

HOW MANY MEMBERS SHOULD THE COOP HAVE?

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By Zach Schiffman

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ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

The Coop can often feel overcrowded, with shoppers jostling one another and the entry line flowing up the street. At the same time, membership size is still below pre-2020 levels—a decrease brought about by the pandemic—despite significant efforts to increase efficiency.

That is the tension that the Coop's leadership regularly confronts: How many members should the Coop have?

This past fall, the Coop reached its 2023 goal of 16,000 members, which is 1,200 less than the 2019 peak. Still, General Coordinator Joe Szladek says the Coop hopes to add another 500 members this year. New members are crucial to the Coop's long-term success because they help to bolster the Coop's finances, typically spending more per visit.

It is estimated that adding another 500 members would bring roughly \$1.8 million in additional annual revenue.



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Szladdek says that figuring out the correct membership size has been a delicate balance since the stark fall to 12,500 members in 2020. “As we were starting to build back up,” he said, “we wondered, ‘What number do we get back to that is appropriate for the Coop?’ The initial hope was to take the edge off the crowdedness of the Coop pre-pandemic.”

“At 17,200 members, we had to keep finding new space for things. To fit deliveries, we had to move stacks of produce in the basement over two inches, and then another two inches, and then another two inches,” he said of peak membership. “We just didn’t have any more room. It was very challenging.”

Szladek said the staff discussed a target and agreed that if members were shopping at pre-pandemic levels, “we probably don’t want to be at 17,000.”

Here’s the catch: Coop members are not shopping at pre-pandemic levels.

In January 2024, members bought an average of 87 units of groceries per month, whereas in 2019, they purchased 97 units per month. Szladek said several factors contributed to the 13 percent drop, including the reduced shift commitment (from every four weeks to every six weeks).

“The six-week cycle means members are coming to the Coop fewer times per year to work,” Szladek said, “and it’s possible they’re splitting their shopping between more local options between shifts.” Despite the Coop’s beloved lower prices, rising housing costs are also a factor, with members forced to move farther away. “It’s very expensive to live near the Coop,” Szladek added, “so people aren’t always close to shop here.”



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Even Membership Coordinator Karen Mancuso has moved farther away. “I am a Coop shopper through and through, but if I wasn’t here all week and able to shop while I am working, I might shop more at other places,” she said.

The Coop’s leadership also worries about competition from other grocery stores.

“We’re always thinking and wondering about who’s going to open near us and how that’s going to impact the Coop,” Szladek said. “When Whole Foods opened in 2012, we noticed a dip in sales. It was only 2 percent, and we were very resilient, but it’s a more complicated landscape now, with considerations like food inflation and online shopping.”

The Coop could increasingly face pressure from new low-cost grocery stores coming to the neighborhood, including Lidl on 5th Avenue (opening next year) and the long-rumored Gowanus Trader Joe’s.

The Coop plans to be open an additional hour every day starting on Monday, February 3, going from 84 hours a week to 90 hours. This move is intended to address both external competition from other grocery options and internal competition for shifts and room in the aisles. Szladek said the Coop continues to explore online ordering options, which would also counteract competitors like Instacart and provide a new swath of shifts for members.

As the Coop inches toward 16,500 members, the membership office is not operating very differently. “There are probably hundreds of people out there who want to join the Coop,” Mancuso said. “We tell everyone the same thing, ‘Look at the website, create an account, and it will tell you when we open appointments to join.’ We’re trying to be really transparent about it.”

If the Coop takes on too many new members, she said it’s relatively easy to slow down the flow.

“In 2007, we realized we had to start controlling the number of people who could join. That’s when we created the online sign-up for orientations. We control things so much more now because it’s all digital,” Mancuso said. “We can cancel new member enrollments for the month of December, for example, because of the holidays, or maybe we just don’t need more people right now. Before this, we just always had orientations every week, and the new members began to spiral out of control.”

Despite concerns about overcrowding, Mancuso and Szladek both feel confident about the Coop’s increased efficiency since the pandemic.

“I think at first it was a little scary,” Mancuso said, “People thought, ‘You guys really want to go back up to 17,000?’ We couldn’t really handle that before COVID, but now we can because of all of these new systems; the lines move so quickly, and there are way fewer people waiting on line in the store. I think most members appreciate that.”

Zach Schiffman is a social editor and writer at New York magazine, comedian and Park Slope local.