UPHILL BATTLES: THE CHALLENGES OF REPLICATING THE SUCCESS OF THE PSFC

December 9, 2025



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

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By Kim Velsey

When the Park Slope Food Coop opened in 1973, it was one of some 3,000 coops started in the United States during that era, according to Anne Meis Knupfer's *Food Coops in America*—part of a movement to bring lower-priced, healthy foods to communities through a noncorporate grocery model. Only a fraction of that number exists today—somewhere closer to 300—but the Park Slope Food Coop has thrived, growing from a small second-floor bulk-buying operation to a 16,000-member cooperative that is the busiest grocery store in the United States by sales per square foot. Members travel from around the city to shop here, while those hoping to join clamor to secure the

limited spots available for new member enrollment.



Many food co-ops that have closed their doors.

> "COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS ARE PRECIOUS AND THERE WILL BE SOME CHALLENGING INITIAL TIMES. IS IT POSSIBLE? YES. IS IT EASY? NO."
>
> *JOE HOLTZ*

Over the years a number of groups have tried to replicate the Coop's success in other neighborhoods. The density of New York City, combined with the lack of healthy affordable foods in many neighborhoods, makes the coop model an especially attrac-

tive one here. What's more, the Park Slope Food Coop offers not only advice and mentorship to other coops interested in following its model, but also low-interest loans. Even so, most attempts to replicate Park Slope's model here have faltered or fizzled out. The Bay Ridge Food Coop never got beyond the buying-club stage; the South Bronx Food Co-op closed after three years, in 2010; the East New York Food Coop had a similar run; and the Bushwick Food Coop closed after 13 years, hobbled by a fire, Covid and the inability to secure a new affordable space.



Four New York City food co-op success stories

Others however, have managed to find their footing, notably the Greene Hill Food Co-op in Clinton Hill, which follows the Coop's mandatory member labor model, and the Windsor Terrace Food Coop, which does not. The Flatbush Food Coop is a cooperative that dates to the mid-1970s but has no member labor at all, and the 4th Street Food

Co-op in Manhattan, which opened as the Good Food Coop the same year as the Park Slope Food Coop, exists entirely as a member-run space that is also open to non-members.



Joe Holtz, the Coop's co-founder and former General Manager, retired over the summer.

Why has it been so difficult for others to follow in the Coop's footsteps?

Space Challenges

"Space is a big challenge in New York City," said Joe Holtz, Park Slope's recently retired general manager, noting the challenge of "finding a space that is big enough and affordable enough." This, he says, was the problem Bay Ridge Food Coop faced and was ultimately unable to overcome, despite considerable interest from the com-

munity (Holtz recalls that 2,000 would-be members signed up). If a space is too small, or a coop never moves beyond the buying-club stage, members will find themselves doing a lot of work for a coop that offers supplemental groceries at best. Even if a coop starts off strong, it usually needs to scale to allow for staple shopping at some point, which is where a lot of coops fall apart.


CO-OP
GREENE HILL FOOD CO-OP
ICE IS NOT WELCOME HERE!
ZOHRAN
YOU CAN AFFORD
OPEN
GREENE HILL
FOOD CO-OP
MON 1-3PM
TUES-FRI 1-9PM
SAT-SUN
ZOHRAN
ICE IS NOT WELCOME HERE!
PHOTO BY FROD MORRISON

Sarah Chinn, pictured outside the Green Hill Food Co-Op. The store is located on Fulton Street, at Classon Avenue.

Sarah Chinn joined the Park Slope Food Coop in 1991 and was a member until the mid-2000s, when she joined the effort to open Greene Hill as one of its founding members. She said that finding a space was definitely the biggest challenge early on. Greene Hill needed something “flexible, that had a basement we could put storage in, that we could put a walk-in fridge in, that was affordable, that was in the neighborhood,” she said. The founders also wanted a place that had good foot traffic, which their Putnam Street store didn’t really have, but the coop nonetheless eked out an existence for its first few years, managing to just barely stay afloat. Then they found out their landlord was selling essentially the whole block and they’d have to leave. The board told the membership that they had to close: Not only did the coop not have the time or wherewithal to move, it didn’t have the money. Chinn and a few other members decided to look for a new store anyway and after touring many spaces, found the coop’s current spot, a few blocks away on Fulton Street. It was that rare phenomenon in New York real estate: a better deal. The Greene Hill Food Co-op’s new space is bigger, has better foot traffic, and “sales just went up and up and up.”

Merchandise and Pricing Challenges



Sarah Chinn was a PSFC member before co-founding the Green Hill Food Co-Op.

Figuring out where to buy merchandise, and how much to buy, is another early hurdle: Coops need to find high-quality food suppliers who will offer bulk pricing that makes shopping at the coop less expensive and justifies member labor, in turn helping keep costs low. “When we opened, our Coop understood we had to get fruits and vegetables from the Hunts Point Market in the Bronx,” said Holtz. “We also knew we didn’t have the wherewithal to do it, but there was a small distribution company that wanted to sell to coops and daycares, and they sold to us at very low cost.”

Chinn said, however, that the supplier landscape is more difficult now than it was in the 1970s. The Greene Hill Food Co-op still isn’t big enough to get bulk discounts so their mark-up, which started at 30%, is now 35% for most items, compared to Park Slope’s 25%. Moreover, on “luxury” goods like chocolate and personal care products,

it’s 40%. But by leaning heavily into bulk bin items Greene Hill has managed to offer a solid and growing inventory of affordably priced groceries, expanding to bulk cleaning supplies (like laundry detergent) without taking up too much of the limited shelf space. In the beginning, there were also divisions over whether Greene Hill should carry only non-GMO, organic, local foods or add in mass market brands that would help draw in new members and the community on Sundays, when the coop opens its doors to non-members at no extra markup—something that the membership felt was important in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood like Clinton Hill. Greene Hill settled on a solution that for every organic item, there would be a nonorganic alternative. Bananas also became a year-round staple, even if they weren’t local because, said Chinn, “no one is going to shop at the coop if they can’t pick up bananas.”



The Green Hill Co-Op is a well-stocked, neatly laid out, and welcoming store.

Membership Challenges

Greene Hill, which started as a buying club in 2011, opened about a year later, and is now going on nearly 15 years—it has one full-time and one part-time employee. The coop recently started doing $25,000 a week in sales, a milestone, but Chinn said they still sometimes have to close early when someone cancels a shift. And every week, an email goes out listing emergency shifts that need to be filled.

Large-enough membership is a key factor in a coop's success but can be hard to build, especially in the early years when members must put in a lot of time for something less than a full-fledged grocery store. A too-small membership was a big factor in the South Bronx Food Co-op's closure, leading to erratic hours and falling sales, which caused the coop to fall behind on rent. After a deal to sublease part of the space to city greencarts was nixed by the landlord, the coop folded. The Lefferts Community Food Coop, which lasted five years, also struggled with membership. When the landlord listed their building for sale—the coop had what one of its founders described as a "super-generous landlord" who required "minimal rent"—the board decided it was time to throw in the towel.

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> *SARAH CHINN*

For Holtz, the ability to overcome early crises like Greene Hill's store loss comes down to member labor, and the sense of connection necessary to keep a coop running. "When I hear members talk about our Coop, sometimes I hear them saying things like, 'Well, they don't have that at the Coop,' or the neutral, 'the Coop doesn't have that,' but most of the time it's '*We* don't have that at the Coop.'"

Managing Expectations, Nurturing Mission



The Lefferts Community Food Coop folded after just five years.

There is another, less tangible but no less significant, challenge for any coop trying to follow Park Slope's model: managing expectations. As Chinn noted, "Park Slope wasn't Park Slope right off the bat. Park Slope is a really mature business that has been decades in the making."

And while there have been plenty of would-be coops that disappeared before ever opening their doors (like Greenpoint) or folded after a few years of not quite making it (like Lefferts) new ones keep trying to open, underscoring the appeal of the coop model, despite all the difficulties of making it work in New York City. For example, the Central Brooklyn Food Coop, which has been trying to find a storefront since September 2022, recently announced that they finally secured one on the ground floor of a newly

constructed building in Bed-Stuy. They are currently building membership, according to their website, so that they'll have enough community members to run it.



PSFC jam-packed with shopping members pre-Thanksgiving

As a leader of the food coop movement, the Park Slope Food Coop will continue to encourage and support others to follow. Offering cause for optimism, however cautious, Holtz reminded, "Community organizations are precious and there will be some challenging initial times. Is it possible? Yes. Is it easy? No. But are there other people that want to help? Yes."



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