

THE COOP IS AT CAPACITY AND CROWDED: CAN ANYTHING BE DONE?

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By Dan Bergsagel

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It's 2 p.m. on a Saturday and you are waiting to shop at the Coop. It's sweltering outside, and you joined the line on Union Street, closer to 7th Avenue than the Coop.

Finally, the "NEXT MEMBER" sign flashes for you.



A welcome sight after a long line.

But inside, the aisles are thronged. You regret taking a full-size shopping cart as you struggle to navigate the pinch point between the lemons and the bananas. The end of the checkout line is by the frozen peas cabinet.

This scene tells a story of the Coop's success, but it also speaks to the main complaint that many members have about the Coop: overcrowding. It's a longstanding challenge that the Coop's board and professional staff have periodically tried to grapple with, but there are no easy answers.

"The lines at the Coop are where all the good intentions of the community disappear and die," said member Lucy Willis. "It is a real decision to choose between a chaotic shopping experience with people barging into you, instead of a less busy, less rushed but slightly more expensive shop."

Even so, demand to join the Coop remains fierce. Currently, 15 to 25 members leave

each week, and they are quickly replaced when new membership orientation appointments are opened, which “are booked up almost immediately,” said General Coordinator Ann Herpel.

For many members, the tensions over overcrowding can lead to complicated emotions. Members are proud of the Coop, but do not necessarily want it to be an exclusive club.

This friction is not new, said Herpel, who noted that, “We have been controlling the growth of the Coop since late 2009.”



PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMAN

Traffic jams in produce are not uncommon at peak times.

The impact of these controls has become more pronounced in the last few years as the Coop has shrunk from over 17,000 members pre-pandemic to about 16,000 members today. The goal of this contraction is to try and find a membership equilibrium that minimizes “the negative impacts the staff experienced prior to the pandemic and the long lines and crowded shopping floor the members endured,” Herpel said.

General Coordinator Matt Hoagland described the Coop as a “little ecosystem,” with three key parts: the size of the membership, the efficiency of the Coop in selling food to those members and the physical capacity of the building.

Crowding at the Coop can be addressed by rebalancing the first two, reducing the number of members and improving efficiency. But when it comes to the Coop’s physical capacity, “there is only so much our store can hold,” Hoagland said.

Longtime member Jonathan Farber said, “The Coop is fantastically successful and has been for decades, but capacity is a problem.”

Farber was the architect of the Second Location Study Committee, which was conceived in 2012 with the purpose of investigating how to expand the Coop.



Stocking at busy times can add to the congestion.

He came to the question of expansion from a background in farming and politics. “If I wanted to make a positive change in our food and farming systems, there could be no better vehicle than the Coop. The Coop model solves a lot of problems, so why not do it again and spread the love?”

The Second Location Committee was formally convened at the November 2016 General Meeting. It had a number of goals, including allowing for an increase in membership to better align with the International Cooperative Movement’s goal to be “open to all persons.”

The committee prepared a detailed report in March 2020 that summarized its analysis of a potential second location, including a survey of over 3,600 Coop members, staff and non-members that assessed priorities and location preferences.

The committee also conducted a series of real estate case studies around adaptive

reuse or new construction, and analyzed the financial feasibility of a second location and potential methods to generate funds for it.



PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMAN

Expanding to other spaces on Union Street is unlikely.

Because of the pandemic, the report was not presented to the membership until the November 2022 General Meeting.

After working in detail on the topic for over a decade, the committee proposed finding another building in Brooklyn of around 20,000 square feet that the Coop could purchase for approximately \$20 million, which would roughly double the capacity of the Coop.

A vote was held at the May 2023 General meeting on a resolution to authorize a referendum on a second location. But concerns were raised about whether the committee's report was still up-to-date because it had been prepared before the pandemic. Some opponents also said they were worried about the cost of the proposal. The resolution was rejected, 74 votes to 64 votes.

If the Coop does not expand at a second location, can it expand at its current location instead? Historically, the Coop has grown incrementally, first expanding from its rented second story space at 782 Union Street downwards into the whole building, and then into adjacent buildings both east and west.

Could this approach be continued to increase the size of the Coop by further expanding next door?

This is not likely. "Union Street is zoned residential," explained General Coordinator Joe Holtz. "The Coop is grandfathered in as a 'non-conforming use'," which means it can continue to operate for commercial use.

"We were disappointed," Farber recalled. "We recognized that the vote left few avenues for us to continue our work on the expansion, and that was heartbreaking."

However, the zoning makes it all but impossible to build new commercial buildings. This means that the enticing empty lot to the west and south of the Coop—the former

The station house for FDNY Squad 1, which is to the east of the Coop, would be an extreme long shot as a site for expansion. Even if the squad were ever to move and the building presented for sale, converting it to commercial use would be very challenging.

Could the Coop add floors? This is also complicated because of zoning regulations.

Even if the regulations could be overcome, digging an additional basement level below the existing one would be very expensive, and would require temporary closure

of the Coop.

The structural work required to add additional levels above is less arduous and wouldn't necessarily require closure of the Coop to complete it. However, it would still increase the floor area of the Coop as a ratio of the lot size, which is against zoning regulations.

Zoning issues would also prevent the Coop from using its existing office space for shopping while leasing other offices nearby.

Considering the logistical challenges to these proposals, GC Hoagland quips that, "Expanding the Coop's physical size is more of a dream."

If the physical space cannot be expanded, could efficiency be improved instead?

One way to do so would be to address a main bottleneck, checkout.



PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMAN

Checkout is a main bottleneck.

The front area of the store was rearranged to add four or five new checkouts a few decades ago, increasing shopping capacity and throughflow. Another two registers were recently added to ease lines during busy periods.

Another approach would be to extend shopping hours.

“Before the pandemic, the Coop was open 100 hours a week,” recalled Holtz, with shopping ending at 10 p.m. six days a week. This compares to the current 84 hours that the Coop is open, which is closer to the shopping hours that were available back in 2002.

However, returning to longer hours is not as easy as it seems. Later closing will require members to work later shifts, and shrink the available time to clean, repair and restock.

The Coop already has “trouble getting enough members to work early morning slots starting at 5 a.m. and late evening weekend shifts for hard-to-fill jobs like lifting, cleaning and bathrooms.”

These issues may not deter the General Coordinators, and Holtz hinted at potential movement on this topic, with the possibility of extending shopping hours from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m., Monday through Saturday.



Extended hours are being considered to add capacity.

It is not clear what impact extending shopping hours would have on crowds. Shopping demand can be lumpy. The Coop could try to smooth out differences in peak and off-peak shopping numbers by encouraging people to shop more uniformly across the hours that the Coop is open, perhaps with carrot credits for early morning and late evening shopping.

Short of taking another look at the Second Location Committee's work, any of these possible changes may be relatively incremental.

Still, the Coop's professional staff continues to try to figure out innovative ways to address overcrowding. "The GCs, with the staff, will keep working to make the experience for the current members the best it can be," Herpel said.

Dan Bergsagel is a structural engineer from London. He likes to talk about the unexpected things hiding in plain sight.

MOODOMETER: THE RETURN OF CROWDED AISLES

August 14, 2024



By Miranda Purves

On a recent July Sunday afternoon outside the dear old Coop, things were feeling positively *Sesame Street*. Receiving workers paused to chat with friends, walkers sauntered in with carts, and children celebrating a birthday party raced into the foyer to find a scavenger-hunt clue. Suddenly, the mood darkened. “I was in line, you [expletive]! Didn’t you see my kid holding my spot?” a man yelled. He was about 6’4”, and the object of his rage was a somewhat shorter shopper waiting to enter the store. Other than him, the line consisted of a child who, up until that minute, had been darting around the place-marker pylons, spraying the laminated numbers from a bottle, his face behind a plastic shield.

“I didn’t know he was in line,” the recipient of the onslaught uttered, pulling back from the finger jutting into his face. The crowd quieted as the angry man continued to

step toward him. “Don’t talk! Have some respect,” he said menacingly. The neon NEXT sign flashed and the man strode inside, commanding his child to wait by his cargo bike, while the victim of the aggression tried to regain his composure—as did the now-silenced crowd.

Despite the pandemic accouterments of the masks and spray bottles, the rest of the scene resembled the before times: the density of people outside; the genial, lively mood; the sudden altercation. In the past few months at the Coop, other than Coop co-founder and General Manager Joe Holtz being barred without pay for a month, the big news is old news: just as we’d gotten used to shopping under what former Governor Andrew Cuomo once called the “new normal,” the normal-normal Coop has begun to seem possible again, including the defining feature of the return of somewhat more crowded aisles.

There are currently 62 orange shopper tags, aka “carrots,” that the Coop uses to count and limit shoppers in the aisles. According to General Coordinator Ann Herpel, this number has been the same since fall of 2021. But those 62 carrots are running through more shoppers’ hands throughout the day. We’re also filling our carts at a less-harried pace.



Members are seeing the return of a familiar sight in the Coop: crowded aisles.

“Shopping had become utilitarian; you were coming to get your five things and get out,” said Caroline Todd, a transportation planner with the MTA who was waiting outside for her shift to start. “Now it’s somewhere between the old days and that.”

The evolution of hyperexpedient shopping during the pandemic is a lovely example of what design and management theorists call *emergence*. This refers to novel behaviors and innovations that spring into existence organically when different elements within complex systems interact.

“As we all got accustomed to what was happening, people developed tools to make it easier for themselves,” Herpel said. The management quickly adapted to the crisis by combining recommendations from New York state—enforced traffic-flow patterns and decals on the floor marking distances—with new paid employees at the front of the Coop.

“No one was really interested in spending a lot of time in here,” Herpel said. “We were trying to facilitate that, and members responded and began to come in extraord-

inarily prepared to shop, with very detailed lists, schematically working out where things were on the shelves.”

Now some of the fear has lessened, and so has the distance between us. People are reaching over and under, navigating right-of-way and even—*gasp!*—gabbing in the aisles. Inevitably, this means more snapping as well as pleasantries. “People are forgetting about personal space again,” said Todd. But she quickly added that she loves the Coop. “We’re used to some chaos in the lines!”

The Coop’s commercial certificate of occupancy allows for 250 people within its 6,000 square feet. If you divide 6,000 by 250 you get 24 square feet per person, which sounds great: roughly a five-foot radius. But once you take into account the shelving, the checkout areas, the dairy stocking case, the individual carts and the Hollywood and U-boats, that space cushion evaporates.

In other words, we have plenty of legal leeway to sardine ourselves. Until the pandemic, that left the Coop management to determine a reasonable capacity. They had some experience managing crowds on the fly before. Herpel described the scene in October 2012 as Hurricane Sandy blew in: people shoving inventory in backpacks, totes, anything, because all the carts and baskets were in use (they kept more out than), while the checkout line snaked around and then doubled up in produce.

“If someone had passed out in an aisle, the firefighters from next door would’ve taken minutes to get through,” Herpel said. “You could just tell it wasn’t safe.” They decided to hand shoppers numbers and warehouse them upstairs in the meeting room, calling them down as people left.

But it wasn’t until the peak lockdowns in the spring and early summer of 2020 that the store faced external strictures. The state said that essential businesses that remained open needed to operate at no more than 50 percent occupancy and provide six feet of distance between customers. At the Coop, having 125 people in the store wouldn’t allow for six feet between them.

“We settled on 30,” recalled Herpel, “then for a long time we stayed at 40.” The store increased capacity incrementally, two at a time. After the staff was fully vaccinated, they became more comfortable with letting more shoppers in. Once member workers returned in July 2021, they decided to try 56 orange carrots and 20 blue, for workers to shop after their shifts, before settling on the current 62 and ending the requirement that member workers take a carrot to shop post-shift.

The state has long since lifted its capacity limits, but the Coop is so far sticking to its own, finding that this number allows in most members who want to shop without long outside waits. But membership is beginning to creep back up. Before the pandemic, it hovered above 17,000. In 2020, either because members faded away or decisively left, the number was down by 50 percent. Currently, there are 13,500.

Many of the members outside on that Sunday relished the increases and were happy that shoppers were back in the aisles. “I don’t want a line outside!” said Adam Pollock, a Park Slope resident and father of the birthday girl on the scavenger hunt. “I’d rather it be crowded inside, as COVID recedes.” His partner, Michal Lewin-Epstein, added, “I want non-member visits to resume!”

“THE MORE THE MERRIER! DURING THE PANDEMIC, SHOPPING WAS A HORROR SHOW, A KUBRICK MOVIE, AWFUL.”

MEMBER JAMES RUSCHAK

James Ruschak, a member for over 20 years, was standing outside while his cousin, who was working, brought him New York State cherries that had just hit the shelves. “The more the merrier!” he said. “During the pandemic shopping was a horror show, a Kubrick movie, awful.”



Coop member James Rushak

The new members interviewed for this article—who, it's important to note, have never experienced the pre-pandemic crowds that were once the norm—echoed Ruschak's sentiment, describing shopping as less stressful now that the store is busier.

Emily Seager, a Rockaway Beach resident, joined almost a year ago in July 2021. "People were on edge then," she said. "I value people feeling more comfortable now, walking closer to each other. There's not as much anxiety."

But Kate Barrow, a social worker and management consultant for nonprofit organizations, still remembers holiday shopping and the different kind of tension generated by Coop crowds, even when they're not the possibly-contagious, burned-out, masked zombies we've all been in the more-recent past.

"I had so many of those experiences [of personal space invasions] pre-pandemic that

anytime it was super crowded I would just end up leaving, as in: I can't handle this stress. 'I think I'm being really polite, you seem to think I'm being really rude, I don't know what to do,'" Barrow said.

Laura Tucker, a writer, noted that shopping in the 35-people days did have a certain luxuriousness. "This is the first Sunday that I am struck by how crowded it is. But I understand they have to do what they have to do," she said.

Some of the Coop pandemic changes will serve to make the store a little less crowded even if we do zoom back up to 17,000 and do away with the carrots. Now, shift changes are staggered. "It took a pandemic to figure this out!" laughed Herpel. "We used to always complain pre-pandemic on a Saturday afternoon at 3:30 when a bunch of people would come off of checkout, food processing and receiving shifts, 'Why did you come shopping at shift change?'"



General Coordinator Ann Herpel

“THERE IS A CAPACITY TO THE COOP. I DON’T THINK THERE’S AN AGREEMENT AS TO WHAT THAT CAPACITY IS. WHAT COULD WE FINANCIALLY SUPPORT?”

GENERAL COORDINATOR ANN HERPEL

Management has also gotten better at comparing revenue with membership information. Because each transaction is tagged to a household membership number, they can see which members are actually shopping and how much each household buys. The store has always had access to these numbers but didn’t make use of them until trying to survive the financial crisis in 2020 with the help of federal aid, when both capacity limits and membership cut sales by about 30 percent. Going forward, this data analysis will help us determine how, and when, to grow.

“There is a capacity to the Coop. I don’t think there’s an agreement as to what that capacity is,” said Herpel. “What could we financially support? It depends on what you want to do.”

If shopping is more pleasant at a \$42 million business rather than a \$58 million business, the Coop would have to make choices, such as having fewer staff members, which is the biggest expense, she said.

But the Coop has to plan for some growth to keep up with inflation, which puts pressure on operating expenses. Even when the economy isn’t grappling with runaway numbers, the Federal Reserve aims for a 2-percent-per-year target. To stay solvent, the store needs either to increase the number of shoppers, which equals crowded aisles, or encourage fewer shoppers—via incentives, refunds, minimums or other mechanisms—to buy more food. Or there’s the option of markup increases—which would be about as popular as solar power in coal country.

How we feel about crowded aisles is an issue central to how we want to structure our-

selves, what we want to take away from the pandemic and what we don't. Barrow mused that it might be preferable to keep a capacity limit permanently, particularly since there isn't a clear-cut end to COVID-19. But Ruschak's in favor of letting it all resume: "I'm a closet sociologist so I kind of liked the old way. Even when it was bad, it was good!"

Miranda Purves is a writer who's lived in the South Slope since 2005.