

# AUGUST GENERAL MEETING REPORT

September 24, 2024



*By Sanoja Bhaumik*

September 24, 2024

The August 2024 General Meeting (GM) focused on the Coop's two-day-per-week mask policy on the shopping floor. The discussion led to renewed calls for hybrid meetings so that immune-compromised members could easily attend GMs. At the meeting, there were also procedural questions around the agenda and Coop referendums.

GENERAL COORDINATOR JOE HOLTZ PRESENTED THE COOP'S 24-WEEK FINANCIAL REPORT. NOTABLY, THE COOP SAW A NET INCOME LOSS OF \$33,298, WHICH HOLTZ ATTRIBUTED TO SLOWER SUMMER SALES.

## OPEN FORUM

In the Open Forum, Coop member Tim Hospodor inquired if merchandise credits, which can expire, could be used as credits towards member investment. Coop secretary Elizabeth Tobier brought up the question of hybrid GMs over Zoom, especially in cases where venues will not rent to the Coop (Brooklyn College Tow Center agreed and then later reversed on their decision to rent a larger meeting space to the Coop earlier this year). Another member noted that an agenda item on the issue of amending the Coop's bylaws to allow for hybrid GMs has been pending for eight months, and there has been no update on when it will be included in the agenda. Dominique Bravo, a member of the Agenda Committee, responded that the issue will be heard: "It's happening," she said.

## COOP FINANCES

General Coordinator Joe Holtz presented the Coop's 24-week financial report. Notably, the Coop saw a net income loss of \$33,298, which Holtz attributed to slower summer sales and increased spoilage in the warm weather. During the same period last year, the Coop had a net income gain of \$283,586. When questioned on the difference between the two years, Holtz attributed it to a change in the Coop markup, from 25% in 2023 to 24% this year, as well as to a rise in staff healthcare costs. He concluded, "Nothing I've said concerns me about the Coop's financial health." The Coop has done almost \$27 million in sales in this fiscal year.

As Holtz explained in the August GM, the Coop raised its markup from 21% to 25% during the pandemic, then lowered it just before the beginning of the current fiscal year; the power to make this change had been given to General Coordinators by a pri-

or GM. Holtz had also explained in August that the Coop's income should bounce back by the end of the fiscal year and that its mission is to make food affordable and break even.

Members also asked about increases in *Gazette* costs and repairs: the *Linewaiters' Gazette* needed a software purchase, and the Coop made repairs to the floors in aisles 2 and 3. The Coop also recently converted the childcare room to storage, since the Coop no longer provides childcare as a result of rising insurance costs.

HOLTZ EMPHASIZED THAT FUTURE PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS NECESSITATED A HOME DELIVERY SYSTEM, AND A PILOT DELIVERY PROGRAM WOULD BEGIN SOMETIME NEXT YEAR.

One member asked how the Coop invests its balances to take advantage of high interest rates. Holtz gave an overview of the Coop's investments—the bulk of which is held in Vanguard treasuries, money markets, and CDs—and added that the Coop earned approximately \$136,000 in interest this fiscal year so far. One member asked about a line item for a pilot home delivery program, which had been delayed from January 2020. Holtz emphasized that future pandemic preparedness necessitated a home delivery system, and a pilot delivery program would begin sometime next year.

## SUMMER PRODUCE

General Coordinator Joe Szladek gave a produce report, highlighting all the fresh, local summer produce available at the Coop, including local cucumbers, zucchini, eggplant, melon, peaches, nectarines and apples. Szladek also noted that the first week after Labor Day tends to be one of the busiest at the Coop, as members return from holiday and children go back to school.

One member asked about excess packaging waste. Szladek stated that the Coop considers plastic and wasteful packaging when ordering items, but he acknowledged that excess waste is an industry-wide problem. He also reminded members that the Personnel Committee, which works with the General Coordinators to provide guidance and support human resources and operational issues, is looking for new members. To learn more, read about it here.

## MEXICAN MAIZE

A member of the International Trade Education Committee gave a report previewing a piece in this issue of the *Linewaiters' Gazette* on Mexico's ban on genetically modified corn, in an effort to protect Mexico's vast array of indigenous corn. Mexicans are the largest maize consumers in the world, and maize is the country's staple crop. The US is the second-largest importer of Mexican maize, and Mexico is the largest importer of US corn. This ban would have major effects on US corn exports to Mexico, and the move has since led to a dispute with US trade representatives, who are challenging the ban under the US Mexico Canada Agreement (USMCA).

THE MAJORITY OF THE GM MEETING WAS SPENT DISCUSSING A PROPOSED REFERENDUM ON THE COOP'S TWO-DAY-PER-WEEK MASKING POLICY.

## MASK UP?

The majority of the GM meeting was spent discussing a proposed referendum on the Coop's two-day-per-week masking policy. The agenda item sponsor, David Bartner, briefly introduced the proposal. Bartner's main point was that the vote on the mask policy took place at the October 2023 GM, on Halloween night, when many parents could not attend. He described the decision to hold a vote on this night as "joyless." Instead, Bartner pointed to an earlier 2023 Coop survey on the question of masking sent through email. That survey had over 4,700 respondents, with 68 percent voting against a mask mandate, and Bartner argued that this survey was more representa-

tive of members' opinions than a 100-person GM. This comment sparked discussion around the effectiveness of GMs versus referendums in deciding Coop policy. Several members noted that they had advocated for hybrid GMs for several months in order to expand access to the forum.

A member later added a point of information that the cited survey asked for opinions on a 7-day-per-week mask mandate, not a two-day-per-week mandate as is currently in place on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Thus, the survey was not representative of members' opinions on the standing Coop mask policy.

The agenda item stated that masking at the Coop should be voluntary and not required two days a week; in addition, any future decision on masking should be decided by referendum. Several members cited concerns around the text of the referendum, which was limited by presenting two choices:

Yes, I agree masking should be voluntary, and any future decision on masking should be decided by referendum.

No, I do not agree that masking should be voluntary. The Coop should maintain its current masking policy.

Members noted that there were many possibilities between the two options, such as a decision to vote on a masking decision by referendum, while maintaining a two-day mask mandate on the shopping floor, altering a mask mandate to one-day-per-week, or adjusting the mask mandate to certain hours of the day. Members asked Bartner if the Coop would retain its ability to implement an emergency mask mandate, as during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bartner replied that the referendum would not impede emergency decision making.

MEMBERS ALSO NOTED THAT THIS DISCUSSION WOULD BE MORE APT IN A HYBRID SETTING WITH A VIDEO OPTION, WHERE THOSE WHO FELT UNCOMFORTABLE

## ATTENDING AN UNMASKED, INDOOR MEETING COULD PARTICIPATE IN A DISCUSSION THAT WAS PERTINENT TO THEM AND THEIR SAFETY.

The agenda item also spurred debate around the Agenda Committee's process. As the Open Forum discussion revealed, the agenda item on hybrid meetings had been stalled for eight months. A member asked why the masking agenda item was back on the GM agenda when the issue had been discussed less than a year prior. Agenda Committee member Dominique Bravo responded that the new item considers a referendum, a new subject in the discussion, and the committee was concerned about the perception that the October 31 GM vote was unfair.

Members also noted that this discussion would be more apt in a hybrid setting with a video option, where those who felt uncomfortable attending an unmasked, indoor meeting could participate in a discussion that was pertinent to them and their safety. The Chair Committee then urged members to discuss the content of the proposal and not the process.

Several members commented that they would vote "no" on the agenda item and the referendum. They argued that the two-day-per-week mask mandate seemed like a "reasonable" accommodation for vulnerable members and those with health conditions that required masking, and it was in line with the cooperative spirit. Member Elise Barr spoke about fellow Coop members who only feel safe shopping with two-way masking. She also questioned the posts on the Coop's Instagram account, which promoted the GM discussion around mask mandates with an image of a large trash bag filled with disposable surgical masks. Members suggested that concerns about the excess waste produced by free disposable masks could be addressed by encouraging members to bring reusable masks (as members bring their own shopping bags) or even charging a small fee for a disposable mask at the Coop.

Others disagreed. One member suggested that the mask mandate was "offensive, oppressive" and "hateful," as it reduced individual choice. Member Amir Bar-lev argued

that through the mask mandate, the Coop had chosen “ideology over science,” because no government or scientific body has currently urged a mask mandate. Another member responded that government bodies often make recommendations based on expectations of compliance, and the current policy seemed like a good compromise. One member involved in the 2023 survey noted that the two-day-a-week mask policy was based on staff input, and survey results in which 32% of respondents wanted a seven-day mask mandate.

Although a small number of present members opposed the mask policy and signaled their approval of the proposed referendum, the majority of present members appeared hesitant to move forward with the agenda item, both due to procedural questions around the use of a referendum and COVID-19 transmission concerns.

Following this lively discussion, the Board of Directors voted to accept the advice of membership in reference to the minutes of the July meeting. After the vote, the meeting was adjourned.

---

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

September 24, 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 removed 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 outside 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 Elinoar 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 products. 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.*