SEPTEMBER 21 GENERAL MEETING ROUND UP

October 18, 2021



Above: General Meeting Zoom Participants

By Meredith Kolodner

Rebuilding Coop community and making the general meetings more interactive

The Coop's General Meeting grappled with one of the central issues of our time – how do people communicate, feel connected, and make important decisions in the age of COVID?

An informal group of Coop members who call themselves the "Coop Study Group" have been meeting for the past several months to discuss ways to improve member participation and to support the Coop. This group brought those questions to the

September GM and asked for feedback on several concrete suggestions to improve communication and participation during the GM; they also sought new ideas to make the GMs more community-minded, transparent and democratic.

On the one hand, virtual meetings might have allowed more people to attend who lived far away or lacked child care, said the presenter, George Olken. At the same time, people who are less tech-savvy or don't have stable Internet access have lost out. But the "Study Group" argued that all members—and the Coop itself—have lost something in the fog of Zoom. Overall attendance has decreased on Zoom versus in person meetings.

"Zoom is frustrating and isolating," Olken said. He acknowledged that the in-person meetings had also sometimes been frustrating but that Zoom meetings lack the energy of being in-person. One can't get a sense of the room, see how people are reacting or who's stepping out for a side conversation.

The study group was not blaming the Chair Committee for the problems, and several members of the Chair and Agenda Committees said they appreciated the constructive tone of the presentation. Two suggested changes had already been made—there is closed captioning available during the meeting and speakers are told how much time they have to speak and everyone is kept to the same number of minutes.

Another suggestion, which garnered some support, was to change the meeting format from "webinar" to "meeting" format. In the current webinar set up, participants can only see the hosts of the meeting and the person speaking. In a meeting format, you can see the faces (or names if participants want their camera off) of everyone attending. It also allows for reaction icons (thumbs up, clapping, etc) that everyone can see, and it allows everyone see who and how many people have their hands raised to speak. Break-out rooms are available, which facilitates smaller groups of people to meet and talk.

The other main suggestion from the study group was to turn the chat function back

on to let members communicate directly with one another. One-on-one chats could be used to say hello to people you know, and the group chat would be another mode of communication among all members. The chat script could also be copied and made public, allowing more members to see what happened during the meeting beyond reading the official minutes.

“Democracy is messy,” Olken quipped, “but in the messiness is the joy.”



Additionally, the study group suggested that members could volunteer to provide live technical assistance to anyone having difficulty with any of the Zoom functions, like voting. Another suggestion was to use slides for presentations to help people follow the discussion.

“These are ideas, just food for thought,” Olken said as he wrapped up his presentation. “Our goals are greater participation through transparency and expanded accessibility. Our hope is to create more feeling of community at our meetings. When we can see each other we feel less alone. And when we can see who is here we feel part of a community. We’d love to hear your ideas.”

Several speakers said they liked many of the ideas proposed by the group.

“I’m new to the Coop,” said one member, who identified herself as Mary. “I really like the idea of being able to see people.”

General Coordinator Joe Holtz agreed. “I really appreciate the suggestions,” he said. “I so miss being able to look out at the audience and see the reactions I’m getting, see how many hands are up.”

David, a member of the Chair Committee, said he appreciated the tone of the presentation and reminded members that they did vote on the meeting format and the creation of a committee to carry them out.

He wasn’t in favor of re-instating the chat. While most members are respectful, he said, there are people who are “trolls,” there’s hate speech and “brigading” which make moderating a chat very challenging. He suggested posting a link in the chat for a Slack or Discord channel (which are other messaging platforms) for member communication.

Another member suggested that the chairs use an alternative channel, since they’re familiar with the technology, and leave the chat to meeting attendees to make it more accessible to people who aren’t as tech-savvy.

Treasury still struggling but there’s hope on the horizon

The Coop has lost $2.1 million in the last year, Joe Holtz reported. The IRS, however, owes the Coop $2.9 million in employee retention credits, and it is hopeful some of this will come in soon.

The number of paid staff went from 77 before the pandemic to more than 200 people during the height of the pandemic. On July 12, with the restoration of member labor, 80 percent of the temporary staff was laid off, and the goal is to no longer have tem-

porary staff by the end of October, which will save the Coop an additional $10,000 per week.

In response to a question about raising revenue by accepting more members, Holtz answered that the Coop is down 4,000 members since March 2020. By mid or late-October there should be an online onboarding system with appointments to visit to Coop to complete the joining process.

The Coop used to have 100 hours of shopping time, and it is now at 84. As the Coop adds more members, the General Coordinators hope to add more hours to keep the same limits on the number of people who are in the building.

Buyers report

If you've noticed some of your regular items missing in the cans aisle, it's not because your friends are suddenly buying all the same things that you are. The Coop's biggest dry goods distributor has been facing serious labor shortages. The Coop usually gets an 18-wheeler full of food five or six times a week, and they've been sending a quarter trailer or less. Buyers have been working very hard to find other distributors so even if your favorite brand isn't there, there should be a good substitute.

A bit of controversy

Members of the Hudson Valley Farm Coop Committee, which was formed to help launch an organization in the Hudson Valley with a goal to acquire and operate up to 15 farms, presented their structure and reporting proposal, which was required by the provisional approval granted at the April 2021 GM.

The goal of the group, said Teresa Santamaria, is to create "safer, saner and more sustainable food systems." The committee said they would report quarterly to the GM, open the first half of committee meetings to all members, and post meeting notices in advance. The proposal sponsors will recruit and interview members with expe-

rience in agriculture, real estate, finance law and business management, and the new members will be approved by a simple majority of the proposal's sponsors. Members will get credit for work on the committee, and committee members' bios will be posted on the Coop website.

There were questions about committee members being able to benefit from the creation of the Hudson Valley Coop, and in particular committee member Jonathan Farber. (Farber has been a member of the Coop for 28 years and is a landscape architect and farmer.)

Farber answered that his company could help to get the company up and running, but that would be up to the committee.

The proposal was approved.

Committee reports

Paul Warren, from the Equity Access and Community Committee, requested space on the agenda to vote on collecting demographic information of new members to find out who the Coop community is.

The Labor Committee, the International Trade Education squad, and the Agenda Committee are all looking for new members. There are links to these committees Coop website if people are interested in more information.

Open Forum

One member requested that the text of complicated issues be distributed in advance of the meetings so members had a chance to read and digest proposals. Coop staff said that they could provide link in the Google doc that has the agenda, which is posted in advance.

Another member asked when child care would be available. Joe Holtz said there weren’t plans about when to bring back child care since the room is being used to package food so that Aisle 2 doesn’t get too crowded. There is also a safety issue in terms of the virus. Holtz said he doesn’t have answer as to how to make it happen but that the Coop is committed to bringing it back and that the issue needs further discussion.

One more vote

Two sitting members of the Hearing Officers Committee Election, which has had no hearings since the start of the pandemic, were overwhelmingly re-elected.