

HOW THE COOP HANDLED THE BLIZZARD

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By Kayla Levy

It's not unusual for members to line up to enter the Coop to shop on weekends. There

are often a few people waiting on Union Street with bags in hand. But during the weekend of Feb. 21 and 22, just before the city's first blizzard in a decade, the lines were the worst many members had seen since the pandemic.

Janet Gottlieb, who arrived as doors opened on Sunday at 8 a.m., was surprised when a worker swiftly took her entry pass at checkout to ensure others could shop. "Sure enough, when I left, there was a queue almost to Seventh Avenue," she said.

Members who shopped at the Coop in the days leading up to the blizzard mostly talked of lines and crowds—a phenomenon of panic shopping that, for reasons real or imagined, befalls grocery stores in some New York City neighborhoods whenever a major storm looms.

"Saturday was probably our busiest day in years," said General Manager Joseph Szladek. Whereas a very busy weekend day typically yields \$250,000 in sales, members spent \$338,000 on Saturday, Feb. 21, he said.

Eggs, bread and milk were among the most popular items. "Apparently, everyone has to make French toast during a snowstorm," Szladek said with a laugh.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PARK SLOPE FOOD COOP MEMBERS

Coop members and snow conditions during the blizzard weekend.

Despite the shopping frenzy, most members said their blizzard shopping experience was relatively smooth. After navigating a Saturday line that reminded her of early pandemic times, Jordan Lee found the Coop was crowded, but well-stocked enough to do a typical weekly shop.

“Honestly, I thought it was going to be worse,” she said. Several others agreed that crowds were big but typical for a weekend, with just a few items running out by Sunday afternoon. One shopper, for instance, couldn’t find cilantro.

Still, the lines were enough to deter some members entirely.

“I have a newborn, and with the rain and wait time, I decided to do all my shopping at Union Market,” said Cory Zapatka, who showed up at 9 a.m. Sunday in an attempt to beat the rush but was met with a line up the block. “Union Market was practically empty. I was in and out in 20 minutes.”

Other members reported skipping the Coop altogether after hearing word of the wait from friends, or opting to shop at the Associated Supermarket on Fifth Avenue.

To handle the crush of shoppers, Coop staff had to do intensive coordination, including hours of conference calls all weekend. “We’re communicating with staff, but we’re also emailing hundreds of members about their shifts and informing the entire membership about changes,” said Szladek.



Coop members shoveling during the blizzard weekend.

At first, the plan, detailed in a Coop-wide email sent Saturday night, was to open late on Monday and cancel some morning shifts. Then, on Sunday evening, after Mayor Zohran Mamdani issued a State of Emergency for the city and banned nonessential car travel through noon the following day, General Coordinator Ann Herpel sent another email pushing Monday's opening until 1 p.m. and cancelling all shifts before noon (for which people were told to arrive at 12:30). She also asked members to sign

up for emergency snow-clearing shifts on Monday morning. “Please come to work or shop only if you can travel safely,” she wrote.

Aside from changes to hours and shifts, the biggest challenge that the Coop faced was in handling the snow itself. That operation was overseen by David St. Germain, a Receiving Coordinator of 12 years who is responsible for getting deliveries off trucks and into the store—a task that requires a clear loading zone. In anticipation of the blizzard, the Coop used 250 pounds of snow melt on the sidewalk and loading zone, and most vendors delayed deliveries until Tuesday (though some came earlier in the weekend).

By 7 a.m. on Monday, when St. Germain got to work, he said Union Street was “completely inundated” with snow. He and a couple of other Coop staff spent the next three hours laying the groundwork for clearing the sidewalks and loading zone. At 10:30 a.m., they were joined by a team of eight members who answered the call for snow-clearing help. Together, St. Germain said the team repeatedly cleared an area of 3,500 square feet in a “Herculean” effort to get the store operational as soon as possible.

“A lot of trucks that came in on Tuesday were completely surprised that there wasn’t any snow,” he said.



Members who answered the call for shovelers

Joshua Paris, a 20-year Coop member who was among those on the snow-clearing shift, said the work was both fun and rewarding. “We were really pleased about finishing the task and getting the area clear so people could get what they needed at the Coop,” he said. Paris stuck around to shop for coffee and granola bars after the shift and found the store relatively calm.

“I think everyone was just happy the Coop was open,” he said. “You can close the city, but you can’t close the Coop.”

Kayla Levy is a freelance contributor covering housing and culture for New York Magazine. She’s been a Coop member since 2019.