GM ADDRESSES MASKS, FINANCE, ADDING NEW WORK SLOTS AND MEMBERS

December 6, 2021

By Hayley Gorenberg

Members played out a miniature version of a national debate in the open forum to kick off the October 26 General Meeting, as one member objected to the Coop's mask requirement. The member deemed masks a personal choice for adult decision-making, and asserted that the Coop should consider temperature checks and junk the current mask requirement.

All responses voiced support for masks in the store. One member recast masks as a measure to "protect each other and our community," including people who cannot medically tolerate or qualify for a vaccine, and noted widespread mask requirements at other establishments.

The next speaker referred to their professional background in infectious diseases and public health, and called masks a key part of "ending the pandemic."

The final member who spoke added that absence of fever does not medically confirm that an individual with COVID-19 cannot transmit it, so a fever-check system would be insufficient to protect members' health.

FINANCES STILL TOUGH

Coop General Manager Joe Holtz shared a new financial report on the Zoom screen, noting that slow IRS credit processes ought not obscure the fact that financial "trend lines" for the Coop, while improving, still show the Coop losing money weekly, "and we shouldn't be complacent about that."

The Coop's infamous "cash burn" has improved to the best level in the pandemic. If the Coop had not received the IRS credits that did flow in over the previous four weeks, the Coop would have lost $155,000, Holtz noted. That said, the "cash burn" has improved to its best level during the pandemic, he added, as the Coop was down $125,000 per week early in the pandemic.

The Coop has lost $6.8 million over the course of pandemic operations, and sales volume remains $300,000 less per week than it was before March 2020, which Holtz termed "really troublesome."

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

Possibilities to grow sales might include adding more hours, adding more capacity (shoppers on the floor and checkout lines) and adding more members, Holtz suggested. The Coop routinely loses about 2,300 members per year, but that number increased to about 4,000 over the course of the pandemic. Holtz opined that adding more members was the most important measure, and that in addition to shopping and boosting sales, more member workers would be needed for the Coop to expand hours and operations.

Major credits owed to the Coop were recently paid by the IRS.
One member suggested applying lagging IRS credits to offset Coop payroll taxes, adding that some local restaurants had adopted that measure to mitigate cash flow. Holtz noted payroll taxes are below $10,000 per week, “and our problem is much bigger than that.” He said the Coop is considering a bridge loan secured by money it is owed by the IRS.

Asked whether the Coop’s higher markup might have contributed to member falloff, Holtz acknowledged that “as the world of groceries gets more competitive,” with some stores running checkouts “with no human labor,” it was all the more important to try and return to earlier prices, but that “we need some rebuilding first,” and the Coop is working on a system for recruiting members.

NEW WORK SHIFTS

PHOTO BY JOHN MIDGLEY

General Coordinator Elinoar Astrinsky reviewed the Coop's operations including plans for new work shifts.

The Coop is rolling out new work shifts, including bulk packaging upstairs in what was previously the childcare room, and three nightly cleaning shifts with "not many people . . . basically working on your own," ideal for members who want a very sparsely populated shift, reported General Coordinator Elinoar Astrinsky. She highlighted new receiving shifts, as well as deep-cleaning and repair shifts Monday through Wednesday at 8:30 p.m., "if you're handy with tools."

Members will soon be able to book shifts further in advance and shop a little later in the evening, and with good planning and safety measures, the Coop is experiencing "almost no no-shows" for work, a record Astrinsky pressed with pride.

New work shifts are being rolled out, including pre-packaging the most popular bulk items.

SUPPLY CHAIN

As Coop buyers continue to seek out good options and alternatives, "I don't think

there’s any need to panic-shop,” Astrinsky said. She supported buying staples members know they will need, and highlighted an “amazing selection” of pears, which ripen from the inside out and should be stored in the refrigerator till the “shoulder” around the stem has a little give, indicating “juicy, lovely flavor.”

COMMITTEE REPORTS

A member of the International Trade Education Committee reported about objections from Brazil to vaccine cost and intellectual property constraints under a contract with Pfizer, and about low vaccine access in Africa.

The Labor Committee, focused on workplace fairness, announced committee vacancies and a desire to recruit more members of color. The committee reported on the Coop’s participation in the tomato workers’ Fair Food program, in which Coop members pay a “6% premium on tomatoes” and are now sending a check of over $4,500 to the campaign, modeling small-store support.

Fran Hawthorne was also reelected to the Agenda Committee.

PHOTO BY EVA WALTER

Pirco Wolfframm successfully ran again for the Agenda Committee.
Three Agenda Committee members successfully sought reelection: Fran Hawthorne, Kate Spota and Pirco Wolfframm. They responded to GM member requests for more transparency in advance about agenda items and the potential for innovation.

PARENTAL LEAVE DISCUSSION

PHOTO BY DAVID BARTNER

Member David Bartner is campaigning for the Coop to make parental leave more flexible.

Member David Bartner teed up a proposal for discussion, suggesting the Coop allow parents to time parental leave as they choose, sometime before a child turns 3 years old—rather than requiring leave start upon the birth of the child. His proposal also included a provision to “backdate,” for members who had a child during the pandemic member-work suspension, so that they could take a year of leave from subsequently required work.

Bartner asked to table his item and delete the suggestion of backdating leave, given the GM’s discussion of worker needs, saying “it may not be the right time to change things, given what’s going on at the Coop.”

Members nonetheless commented, expressing support for flexibly timed leave.

Hayley Gorenberg joined the Coop in 1993. When she’s not writing for the Gazette*, she’s working as a community-driven civil rights lawyer—or playing the surdo for a local women’s/TGNCI+ samba reggae band.*