail.com. Their next meeting is on October 8, 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

All of the above were the equivalent of warm-up bands to the evening’s rousing headliner: “Urgent Resubmission of Personnel Committee Proposal.”

Membership Coordinator Karen Mancuso took the stage with Membership Coordinators Jana Cunningham and Mae Frankeberger, who together had collected 50 staff signatures in favor of a proposal that outlines a new approach to Personnel Committee responsibilities. To recap: “Area Coordinators” is the umbrella term for staff who are not General Coordinators. Receiving Coordinators, Membership Coordinators, Book-keeping Coordinators, and the IT Department are all considered Area Coordinators. The General Coordinators are the supervisors of the staff of approximately 75 Area Coordinators. The Personnel Committee (PC) is composed of PSFC members who are responsible for hiring, firing and disciplining the General Coordinators. This group operates with out-of-date policies that are deficient in addressing the current workforce. When the committee was formed in 1981, there were only 1,000 members at the Coop. Now that the Coop has vastly grown—in membership and staff—the authors of the proposal laid out a need for functional HR practices and policies. As Mancuso explained, “without an empowered PC, the Coop is unable to fairly mediate any grievances.”

“THE COOP IS THIS AMAZING PLACE WHERE WE ALL LOVE TO SHOP AND WORK AND COME TOGETHER AS A COMMUNITY. WE NEED TO PROTECT IT.”

During the subsequent Q and A session, most of the members who commented agreed that we must protect our staff at all costs. During the vote an overwhelming majority shot up their hands in favor of this new proposal.

As Mancuso stated, “the Coop is this amazing place where we all love to shop and work and come together as a community. But to this group, it is our employer and our livelihood. We need to protect it.” The motion was passed unanimously.

Liz Welch is a journalist, memoirist and book collaborator.