

AUGUST GENERAL MEETING REPORT

September 24, 2024



By Sanoja Bhaumik

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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.

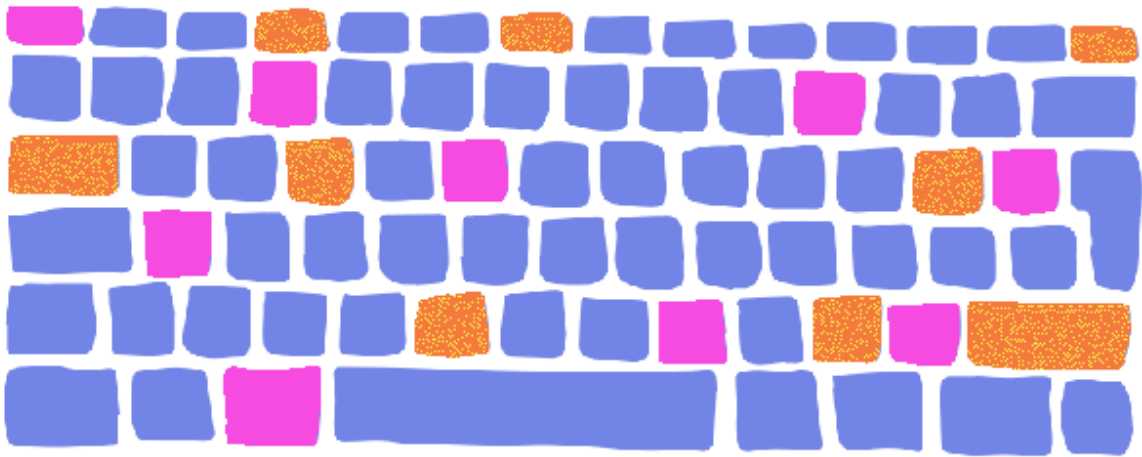
Although a small number of present members opposed the mask policy and signaled their approval of the proposed referendum, the majority of present members appeared hesitant to move forward with the agenda item, both due to procedural questions around the use of a referendum and COVID-19 transmission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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

September 24, 2024

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RE: GENERAL MEETINGS

Members and leadership,

Some greet in-person General Meetings as a “return to normal.” They also carry disappointment. Months ago, leadership was asked to implement a hybrid solution [of virtu-

al and in-person attendance]. Sadly, there's no indication that this possibility was considered nor is it clear that the membership actually voted for one or the other option (though I may have missed it).

In person has advantages and advocacy. So does the greater inclusion facilitated by hybrid. What is the greater good for our community? With thousands of members, we need greater participation at meetings to consider important, financially impactful or long-range matters.

In recent months, generally fewer than 150 members dialed in, sometimes less than 90. Yet I attended more meetings than in the decade preceding the pandemic because of online access. Will in-person meetings burgeon? It is fair to speculate that a fair number of members attended only to garner two work credits.

After 13 years being engaged yet never living close by, my status is now "retired." Shopping, periodically working a shift (not required but enjoyed) and attending monthly evening meetings is impractical for me. This decision lacks flexibility. Even post-2019, circumstances were unchanged. Isn't there wisdom in better access electronically? Why not avail ourselves of all opportunities? If in-person carries more value, then let the new one-credit policy apply to in-person attendance, but don't deny participation to the rest.

Respectfully,
Amita Rodman

Editors' note: Amita Rodman is incorrect in characterizing hybrid meetings as something the General Coordinators can just implement. The GCs explained several times that virtual meetings were an emergency measure during COVID and that the GCs have been unwinding emergency measures. They also stated that members can submit an agenda item to discuss a hybrid meeting format. In addition, the Chair Committee stated that they were not yet prepared to run a hybrid meeting, and that they would need more people, more equipment and more time to work on how the GM

would function effectively.

LET'S VOTE ON MASKED DAYS—WITH A REMOTE OPTION

To the Editor,

I love the Coop and have been a member for many years, but the lifting of the mask mandate has made the Coop a less accessible space for people who, like me, are disabled, immunocompromised, live in a household with others who are disabled or immunocompromised or for any other reason want or need to limit their potential for COVID exposure. The proposal discussed at the September General Meeting—mandating masking two days a week—would help make the Coop a safer space for everyone and would be easy to implement, just like the carrot tags that limit capacity only on certain days. Those who strongly don't want to mask could shop five days a week, while the other two days could be COVID-safer spaces for anyone who needs to mask or is fine with donning a mask to support their fellow Coop members. This would also allow COVID-cautious members to choose work shifts that require masking and help reduce the cumulative risks of the Coop staff who keep the Coop running day in and day out.

Please put this item up for a vote at an upcoming GM—and please create an option for remote participation for that meeting (and in general). Without a remote option and with no mask mandate at the newly in-person GMs, many of the people for whom masked days would be most important will be kept out of the conversation and effectively disfranchised. We are part of the Coop community too. Please vote to make the Coop a safer space for us and let us have a voice in the process.

Adrien Lorenzo Weibgen

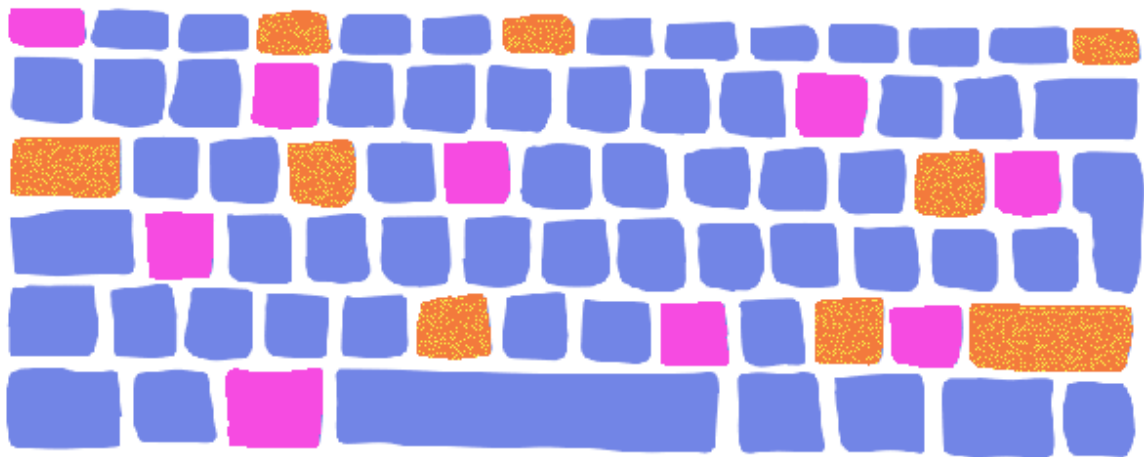
Note from General Coordinator Ann Herpel: As I suggested at September's GM,

there is an option for all members to vote on a proposal for masking: a Coop-wide referendum. Holding a referendum is the solution, as every member would receive a ballot and could vote on this important issue, especially those who cannot attend an in-person meeting due to health reasons. If a member wants to have a referendum on this subject, they are welcome to place an item on the agenda of a future GM.

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BRING BACK THE CLASSIFIEDS

To the Editor:

At the risk of redundancy, I am writing yet again to suggest—and request—that the *Linewaiters' Gazette* resume its “Classified” section. I don’t know why it was elimi-

nated, I believe early during TrumpVirus, but surely it should be reinstated.

Among its many advantages and conveniences, it serves as an important means of communication among Coop members. And, for an organization that touts the benefits of recycling and improving the environment, it is indispensable for minimizing the unnecessary purchase of yet more goods.

I have both bought and sold items via the *Gazette* and always been happy with my recycled bargains.

I am again requesting that the *Gazette* reinstate this valuable service to the members.

Marc Palmer

MASKING WHILE SHOPPING

To the Editor:

I am still masking, as when I get even a cold it lasts for months. I have been cold-free for most of the past three years, and will continue with the inconvenience of masking vs. the worse inconvenience of a long respiratory illness. That being said, studies show that by masking I'm protecting others, not myself. Everyone in the room needs to be masking to reduce the risk of spreading a cold, the flu, or Covid. So how can I shop safely at the PSFC if no one else around me is masking? I would appreciate it if there were at least one or two days per week when everyone in the room is masked. - Can't we set this up in non-peak hours for the safety of those of us who are immunocompromised?

Spike Kahn