

## GIVING NEW LIFE TO COOP PACKAGING

May 23, 2023



*By Juliet Kleber*

The Coop has instituted robust recycling, food donation and compost programs to minimize waste. But some members are finding even more novel ways to repurpose the Coop's discarded packaging and other refuse.

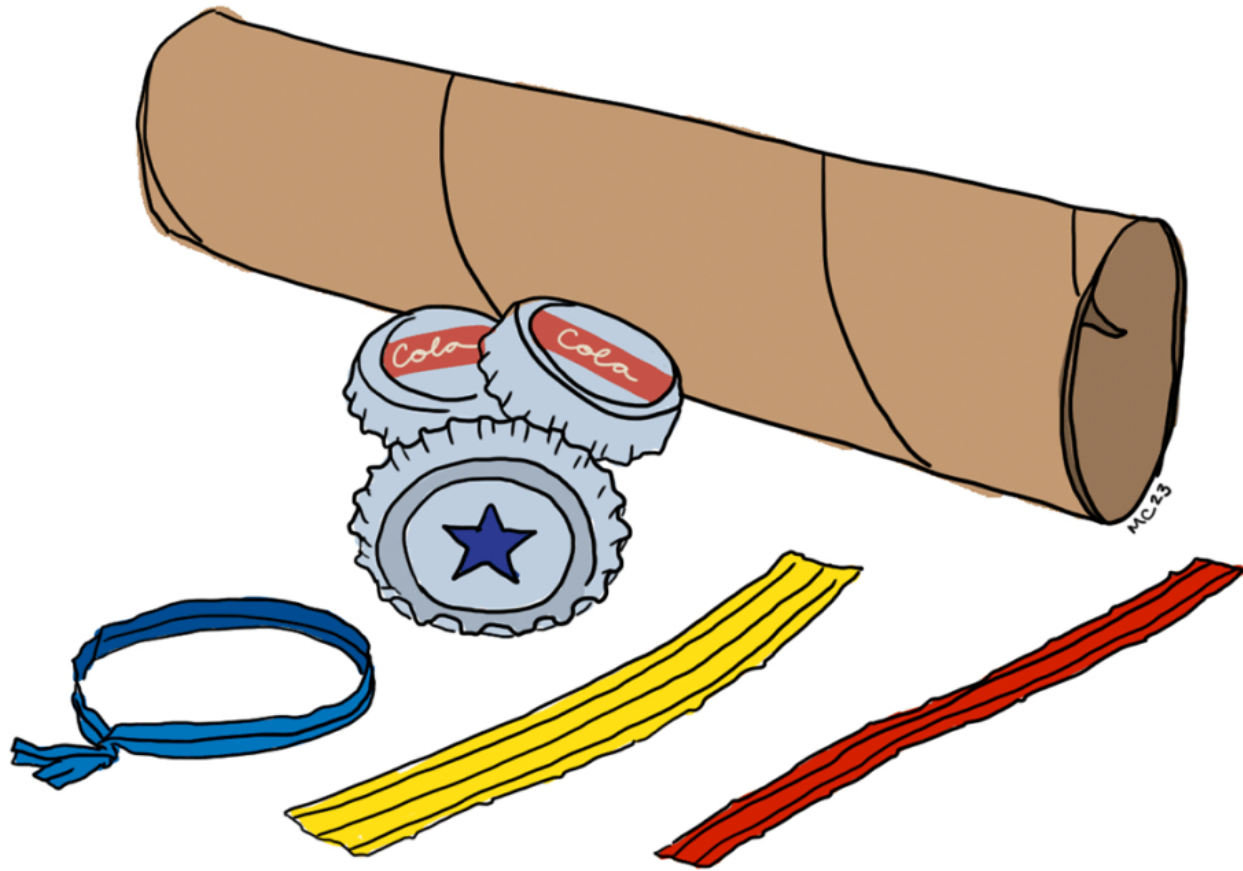


ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

Wendy Gelsanliter, a Coop member since 2005, is one of them. Gelsanliter is the Materials Center Educator & Coordinator at Teaching Beyond the Square, a local education non-profit. Located on 16th Street just outside of Union Square, the Materials Center houses a collection of found objects donated by New York City residents and businesses, including the Coop. These are items that would typically be discarded after a single use: commonplace objects like coffee machine pods, metal and plastic bottle caps and paper towel tubes, as well as more specialized materials, such as discarded samples from architecture and design firms that make recurring donations. But the discarded items are not just collected—they become “clean, resorted, curated, beautiful trash,” Gelsanliter explained in an interview with the *Gazette*. “People walk in and say, ‘Oh my god—I want to live here!’ ”



The center is open to the public by appointment—visitors can buy materials for \$2 a pound to repurpose for their own projects. But the materials are primarily used as a medium for creative play at the center’s Materials Trailer and in its Materialized Classroom program, which visits schools across the tri-state area in order to give children an opportunity to play, create, and experiment with the objects.

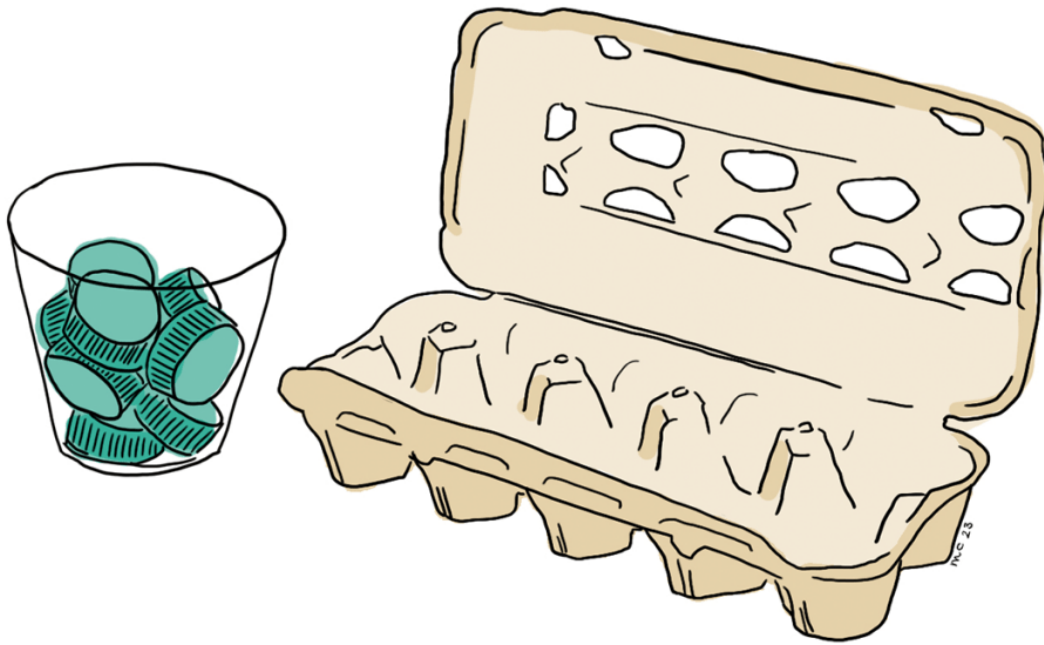


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Children from pre-K to 6th grade engage in open-ended exploration with these found objects, sometimes using them as building materials: “A pre-K student might use objects and say, ‘It’s a playground’ or ‘It’s a ship,’ ” Gelsanliter said. But they might also just enjoy pouring bottle caps from one container to another, or shaking a jar full of buttons to hear the sound it makes.



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

“It’s not about the product; it’s about the process. When the grownups get involved, they’re the ones intent on saying ‘What did you make?’ But when they step away the children are so interested in discovering what these materials can do. They’re silent—totally engaged in exploring.”



Gelsanliter is always looking for interesting materials and the Coop has become a great source. It started with can carriers. “I saw someone shelving beer and throwing the can holders into a box,” she explained. “He saw how excited I was... but wanted to know what I was going to do with them, so I explained.” That person put Gelsanliter in touch with the Coop’s beer buyer, Kusi Merello, who now puts the can carriers aside for her. In 2022, Gelsanliter collected approximately 65 pounds of plastic can carriers from the Coop. By May of 2023, she has already collected 20 pounds of plastic—and has just begun collecting other supplies like cardboard, twist-ties, and the plastic tubes inside rolls of register tape when she shops.

Whether students are art-making, experimenting, engineering or just appreciating sounds, colors and textures, the program requires that they follow only two rules:

1. Be kind to others.
2. Be kind to the materials.



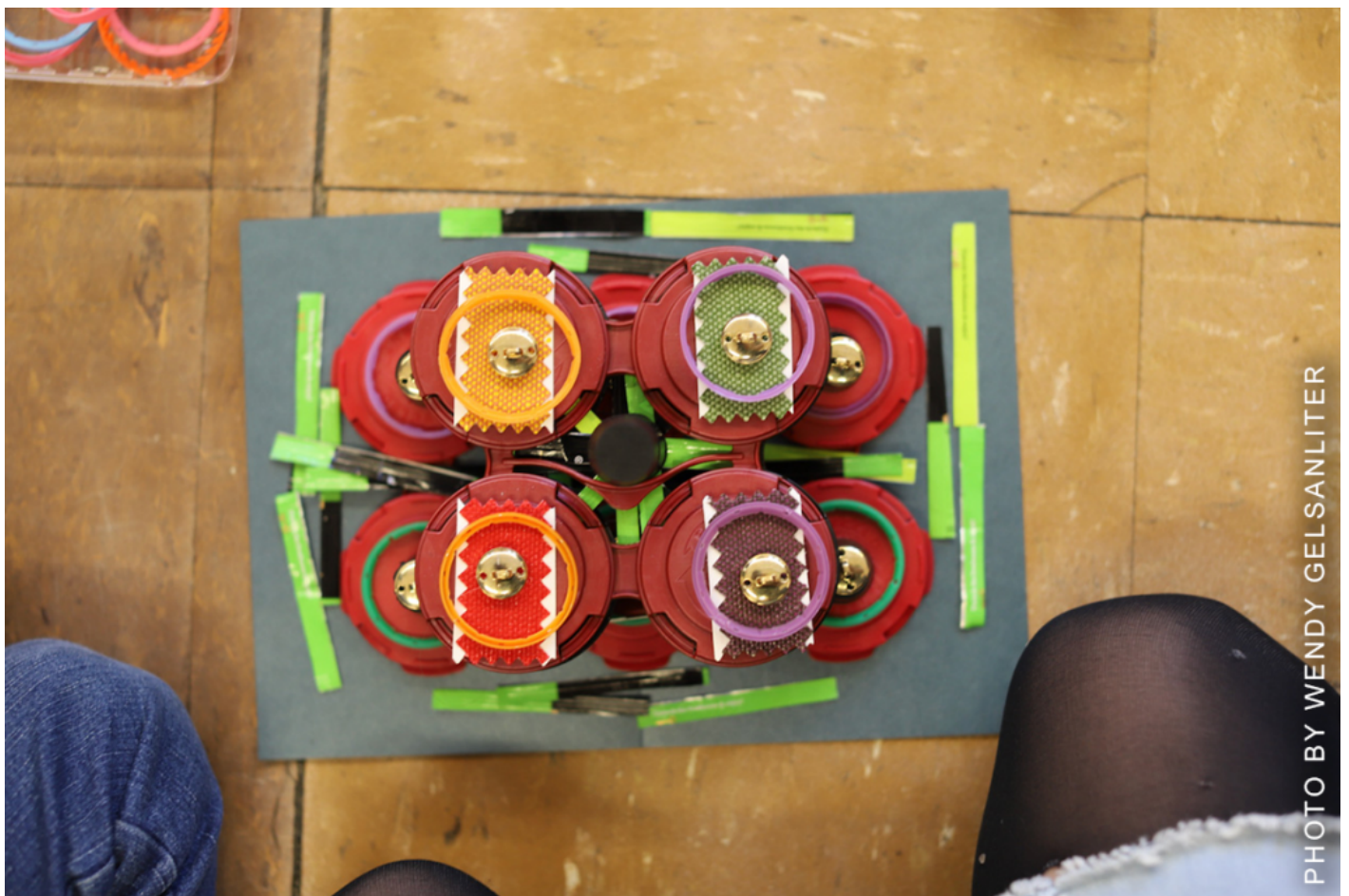
Children do not use tape or glue to make permanent objects and all materials are collected at the end of their work to be reused again in the next classroom. Not using adhesives forces problem-solving, Gelsanliter says, but it also allows the life-cycle of these materials to be extended as much as possible. Twist-ties typically last several months, sometimes up to a year if they arrive to the Materials Center in good condition. And children are taught how to use the materials conscientiously. “We teach children not to break the cardboard. And there’s great care in the cleanup process; we teach the children that if you use a twist tie and twist it around, please make it straight and put it back in the jar.”



PHOTO BY WENDY GELSANLITER

Coop staff and member-workers have been interested in and supportive of Gelsanliter's collection. "I walk around [the Coop] so excited. And people are interested when they see me taking things—I saw a color of can carrier that I needed and asked the member stocking if I could have it. He was curious what I was going to do with it, so I showed him some of the pictures on my phone. What the kids can make with these things is amazing."

"I save everything I ever use—I wash and keep every bottle cap," Gelsanliter said. "Before you throw something away, look at it carefully and ask, 'If I had a whole bowl of these—could I do something with it?' If the answer is yes, don't throw it away. 'If I clean all these apple sauce pouches and put them in a jar it will it look good?' If so, then keep it. Once you start looking at things in a different way, you can't stop seeing it. Your whole life changes."



Receiving Coordinator Jerome Petitgand and his seven-year-old son, Luc, have also seen creative potential in the Coop's refuse, though they've taken a somewhat more

concrete approach. For the past six months, they have been building a detailed model of a medieval castle and village using packaging materials from the Coop—primarily the cardboard boxes that the Coop’s bananas are received and sold in. In an interview, Jerome and Luc told the *Gazette* that the inspiration for the project came from reading the 1977 book *Castle* by David Macaulay, which chronicles the construction of a fictional castle in written and illustrated detail. Jerome explained that their construction project began with the central keep and village but expanded over time: “Luc realized we needed land to subsidize and feed the people.”



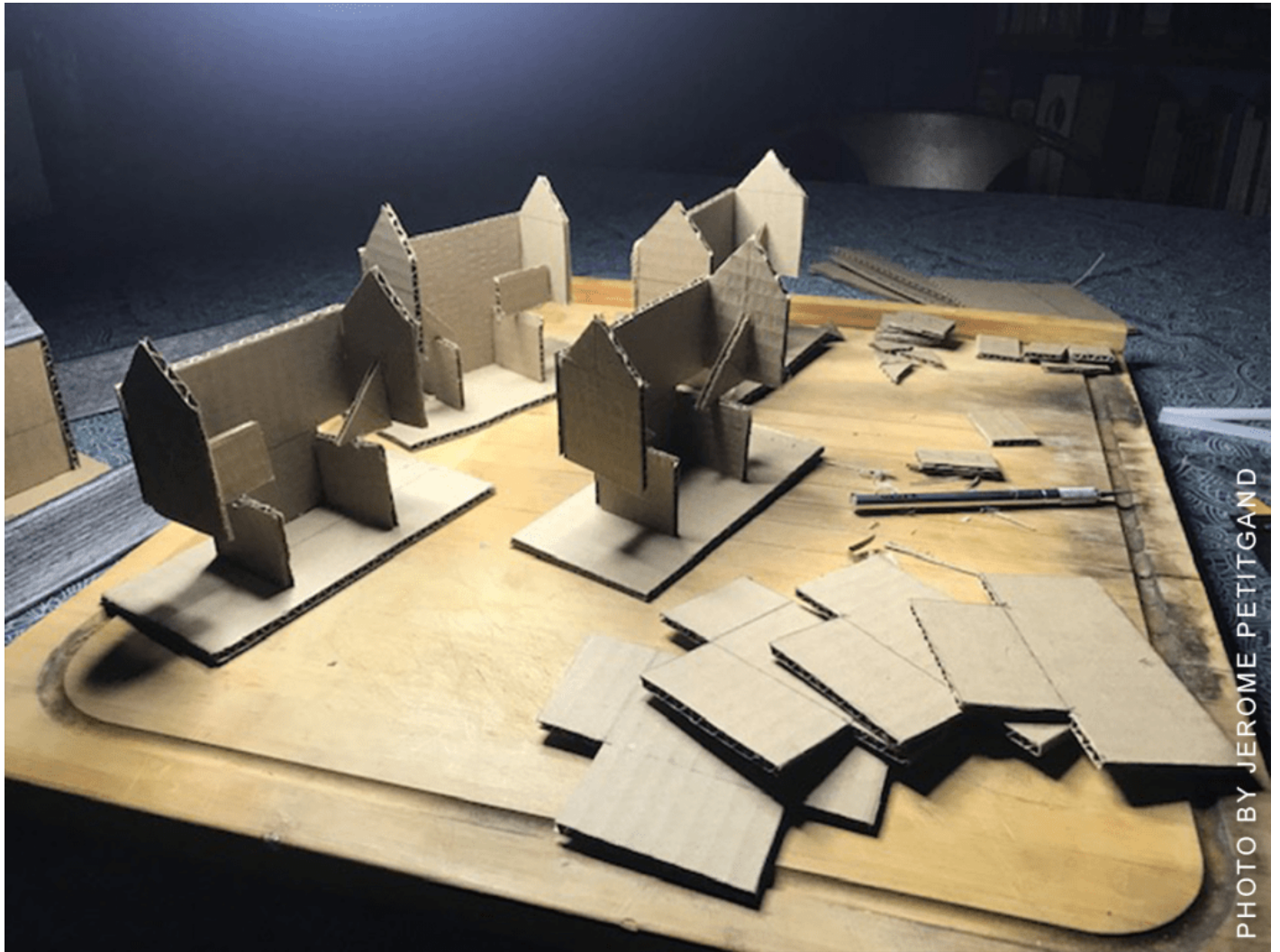


PHOTO BY JEROME PETITGAND

At present, their settlement features the castle, bridges and archways, and multi-story houses, all surrounded by a guard wall featuring watchtowers, a gatehouse, and siege equipment for the toy soldiers attempting to scale it. While Luc did draw some detailed maps and plans, the buildings are modular and rearrangeable.



The buildings are mostly made of flat cardboard cut from banana boxes—they make up both the structure of the buildings and their details. Tiny strips of cardboard are glued onto the facades to replicate the half-timber work of their Tudor-style houses. The towers and turrets of the castle and wall are made with the tubes that hold the Coop's rolls of produce bags. The roofs are made from the edge protectors used to stabilize boxes (again, mostly banana boxes) when they're stacked onto pallets. They're typically about four feet long, but Petitgand and Luc have found that they make perfect slate-like roofs when cut to size.



"I built things like this when I was a boy, even though everything was plastic and beautiful and you could just buy it," Petitgand told the *Gazette*. "We decided to make it ourselves from scratch instead." He's found that he and Luc share that affinity for building. The two have spent many cold winter afternoons and rainy Sundays working on their project, often for four or five hours at a time. And aside from glue guns, hot glue, and tools like box-cutters and X-Acto knives, their village has been made entirely from free, discarded materials.



Now that summer is approaching and the weather allows Luc more opportunity to play outside, the village is often packed away in the seven banana boxes that hold all of its composite parts when it's not being worked on. But the project is far from over. Luc and Petitgand are already planning its next expansion: viking boats and river, all made from Coop cardboard.

*Juliet Kleber is a writer and editor based in Bed-Stuy. She serves as a member of the editorial board of n+1 magazine.*

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# APRIL GENERAL MEETING REPORT

May 23, 2023



## 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 re-

turn 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 Elinoar 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.*

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FILM NIGHT: MENASHE

May 23, 2023

# F I L M N I G H T

## M E N A S H E

### THURSDAY

### MAY 25 7PM

This documentary will be screened on Thursday, May 25th at 7pm on Zoom  
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89525849483> (Meeting ID: 895 2584 9483)



## MENASHE

Set within the New York Hasidic community in Borough Park, Brooklyn, Menashe follows a kind but hapless grocery store clerk trying to maintain custody of his son Rieven after his wife, Lea, passes away. Since they live in a tradition-bound culture that requires a mother present in every home, Rieven is supposed to be adopted by the boy's strict, married uncle, but Menashe's Rabbi decides to grant him one week to spend with Rieven prior to Lea's memorial. Their time together creates an emotional moment of father/son bonding as well as offers Menashe a final chance to prove to his skeptical community that he can be a capable parent. Shot in secret entirely within the Hasidic community depicted in the film, and one of the only movies to be performed in Yiddish in nearly 70 years, Menashe is a warm, life-affirming look at the universal bonds between father and son that also sheds unusual light on a notoriously private community.

The director, Joshua Weinstein will be present for a Q&A after the screening. He has been a Coop member on and off since 2008 and is in awe of people who have member numbers in the double digits!

To be added to our email Listserve for future screening announcements, please send a request to [jllymiller@me.com](mailto:jllymiller@me.com).

Opinions expressed within this film  
 are not necessarily representative of  
 the views of the Park Slope Food Coop.  
 787 Union Street, Brooklyn, NY 11215

[www.foodcoop.com](http://www.foodcoop.com)  
 718-622-0560

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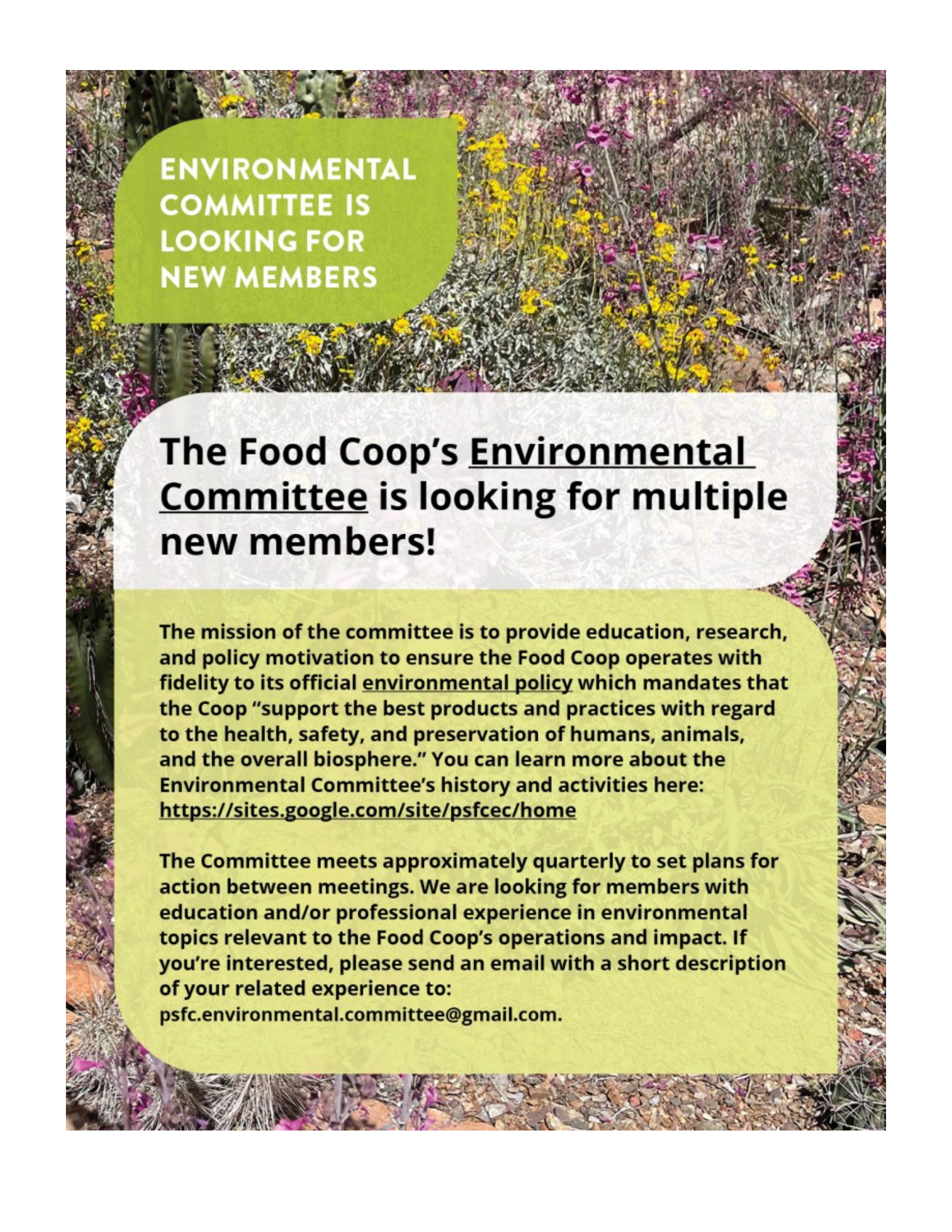
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## ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE SEEKS NEW MEMBERS

May 23, 2023



**ENVIRONMENTAL  
COMMITTEE IS  
LOOKING FOR  
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**The Food Coop's Environmental Committee is looking for multiple new members!**

The mission of the committee is to provide education, research, and policy motivation to ensure the Food Coop operates with fidelity to its official environmental policy which mandates that the Coop "support the best products and practices with regard to the health, safety, and preservation of humans, animals, and the overall biosphere." You can learn more about the Environmental Committee's history and activities here: <https://sites.google.com/site/psfcec/home>

The Committee meets approximately quarterly to set plans for action between meetings. We are looking for members with education and/or professional experience in environmental topics relevant to the Food Coop's operations and impact. If you're interested, please send an email with a short description of your related experience to: [psfc.environmental.committee@gmail.com](mailto:psfc.environmental.committee@gmail.com).

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