

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

January 16, 2024



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 re-

moved 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 out-

side 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 Elinor 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.

COOP HOLDS FIRST IN-PERSON GENERAL MEETING IN THREE YEARS

January 16, 2024



By Rahima Nasa

Coop members gathered in late September for the first General Meeting since in-person meetings were put on hold at the beginning of the COVID pandemic. About 105 members showed up at Prospect Park Picnic House on the evening of September 27. Coop membership has decreased by about 9% since in-person meetings were put on hold. For many members it was their first in-person Coop meeting.

Mary Beth Bacha of the Chair Committee ran the meeting and explained how General Meetings worked. “The General Meeting is essentially the decision-making body of the Coop. Decisions are made democratically by a majority vote of members present,” Bacha explained while encouraging members to continue to attend the meetings, which enable the Coop to be more responsive to members’ views and wishes.

In the spirit of that ethos, the meeting opened with a forum for members to share questions. Member Carol Wald asked whether future GMs could be hybrid to better accommodate members unable to make it in person. Joe Holtz, the Coop's General Manager, responded that it would be logistically difficult to have hybrid meetings because of technical challenges and issues with how deliberations would be conducted. He did not rule out the possibility that meetings could be hybrid in the future, however.

After two more members shared statements, the open forum closed and the meeting turned to the treasury report. Holtz, who also serves as Coop Treasurer, broke down the numbers of the report for members. A copy of the report had already been sent to members prior to the meeting so that they could follow along.

Back in October 2020, members voted to change the Coop's markup from 21% to 25%; earlier this year, members voted to retain the higher markup. Coordinators noted that, in October, they will revisit the question of whether the markup will change for next fiscal year. "We can't change it higher, but we could change it lower," Holtz said. The general coordinators are expected to bring a comprehensive report about next year's spending projections to the October General Meeting to inform decisions about changing the markup.

When the floor was opened for questions, a member wanted to know how the Coop has continued to improve despite a difficult financial climate. Holtz responded, the reason was the Coop's decision to start letting new members join in December 2021. Holtz estimated that Coop membership shrank from approximately 17,000 members before the pandemic to about 11,750 after the Coop froze membership in March 2020. The decrease in membership led to a lower sales volume; gross margin dollars therefore decreased despite the higher markup. But when the Coop started allowing new members in again, sales volume improved. Membership is now at around 15,500 members. "When members shop, it's one way of supporting the Coop and making sure we're financially viable," Holtz said.

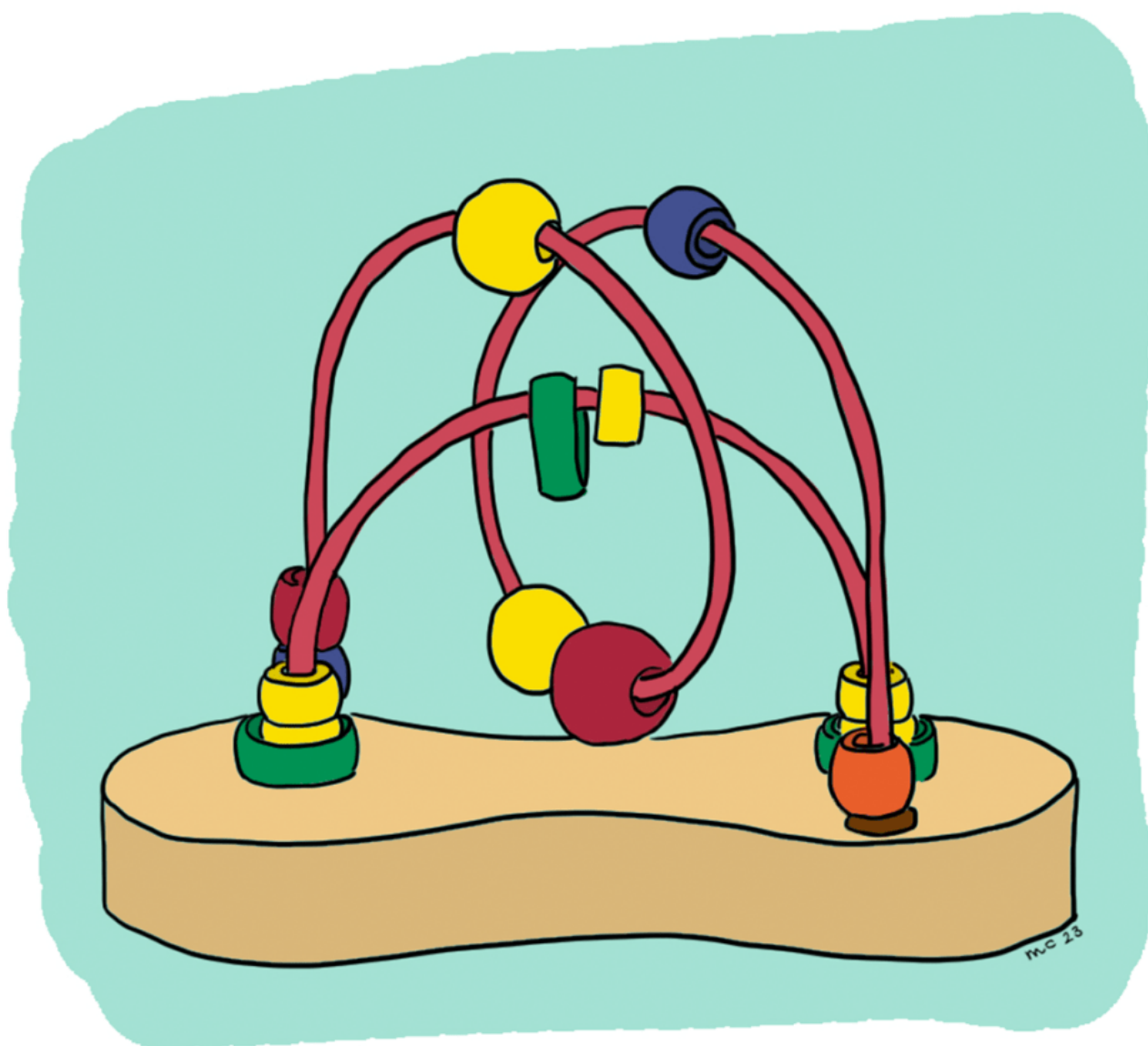


ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

General Coordinator Ann Herpel delivered an update about the plans for offering childcare again. The primary obstacle is obtaining insurance for the childcare room, which requires a separate policy than for the rest of the Coop. Herpel could not share a timeline for when the childcare room would open without a bid from an insurer, which has proved to be challenging despite significant Coop efforts over five months. The Coop's previous childcare insurer had dropped out of the childcare market after the Coop ended childcare during the height of the pandemic. Herpel explained that there

are not a lot of players in the childcare insurance market. The Coop is not a licensed childcare provider and it would be impossible for the Coop to obtain a license for the room as New York State requires license holders to have two exits in the room, which the Coop's childcare room does not have.

However, the Coop has worked with an insurance broker to make other changes to the childcare system so that it is more appealing to insurance providers. This includes reducing the number of children in the room to eight, reducing the time they spend in childcare to two hours, and requiring background checks for everyone working in the room. "Our broker is working with nationwide networks and we just have had no success, and so after five full months of trying, we can't promise what will happen," Herpel said.

Regardless of what happens to childcare, bulk operations will head to the basement as planned. Moving the bulk operations downstairs will enable more efficient management of labor in the basement by allowing one staffer to manage both cheese process and bulk operations.

Next, General Coordinator Joe Szladdek addressed why it has been so hard for members to find shifts. Essentially, the Coop reduces shifts by 9-10% during the summer, because sales fall 15% when many members are away. The decrease in sales means that labor needs are also lower but Szladdek added that there is another reason at play. "We were really very short on member labor from January through the end of May of this year, with only about 89 percent of available shifts filling on average," said Szladdek. "So it made operating the store really tough. We want to avoid that same situation from occurring."

Szladdek encouraged members to sign up for recurring shifts or sign up for shifts 2-3 weeks in advance so that Coop staff can have confidence that there is enough member labor to keep the Coop functioning. Overall shifts were increased by 15% over the previous year as of Labor Day weekend, and Coop staff expect that finding shifts will become easier in the coming months. The hope is to avoid labor shortages in the win-

ter as shifts become more available.

Members then discussed different strategies for getting shifts, including working with the Cooperative Economics Alliance of New York City (CEANYC) to get work credit. Members interested in getting a work credit in this way should email CEANYC General Coordinator Ali Issa at organize@gocoopnyc.org.

Once committee updates wrapped up, the agenda moved to discussion items submitted by members. There were no agenda items to vote on, but one new agenda item was introduced: whether to establish required masking hours for shoppers and workers. The presentation was initially to be given by Sophia Tu, but as she was unable to make the meeting, member Kristina Bassi presented on her behalf.



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

In October 2022, the Coop conducted a survey on whether members would be required to wear masks. The vote was close, with 51% of members voting to make masks optional while 43% of members responded that masks should be required for both shoppers and workers. Another survey was conducted in March 2023, where 68% of respondents voted to have masks optional while 32% voted that they remain mandatory for everyone inside the Coop.

There's been pushback on the decision, expressed in letters to the *Linewaiters' Gazette*. A petition had also gone out calling for two days of the week to be mandatory mask days to reflect the desires of 32% of members who wanted to keep the mask requirement for members who are disabled or immunocompromised. Bassi and Tu were not involved with the petition but Bassi explained that they agreed that having two mask days made sense. Bassi was open to which days that would be.

"We really want the Coop to live these values when we consider the lives and needs of our disabled and immune compromised member owners and we want to oppose policies that put medically vulnerable people in a place where they can't access participation to the Coop," said Bassi, referencing the Coop's mission statement.

Bassi was asked why everyone needed to mask if the vulnerable person already was wearing a mask, to which they replied that one-way masking is not enough to protect immunocompromised people. Other members had questions about the effectiveness of masking, how masking days and hours would be decided, and whether masking days were needed when COVID rates were low in the city.

Member Nancy Romer responded positively to the presentation: "It's a very minor accommodation and I think it's a sign of solidarity that we can have with people who have physical problems, are immunocompromised, and feel very beleaguered in general. We're probably going to have more pandemics, more viruses, more problems as climate change increases," Romer said.

When the vote for the proposal does come, one member urged, the Coop should ensure that the highest number of members, including high-risk immunocompromised members, are able to vote. They suggested that the next General Meeting either be held virtually or that masks be mandated during it. "This question isn't whether each of us individually wants to mask or not, it's about whether or not we are creating a space that is accessible for those who need it."

The agenda item will be brought to a vote at the next General Meeting in October.

Rahima Nasa has been a Coop member since 2022. She enjoys writing for the Gazette because of all the members she's gotten to meet and because it allows her to learn about how the Coop works. When she's not writing for the Gazette, Rahima likes to experiment with new ingredients and is on a never-ending quest to make the perfect pie crust.

THE FUTURE OF CHILDCARE, PLASTIC BAGS, AND 'HOUSEHOLD' DEFINITIONS—TRICKY TOPICS COVERED AT THE AUGUST GENERAL MEETING

January 16, 2024



By Liz Welch

The Coop's August General Meeting took place on Zoom, for the last time in the foreseeable future as in-person meetings resume in September. Issues covered ranged from how the Coop's mark-up is calculated, to why childcare is still on hold—and why 21 is the new suggested age for adult members. Last but not least: Can we please be-

gin to address our fossil fuel addiction?

CHAIR COMMITTEE IS LOOKING FOR A NEW MEMBER

Chair Committee member Josef Szende ran the General Meeting on August 29 at 7 p.m. via Zoom, during which he announced that the Chair Committee is currently looking for a new member who “directly reflects the diversity of the Coop.” Anyone interested, please email psfcchair@gmail.com.

ENCOURAGING FINANCIAL NEWS:

Joseph Holtz, the Coop’s co-founder, General Coordinator, General Manager and Treasurer, presented an eight-page financial statement, and reported “encouraging” news:

The Coop’s gross margin as of July 16 is \$4,941,000 versus our total expenses of \$4,741,00, leaving \$200,000 to operate. Our overall income is \$283,000, due to other and interest income.

Holtz also shared a graph (page 2 of the report) designed by General Coordinator Lisa Moore that clearly shows the fluctuation of the gross margin percentage at the Coop during the four-week periods that comprise the first 24 weeks of this fiscal year. The Coop’s overall gross margin percentage for the 24 weeks is 19.61%.

“If we know the actual gross margin, versus the perfect gross margin, then we know the shrink, which is the measure of all that goes wrong—whether dropping a jar on the ground, someone steals something or a company misbills us and we pay too much,” Holtz explained.

The Coop’s shrink percentage is 1.27% of sales—better than the 2.7% industry average, and even better than the the 1.7% industry low. As a coop owned by member shoppers and workers, Holtz believes that “we can and should be lower.” Holtz added that the Coop is transparent about how all products are priced.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERSHIP COORDINATORS

General Coordinator Lisa Moore announced two new membership coordinator team members: Lisa Pelavin began work on Saturday, August 26, and Mae Frankeberger was slated to begin work on Wednesday, August 30.

RETURN OF CHILDCARE

Moore also gave an update on the return of childcare, which members voted in favor of restarting at the October 2022 meeting.

Efforts to revert the former childcare room from the bulk processing area that it became during Covid are underway. Shelving has already been ordered and there is a plan to accommodate the bulk processing area back in the basement. The Coop staff also must revise the childcare training material, train members and create a new functionality in Member Services for childcare training and work slots.

The biggest unforeseen obstacle, however, has been securing insurance for childcare. “The Coop had childcare insurance until we canceled the policy in 2020 due to COVID restrictions,” Moore explained. “Joe Holtz contacted our broker in May 2023 to restart our policy and learned that the insurer we’d used for years is no longer in the market.”

Since then, the Coop’s insurance broker has reached out to multiple carriers and has not yet found one willing to insure childcare because we are not a licensed childcare facility or they do not write childcare policies. Moore said that we are exempt from NYS childcare licensing requirements because “according to health code Article 47, we are a retail establishment providing supervision for children of patrons, our members, while parents are on the premise and the children are not spending more than 8 hours in the program per week.” But we also could not become licensed even if we wanted to because the requirements are so stringent. “The child care room does not meet the standards established by NY: the room must have two exit doors with fire suppression, for example,” she explained. “We do not have such a room in our build-

ing.”

However, to make ourselves more attractive to insurers, the number of children will be limited to eight at any time and childcare workers must participate in background checks. “Our broker is continuing the search as the list of possible carriers has not yet been exhausted. Provided we get insurance, the goal is to have childcare back up and running in the fourth quarter,” Moore said.

After Moore’s presentation, member Beth Ruck asked if there had been any efforts to enable Coop members to coordinate with each other to share childcare, such as a bulletin board sign up. Another member, Lisa G, noted that there were only 30 people present on the Zoom and since this is an issue that impacts so many members, that perhaps the *Linewaiters’ Gazette* could cover it.

NEW DEFINITIONS

The Coop’s current rules state that members can join the Coop at 18, which means when current members children turn 18, they must join, be issued a card under their own member number, and begin working shifts. Parents have historically pushed back on this rule—whether their kids don’t want to join, or they’re away from home at college. General Coordinator Ann Herpel explained that this has led to tension, confusion and an equity issue as some children who wanted to be able to shop on their own or to work a parent’s shift have been issued cards at 14—and we have a record of their age, and expected them to work when they turn 18. There are many more kids of members for whom there is no record.

“We decided it would be reasonable to raise the age to 21,” Herpel explained. “If you can buy alcohol and weed at that age, you can also work at the Coop.”

The Coop’s General Coordinators sponsored an issue to be discussed: “Coop Definition of Household and Adult” as these definitions have caused confusion and stress to members and staff alike, according to Herpel, who presented reasons for the pro-

posed shifts.

They include:

- The Coop defines an adult as a person 21 years or older. Individuals 21 and older may apply to join the Coop.
- A household is a group of adults who share food and other products purchased at the Coop.
- All adults in a household are required to join the Coop and fulfill all membership requirements.
- All adults in a familial relationship who reside together must join the Coop. Familial relationships include but are not limited to spouses, domestic partners, significant others, children/step-children, adult children, siblings/step-siblings, parents/step-parents, and grandparents/step-grandparents.

The other related issue was confusion over the definition of what it means to be in a “household.” Herpel explained, “The current accommodation is that if you are two adults living in a household but don’t otherwise share anything, then that person is not part of your household.” While your roommate does not have to become a member, your spouse or older children do.

“We want to make it clear that if one member of your family wants to join the Coop, then everyone in that household must join,” Herpel said.

During the questions and comments portion, member Seher Dholakia suggested that in order to be inclusive, people who are not part of a Coop household should still be able to join at the age of 18.

“I would have joined at 18,” Dholakia explained. “And I lived in New York.”

Herpel agreed that more nuanced language could be included in the new rules, adding, “If we are not requiring other children of household members to work until 21, then there could be access for new adult members joining at 18, but not having to work until 21.”

Another member named Tara also shared that she had been a member for 18 years and had never heard of this policy, which was why she came to the General Meeting—to figure it out. “I was not aware that [my daughter] could have gotten a card,” she explained. “She just left for college—can she still shop with me if she is home for the holiday? Is she supposed to work when she is home for the break? The 21 change would be super helpful to us to navigate.”

Under the current rules, Herpel explained: “You would have to register her as a member and then have her take a leave of absence until she is home, at which point she would have to work in order to shop. Or she could join her when she comes home—either winter break or summer break—and then go on leave when she’s back at college.”

The last member to comment on this complicated issue was Bhakti Sondra Shaye, who simply stated: “I’m in support of whatever makes the Coop more family-friendly!”

FOSSIL FUEL

Coop member Tracy Fitz spoke next about an ongoing conversation at The Coop—to stop giving away plastic bags. “We started talking about this in Oct 2019, and then again in September 2022,” Fitz said. “My idea is to sell compostable or non-compostable bags instead of giving them away.”

She presented her reasons, starting with data:

Currently the Coop gives customers 60,677 non-decomposable bags per month. Each

costs roughly \$.01 a piece, which comes out to an estimated \$693 per month, which the Coop covers.

The pros? The bags are cheap and strong.

The cons? Fitz listed many, including: They take fossil fuel to make them and do not decompose. Despite the myth, they are not recyclable—as it costs more to reuse than to use a virgin bag. Making—and getting rid of—these single use bags uses heat, which means more Co2 is emitted into the air which directly contributes to global warming. Carbon emissions are directly related to a 30% increase in extreme weather events, including hurricanes, wildfires, heat waves and more.

She also compares these stats to the pale green compostable bags made from corn that the Coop also distributes to members for free. Each costs 4 to 5 cents, and 41,000 are distributed monthly, which costs the Coop \$1,837.00.

The pros? These bags are biodegradable. The cons? They need air to compost and often wind up in the garbage. “If they don’t go into compost,” Fitz said, “they don’t decompose.”

She also pointed out that the combined cost of providing bags for members—whether single use or decomposable—cost the Coop \$30,000 plus a year which is added to the cost of food. Her suggestions?

1. Convert to providing compostable bags which would cost the Coop \$52,000 a year. “I vote for no free use single bag give away at the Coop and instead use that \$52,000 to subsidize using re-usable bags.”
2. Have a coop work slot that has a member walking around the Coop and training people how to be less dependent on fossil fuel plastic. “We would start with the single use bags,” she said. “And then tackle the clam shells and soft plastic containers.”

Member Brian Shuman showed members the mesh bags his family uses, and asked how the Coop would pay for this conversion. Holtz said: “By converting from fossil fuel [to decomposable] bags, we’d spend \$50,000 a year.... that’s not good for our financial situation.” While he agrees with Fitz that the “plasticization of our world is appalling” and that he is in support of “making this conversion”, they differ on how the Coop would deal with it financially, explaining. “Tracy would like people to pay for it. I would like to pay for it by raising the price of every case of produce by 20 cents for every case of produce.”

If people were to pay for their bags, that could cause conflict at check out, which the Coop has been trying to make more efficient. “If we charge people per bag at check out, it would slow check out down,” Holtz said. “We can’t afford to do that.” He also thanked Brian Shuman for using cloth bags, adding that the Coop does not subtract the weight of the bag.

Amita Rodman agreed: “I wash and bring my own bags—and don’t expect that other people do that. But I do expect that we must and should pivot away from plastic as part of our value system.”

She suggested markups, or the Coop absorbing the price, as a good way to do this.

General Coordinator Lisa Moore agreed.

“We are working towards replacing compostable bags in the produce area, and removing fossil fuel bags,” she said. “And paying for it by adding 20 cents per case—not per item—in produce. You would not feel it as a customer, as a buyer of these items. And that is not the same as charging people individually.”

A member named Lenore seconded that the Coop absorbing the price is the more equitable approach: “I’ve done cashier and check out and people on fixed or limited income often have to put things back they can’t afford.” Herpel agreed: “A member

using food stamps is not able to buy bags on their EBT card. It is not an option.”

Fitz appreciated all these ideas and ended the session with: “Can we chip at this issue slowly and methodically? Let’s stop with the fossil fuel bags first. Then we can go for the clam shells which are also single use, and soft plastic jars as well. And can we vote on this next time?”

Liz Welch re-joined the Gazette as a reporter in August 2023 after a hiatus. She is a longtime journalist and author/collaborator whose work can be seen at www.lizwelch.com.

JULY GENERAL MEETING: THE COOP’S FINANCES ARE LOOKING “ENCOURAGING” AND IN-PERSON GM’S ARE COMING BACK

January 16, 2024



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

By Walecia Konrad

At July's General Meeting, roughly eighty members of the Park Slope Food Coop voted to limit the number of work slots given for attendance at in-person General Meetings, which will start in September. In addition, the latest financial report is looking good. Members also discussed the idea of a DJ work slot, to play a variety of music during various shifts.

BULK ITEMS



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

The meeting started with the open forum, the time allotted for meeting attendees to bring up questions or concerns not specifically noted on the agenda. Lois Wilcken asked the only open forum question for the evening. It concerned bulk items. “Where are we on beans and other things that you have to take home in plastic?” she asked.

“I used to put them in cloth bags,” she said.

General Coordinator Joe Szladek explained that packaging bulk items in plastic bags was instituted during the pandemic, using a bulk package machine now housed in the childcare room. The change was made to streamline shopping in the bulk aisle, to reduce congestion and possible COVID transmission. “We plan on keeping that process,” said Szladek. “As the Coop gets busier, we want to keep congestion down in that aisle,” he added, explaining that even before the pandemic, the bulk aisle could get incredibly congested. “While nothing is set in stone,” he added, “we are set up to keep that process for a while.”

COOP FINANCES

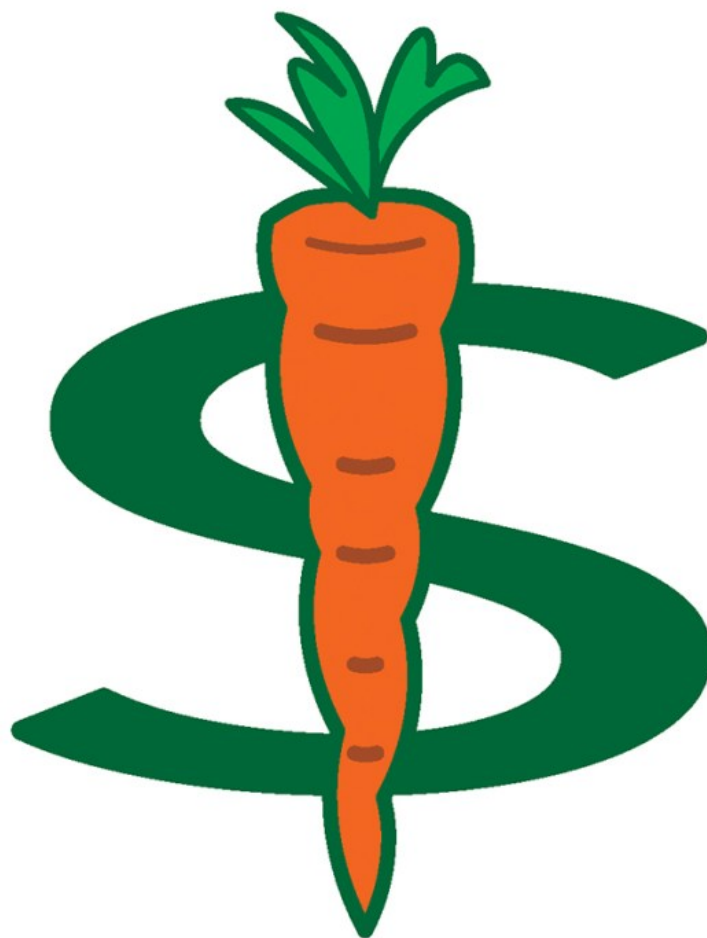


ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

Next up was the Coop’s financial report, which General Coordinator Joe Holtz present-

ed. He reported that Coop sales for the 20-week period ending June 18, 2023, were \$21 million, a \$3 million increase over the same time period last year.

The Coop also reported having over \$7 million in cash and cash equivalents. “That’s very encouraging,” said Holtz. “That puts us in a better position, should the second pandemic start.”

“SALES FOR THE 20-WEEK PERIOD ENDING IN MID-JUNE OF THIS YEAR WERE \$21 MILLION. THAT’S A \$3 MILLION INCREASE OVER THE SAME TIME LAST YEAR.”

—GENERAL COORDINATOR JOE HOLTZ

Holtz then took a few minutes to point out a special section of this month’s financial report, focused on payroll. The section looks back four years, and shows how many staff hours are worked, and how much is paid. It also looks at the percentage that sales personnel costs account for each year. Holtz and other coordinators generated the report in response to members who had voiced concern about payroll at previous GMs, and who had said there should be more information on this subject, Holtz explained.

Over the four-year period, staff hours have decreased about 4%, but the dollar amount paid has increased a little more than 12%, largely due to cost-of-living increases. For the 20-week period ended June 18 of this year, personnel costs accounted for about 15% of sales, compared to almost 13% during the same period four years ago. Holtz then pointed out that overall expenses account for almost a fifth of sales, and personnel costs are a growing part of overall expenses.

GENERAL COORDINATOR REPORTS



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

Joe Szladek discussed the state of member labor during the summer months. He explained that members may have had trouble finding open work slot shifts during the summer months, and are having to look several weeks ahead.

WANT TO GET CREDIT FOR GOING TO A GM? THE COOP WILL ISSUE UP TO 75 WORK SLOT CREDITS A MONTH.

The reason? Demand for shifts goes up in the summer when many people have vacation days and are trying to get their shifts in. At the same time, shopping slows during the summer, so not as many shifts are needed. Szladek reminded members that demand increases substantially in late August and September, when shopping returns to normal and many holidays are around the corner, so shifts will open up again. “We’ll need as much help as we can get,” he said.

GENERAL MEETING WORK SLOT PROPOSAL



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

The meeting then moved to the first agenda item. General Coordinator Ann Herpel presented the following proposal, concerning General Meeting work credit, for questions, discussion and ultimately a vote. The following General Meeting work credit policy for in-person meetings will replace all prior decisions. The policy will be in effect when the next in-person meeting convenes. This policy does not apply to members whose work shifts occur at the General Meeting—including, but not limited to the Board, Chair Committee, Agenda Committee, and the Corporate Secretary.

General Meeting work credit policy:

1. The Coop will issue up to 75 work slot credits per General Meeting.
2. Advance sign-up is required, and is on a first-come, first-served basis.
3. Members can earn only one credit per calendar year.
4. Sign-up for GM work slot credit will be available in Member Services, on the Wednesday after the General Meeting.
5. Members will be allowed to cancel according to regular cancelation policies.
6. The General Coordinators (GCs) will have the authority to increase the number of work credits issued, if operationally feasible.

In presenting the proposal, Herpel pointed out that the item was presented earlier in the year, but the discussion veered into a discussion about hybrid meetings.

This time, explained Herpel, the proposal is focused only on work slot credit when the PSFC returns to in-person General Meetings. She announced that the Coop will start in-person meetings in September at the Prospect Park Picnic House. She then discussed some history behind GM work slot credits. The policy that was in effect before the pandemic allowed an unlimited amount of members to sign up for meeting credit, two times a year. “We had over 17,000 members, and that was when we didn’t have the nimbleness to tailor the size of our shifts to our needs. Consequently, there were a lot of makeups and the GM was a way to earn a makeup or FTOP,” Herpel said.

Now, however, with the new shift sign-up process, the Coop has fine-tuned shifts to better match Coop operation needs according to the days of the week, times of day, and seasons of the year. That means the Coop “doesn’t have excess labor built into every day,” said Herpel.

If the Coop were to go back to granting GM work slot credits to an unlimited number of members (as opposed to the proposed 75-member limit) the coordinators feel

strongly that other shifts might not be filled as much as needed, and operations would suffer, Herpel explained.

“In general,” Herpel concluded, “this is so we can bring back in-person meetings, and have a reasonable work slot credit, so members can earn credit and not have a negative impact on Coop operations.”

Questions and debate followed. Coop member Amita Rodman asked about testing a no-limit policy—then instituting a limit if the coordinators find too many members are signing up for the GM, and possibly cannibalizing other shifts.

Another member, Mehdi Heris, wondered if signing up counts as one of the two shifts that members are allowed to sign up for at one time. Under the new work slot sign-up system, members may only sign up for two shifts at a time. Herpel answered that the GM slot would be outside the two allowed.

Many attendees voiced concerns about doing anything that discourages attendance at GMs. They worried that major decisions are being voted on by only a small percentage of members and believe everything should be done to encourage GM attendance. Suggestions included a range of incentives, ranging from allowing more work credit than proposed, to offering walker services after in-person meetings, to help members who live across the park get home safely.

Members also wondered if there was a way to ensure that the policy would be adjusted, if it becomes clear that more credits wouldn't necessarily hurt operations.

Joe Holtz answered the latter concern by pointing out that item number 6 in the proposal says, “The General Coordinators (GCs) will have the authority to increase the number of work credits issued, if operationally feasible,” and thus allows for any future adjustments. “This is a starting point, so we can start transitioning back to in-person meetings,” he explained.

The debate period also included much discussion about when, and how, a hybrid meeting might take place, and how that would affect work slot credit. Herpel strongly encouraged members to submit a separate proposal, concerning hybrid meetings, to the Agenda Committee, for discussion at a future GM.

The proposal was put to an electronic vote and passed with 65 in favor, 5 opposed.

DJ WORK SLOT



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

Coop member Paul Blachar then presented the next agenda item, the discussion of a new DJ shift that would allow a member to curate and play music. This item was for discussion only, no vote would be taken.

Blachar explained that he envisions a work slot—possibly combined with an existing slot—that puts a person in charge of the music played at the Coop. “I love music, and I love sharing that music with people in my life. At the Coop we’re blessed with hav-

ing a great community. I'm always looking for ways to strengthen community in my life."

The proposal was met with lots of suggestions on the best, most accessible, and most inclusive ways to curate playlists and take music suggestions from member shoppers. Ideas included creating a small committee to curate playlists that include a variety of music genres, and setting up a QR code, or iPads and other electronic devices, on the shopping floor, to take member suggestions for playlists.

Some members expressed skepticism that this would be a meaningful shift or wondered what problem this new work slot would solve. Other members suggested making the DJ position volunteer only, with no work credit given.

Herpel described that currently the Coop uses about 120 playlists from Spotify, including all types of genres, which are cycled through the day. She also cautioned that music of a certain volume impedes members with hearing issues from checking out or doing their shifts.

Member Steven Rosen agreed with Herpel and described how, as a member with age-related hearing loss, music makes it harder to do his job.

Blachar thanked attendees for all of the input and the discussion period ended.

The Board of Directors then voted to accept the advice of membership in reference to the GM work credit proposal vote, and the meeting was adjourned.

Walecia Konrad is a freelance writer, editor and content producer specializing in personal finance. She has been a PSFC member since 2001 and on-and-off contributor to the Gazette for almost as long.

APRIL GENERAL MEETING REPORT

January 16, 2024



Proposal to Return to Live GMs Is Highlight of April Meeting

By Frank Haberle

The April 2023 General Meeting focused on two questions: whether the Coop can return to in-person General Meetings in the fall and how to structure the work-slot credit for attending members. With no committees scheduled to report, and brief reports by the General Coordinators on finances and the shopping floor, the well-managed Zoom meeting of 83 members and staff wrapped up in a crisp 90 minutes.

Open Forum

The April GM began with an open forum, where members weighed in on a number of concerns. Many were related to the reinstitution of elements of the Coop that were put on hold during COVID. A repeated theme was whether the Coop planned to restart the Terracycle plastic collection that was conducted prior to the pandemic, and concerns over increased plastic containers and plastic packaging on the shopping shelves today. General Coordinator Elinor Astrinsky responded that the Terracycle recycling program was a member-led effort and would be challenging to re-create at this time due to the lack of storage space within the Coop and the enormous cost of shipping. Astrinsky added that Coop buyers are trying to find products that have less plastic packaging. Unfortunately, items such as zucchini blossoms and olives are shipped in plastic to protect their contents.

A member asked several times about the new mask mandate guidelines that allow members to not wear masks on the shopping floor, creating what she perceived as an unsafe environment. Astrinsky invited open discussion of the mask policy at a General Meeting, noting that any actual change of the mask policy would be decided on by members. Astrinsky also invited the member to bring this issue back to the Agenda Committee if she thinks it should be explored again.



One member asked if there was an update to the Coop's bringing back the child care room. Astrinsky stated that plans are being drawn for creating physical space for it. (The former child care room was converted into a bulk food processing work space during the pandemic.)

Coordinator Reports

With Coop Treasurer and General Coordinator Joe Holtz away at a National Co+op Grocers conference, General Coordinator Joe Szladek reported on the Coop's finances. Szladek highlighted some early promising trends in terms of sales: the Coop's net sales for the first eight weeks of FY24 were \$8.39 million, a 16% increase from the \$7.24 million raised in the same period last year. The gross margin dollars of \$1.64 million produced by these sales exceeded the \$1.61 million in actual expenses. Increased enrollment is helping with sales and membership has expanded by 3,500

over the past 52 weeks, with more than 70 members joining each week. At the same time, the Coop has kept staffing levels relatively flat, which helps to keep expenses down.

Questions included a request for a status update on the part-time workers who were hired during COVID. Szladek reported that, with the return to member labor, this program has been largely phased out. There is still a group working in food processing, filling the role of squad leaders in guiding different duties like cheese and olive processing. The Coop does not plan to lay these workers off and, instead, hopes to eventually absorb some of them into Receiving Coordinator positions.



ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

Astrinsky opened the food report with a shout-out to staff who are working very hard to keep everything flowing through the Coop. She then reported that the spring season is often a challenging time for produce. Fall produce like pears and apples are dwindling; nonetheless, “we have beautiful spring flowers and perennials from Glover Farms coming in; we are bringing in soil and compost. Every week more local items will be added.” There are also a lot of new cheese products available.



Questions from members focused on concerns about chocolate products that contain cadmium, arsenic and lead that are still on Coop shelves. Szladek responded that the chocolate question is a complicated one and the Coordinators will bring more information to the next meeting.

Agenda Item: Work Slot Credit for General Meeting Attendance

With General Meetings (GMs) moving back to a live setting (in person at the Prospect Park Picnic House, starting on September 26, 2023), the Coordinators put forth for discussion a proposal that in-person attendance be re-established. As presented, the proposal suggested that up to 75 members could earn work slot credit for each General Meeting and members would be limited to earning work slot credit at one General Meeting per calendar year.

As Szladek explained, “In the past, and per a previous GM vote, as many members that went to a meeting could receive credit for attending—and for up to two GMs a year. This was voted in by the membership at a GM during a period of tremendous growth in the early 2000s when the Coop expanded and had surplus labor. Currently we don’t believe the Coop has enough member labor available weekly at a six-week cycle to support this same structure. We think it’s best to start with a cap of 75 work slots per meeting and one credit per member per year. When the Coop can afford to, we can look into increasing those numbers.”

Szladek added that the discussion of this proposal at this time will not include a hybrid option (Zoom and in-person) because the technology would be challenging.

Questions revolved around the numbers of members who could attend live meetings, and the costs and accessibility of the Picnic House. Szladek responded that up to 250 people could safely attend a meeting in the Picnic House and it was considerably more affordable than other venues.

In discussion, some members spoke in favor of only one shift per year, but thought that the number of 75 could be higher. Others felt that two credits would encourage more members to come regularly. Many members felt strongly that there must be a remote “hybrid” option for members who may have challenges getting to an in-person meeting. “It’s a new world out there,” one member added, “and a lot of people are now operating more remotely. We should consider hybrid.” Another member added that “changes in work culture have changed our sense of accountability to each other. As a member organization of 15,000 we will still only have 250 members attending these meetings. We need to offer more incentives to come to the GM, not less.” Another member expressed concern that without a remote option, people who are at high risk of infection and those with physical challenges will feel that their contribution via the GM are not as welcome.

Szladek noted that this agenda item was not intended to address the issue of a hybrid model, but rather to discuss continuing to unwind emergency COVID protocols and re-

turning the GM to the way it was run for decades prior to the pandemic—in person and with some shift credit available for attendance. He encouraged members who were interested in a hybrid (remote and in-person) General Meeting to request that the Agenda Committee include that topic at a future GM.

Frank Haberle works for New Settlement in the Bronx and is the author of the novel Shufflers.