THE HUDSON VALLEY FARM COOP COMMITTEE REPORT: UPDATE AND CALL FOR NEW MEMBERS

July 25, 2022

By Jonathan Farber

The Park Slope Food Coop Hudson Valley Farm Coop Committee is recruiting new members. This is an exciting venture and an opportunity to join a diverse team creating positive change in our food and farming systems. Committee members receive PSFC shift credits for their work. Agriculture and food-related business experience are not required to join.

The Coop voted at the April 2021 General Meeting to become the original sponsor of this new and separate cooperative business. Our website is under development at hvfarmcoop.com. PSFC members interested in joining the committee may contact us at info@hvfarmcoop.com.

The HVFC is a proposed enterprise that will acquire, improve and operate fifteen farms in the mid-Hudson Valley for the benefit of its shareholders and the wider community. The start-up budget for this project is $30 million. The Farm Coop will raise funds through a unique financial mechanism called a Direct Public Offering. The HVFC will provide its members the rare opportunity to own a stake in socially progressive and ecologically regenerative farms. Their investments will help to recreate, sustain and protect this wonderful corner of our threatened and critical agricultural region.

Our immediate needs are in three broad areas. First, we are looking for experienced accounting, business management and finance professionals. The tasks at hand include refining the business plan, preparing our financial model and proforma statements, establishing the cooperative corporation, and structuring the direct public offering. Second, we need professional planners and geographers to round out our design team. And third, we need seasoned marketing and sales pros to help us sharpen presentations to attract project cosponsors in the public, private, and not-for profit

sectors—and, eventually, individual Farm Coop shareholders. Community organizers and public relations professionals will further hone and deliver our message.

Most recently, HVFC members have participated as a client in a semester-long Engaged Learning Project of the Cornell University Cooperative Enterprise Program, SC Johnson Business College, Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management; presented the Farm Coop at the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs Sustainable Finance Seminar; enrolled in a four-session module of the Cornell Cooperative Extension Agricultural Workforce Supervisory Leadership Course titled, "Organizing Farm Work for High Quality Results"; met regularly with the Hudson Valley Devon Cattle Community Breeding Project; participated in a hands-on workshop at the SUNY Cobleskill Meat Processing Lab; and corresponded about the Farm Coop with numerous farmers, agricultural specialists, organizers, and others.

SHIFTS EXPLAINED: HOW DOES THE OFFICE MAKE DECISIONS AROUND SHIFTS?

July 25, 2022



ILLUSTRATION BY ERIK SCHURINK

By Meredith Kolodner

Have you ever wondered, as you're looking online at the list of open shifts, how the Coop knows that it needs only four food processors at 3:30 PM on a Saturday?

The Coop strives for efficiency—so how does the staff decide? In a word, it's data.

"We have years and years of experience," said Membership Coordinator Matt Hoagland, who's been working at the Coop for more than 17 years. "We're on the shopping floor, we're watching how things are working…how receiving is taking in deliveries, etc." Hoagland explains that they look at the data from the past and make continued refinements based on new anecdotal evidence to continue to refine their approach.

THE COOP STRIVES FOR EFFICIENCY—SO HOW DOES THE STAFF DECIDE? IN A WORD, IT'S DATA.

Under the old system, where members were assigned to a “regular” squad, it was the squad leaders who sometimes reported back to Coop staff if they felt they needed more members to get the work done, or if they had more people than they knew what to do with. The staff would supervise the leaders and pay attention to the numbers. More often than not, they determined how many workers were needed based on the shopping volume or how many deliveries we got on a particular day. Or, for example, they knew fewer cashiers were needed because they could tell from their books that fewer members were using cash.

But this came with some drawbacks. Members who were part of the Coop pre-pandemic might remember some days when the checkout line stretched into the produce aisle, and there weren’t checkout workers at all of the stations. A squad leader might say they needed more members, but the underlying issue wasn’t necessarily the number of people on the shift; it was the absentee rate. On average, before the change to the current flex schedule, between 25% and 40% of members didn’t show up for their shifts. Creating the squad assignments was difficult, because staff had to account for people not showing up and then factor in how many people might arrive for an unscheduled make-up shift. Sometimes those numbers matched, and sometimes they were way off.

> “THERE ARE IMPROVEMENTS TO BE MADE THAT WE’RE NOT AWARE OF, BUT WITH FEEDBACK WE’LL CONTINUE TO REFINE THE SYSTEM. WE WANT TO MAKE MEMBERS’ SHOPPING AND WORKING EXPERIENCE THE BEST IT CAN BE.”
>
> ***-MEMBERSHIP COORDINATOR MATT HOAGLAND***

However, under the current system, on an average day only 5% of workers don’t show up for their shifts, which makes it easier to figure out how many people are actually needed. Coop staff also have been running the shifts, so they can see how the system is working first-hand and make judgements about whether more or fewer peo-

ple would be optimal. They watch the aisles, they can see how the stocking is going, how many carts are being used, whether there are enough receivers to unload the trucks, and they keep discussing and sharing experiences. During the pandemic, when there were no member-workers, the staff had the opportunity to make improvements with the goal of making Coop more efficient.

Having experienced staff watching the floor every day, instead of squad leaders who are only there every few weeks, has also made the Coop more efficient, Hoagland said. There are active conversations about bringing back some squad leaders, he noted, now that systems have become more streamlined. But before bringing back the squad leaders (who will now be known as team leaders), the Coop is designing a training that will help members who take those positions.

> SOME ASTUTE MEMBERS HAVE FOUND ANOTHER WAY TO GET THE SHIFTS THEY WANT: PEOPLE CAN CANCEL THEIR SHIFTS UP UNTIL 8:00 PM THE DAY BEFORE THEY WORK, AND OFTEN, ACCORDING TO THESE CRAFTY MEMBERS, PEOPLE WAIT UNTIL VERY CLOSE TO THE DEADLINE TO CANCEL.

The flexibility of the system also means that shifts can get added, or cut, based on a specific event. For example, there are fewer shoppers during the summer, while the days before a holiday can ramp up the crowds. The staff can adjust the number of slots available on particular days, which the former membership database didn’t allow. Those changes can be made weeks or a few days in advance, without causing havoc to the whole shift calendar.

Many members who are intent on getting a particular shift at a particular time have discovered that shifts get released 42 days ahead of time around midnight. The Coop also releases some shifts closer to when they actually occur so that not all the shifts are booked up so far in advance. Hoagland added that one reason the office does not want all six weeks of shifts booked in advance is so that when new members join, or

when old members rejoin, they will see some openings when they look at the shift calendar.

Some astute members have found another way to get the shifts they want: people can cancel their shifts up until 8:00 PM the day before they work, and often, according to these crafty members, people wait until very close to the deadline to cancel. As a result, you can sometimes find a popular shift for the next day if you check the site in the hours leading up to 8:00pm, when the deadline passes. You can also sign up for shifts the day of, up to 30 minutes before the start of a shift.

One of the most popular shifts—and among the more difficult shifts to keep track of—is the Cart Return, or the "walkers", as they're commonly known, as it's not easy to determine the number of walkers who should be assigned to them. There aren't staff members sitting outside timing how long people are waiting for walkers, or how many walkers are sitting without much to do for long periods of time. Many members would like there to be more walking shifts. They are always in high demand, especially since the pandemic, and members say they have to stay awake until midnight so they can sign up when a new shift gets released.

Member Andrea Lindstrom says she can't usually make it until midnight, so it's her husband's job to stay up and get the walking shifts. "It seems like it's been getting more difficult to get them recently," she said.

Along with checkout, weekend Cart Return is one of the most coveted shifts. Darryl Hill and his wife used to do their shifts together, but under the new system, they haven't been able to make it work. He stays up to grab a Sunday Cart Return shift, but it hasn't been possible for them to both get one at the same time because they go so quickly. He echoed several weekend shoppers and walkers who said there are always long waits and they wish there were more walking slots.

"WE'VE DISCUSSED INCREASING THE SHIFTS ON THE WEEKEND, BUT IT'S ALSO A

QUESTION OF, HOW MUCH WAITING IS TOO MUCH?”

-MEMBERSHIP COORDINATOR MATT HOAGLAND

“It’s always nonstop,” said Hill, who has been a member for almost 20 years.

Hoagland says it’s difficult to track the Cart Return shifts because the information is so anecdotal. The feedback comes in the form of how many times people say they’re waiting for a walker and how many times staff see the walkers sitting on the bench reading a book or checking their phones because they don’t have anything to do.

“It’s a really tricky one to get right,” said Hoagland. “We’ve discussed increasing the shifts on the weekend, but it’s also a question of, how much waiting is too much?”

As a weekend shopper who often finds herself waiting for a walker, I discovered that Hoagland had a good point. I set my timer that last time I was waiting, and while I was sure it had been more than 15 minutes, it was, in fact, only eight.

“We’re thinking about these things all the time,” Hoagland said. “There are improvements to be made that we’re not aware of, but with feedback we’ll continue to refine the system. We want to make members’ shopping and working experience the best it can be.”

Meredith Kolodner lives in Brooklyn.

MEMBERS WEIGH IN ON THE RETURN OF RECURRING SHIFTS

July 25, 2022













By Sara Ivry

Earlier this year, the Food Coop announced plans are afoot to restore regular workslots, which will be referred to as “recurring” shifts. The FTOP-for-all model that was implemented during the pandemic will continue for those who want to keep working “freelance,” which is the new term replacing the term “FTOP.” While some members welcome the reversion, others are leery. A handful weigh in below.

Jennifer Bernstein
Cashier; sometimes does check out
Freelance book editor

PHOTO BY JENNIFER BERNSTEIN

FTOP is basically what we've been doing. I like meeting different Coop communities, different subsets of the community, by being there at different times of day and on different shifts. Right now, there's not that feeling of, 'Oh my gosh, my shift is coming up.' That dread.

I recently checked out a guy who was up to just over $600 in his shop. Mostly he was getting vegetables. He got some supplements, too, and it was super fun checking him out. It turned out my husband checked him out before, also, and my hunch was he comes on a regular schedule. I wouldn't have been able to meet him before.

Jon Nealon
Formerly an office worker
Video production



PHOTO BY SKYWALKERPL VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

I didn’t even know this was happening. It’s funny because I’ve always assumed regular shifts weren’t coming back. I overheard some people talking at the Coop about how the system as it is now is working really well, and that there is a really low no-show rate, so why change?

I used to do office shifts, and now I do checkout. I still look for office work, but it’s harder to find because the office has been completely streamlined in the pandemic. It’s been more computerized, so there are fewer shifts. I doubt my office shift will be there in the future; I don’t see the value of it, given the efficiency of the new system.

But it’s great that the shifts will be longer apart. There’s no downside to that.

Francesca Valerio
Former squad leader, now floor monitor
Executive Director of the Robert Lehman Foundation



People prefer to be able to make their own schedule. I did a work slot last week and we were talking about this. People were saying it always seemed whenever time came for your scheduled time of the month, it was a bad time—there was a work meeting you had to cancel, for instance. How it is now is practical, but it's understandable that the Coop needs some standardized way of organizing shifts. Right now it's random. Some days there are a thousand people who want to work. Other days there's no one. The walkers have said that the only way to get a shift is to go on after midnight, cause that's when the Coop posts slots, and by the morning they're all gone. That's a downside: if you want to be a walker you have to stay up 'til midnight.

Yana Calou

Receiving and checkout

Non-profit director


PHOTO BY LIZ LATTY

I’ve been a member for about eight years on a couple of different squads—checkout, cheese-wrapping, whatever’s there, except office work—before we moved to this way of doing things, and I’ve had some lovely pros both ways. It was nice to have the continuity of my work—of knowing when my shift was going to be and to see the same people over and over. There was a civility to that. Now you definitely meet new people and since Coop staff solved the problem of never being able to get a shift, it’s been quite lovely to look at my schedule for the week and pick something that works from there. I’m not a hard line either way. I enjoy the routine of the old ways.

Opal L
Stocking
Musician/singer-songwriter



PHOTO BY LUCASBOSCH VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

I’m indifferent. I’ve done both, and on the one hand it’s great to meet new people every six week cycle at the Coop. You can make a lot of friends. On the other hand, it’s definitely nice to work with the same people. But I’m on the fence. I’ve been coming here since I was a kid but then I left and came back a few times since I’m an adult.

Abigail Miller
Office worker
Graphic designer

PHOTO BY MAGGIE SCHREINER

I’m a Coop member since 2006 and have mostly done office shifts. For the past several years I did “post orientation,” now called “new member enrollment.” I like how flexible the new system is but I feel nostalgic about how I used to work with the same people for years. I know we won’t be magically time-machined back to the before times.

Sara Ivry is a long-time member of the Food Coop. An editor, writer, and podcaster, she lives in Clinton Hill.

SHIFT CHANGE

July 25, 2022



ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

By Christopher Cox

In July, mandatory member labor returned to the Coop for the first time since the pandemic began. It was not, however, a return to the system that had kept the Coop running for decades. Gone were the giant ledgers filled with workslots; gone were the squads with the same people bagging dried fruit or stocking inventory or cleaning the walk-in freezers together throughout the year; gone were recurring shifts altogether.

Members, suddenly, were all placed on the Future Time Off Program (FTOP), responsible for scheduling their own shifts each cycle. (A new name for these work assignments is forthcoming; until then it's FTOP all the way down).

Mercifully, the Coop had developed a way to make the change easier on the members: a brand-new online shift-scheduling calendar that debuted during the pandemic. I spoke with Ann Herpel, a General Coordinator, and Matt Hoagland, a Membership Coordinator, about how the new system was developed. We spoke via video conference, with Herpel and Hoagland in separate offices in the Coop. Hoagland wore a hockey jersey and a high-quality respirator; Herpel's video signal wasn't working, but her voluble, upbeat voice came through loud and clear.

Herpel said that plans for putting shift scheduling under the Member Services tab on the Coop's website had been in the works for years, but it took the disruptions of the past two years to get it off the ground. "The pandemic makes you innovate right on the spot," she said. By fall 2020, the new calendar was ready for its first trial run, just as members were invited back to work in the Coop on a voluntary basis. (I signed up for several of those early shifts, most of them outdoors, and it was a dream: as many cart return shifts as you could schedule, week after week.) "It was like having a big test group to help us improve software and user interface and instructions and everything," Herpel said. "So probably the rollout was a little smoother than if had we just gone from zero to a hundred in one day."

> "THE PANDEMIC MAKES YOU INNOVATE RIGHT ON THE SPOT."
>
> ***GENERAL COORDINATOR, ANN HERPEL***

By mid June 2021, the system was ready to handle the full return of member labor. In contrast to the old system of four-week cycles, members were at first only required to work every seven weeks, then six, and now five. Today, if you sign up for a shift on-

line, you'll have the chance to filter by committee and time of day. You can sign up for a shift the same day (up to a half hour before the shift) or 27 days in the future, and you can cancel up until 8 p.m. the night before. To incentivize people to sign up for less desirable workslots, like early-morning truck unloading, some are designated "carrot shifts"—complete enough of them, and you'll get an extra work credit.



ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

Hoagland said that they anticipated many members would need help navigating the web interface, but “the need did not materialize as much as we thought it would.” (There was, however, a spike in retirements when member labor returned.) Although there was “a level of initial resistance from some people,” Hoagland continued, most members seem happy with the change. One poll—a mandatory survey administered to anyone who used Member Services for a two-week period in November and December—found that 70% of the membership wanted to stick with the new system.

In addition to the ability to easily poll the membership, funneling everyone through Member Services has other benefits. The Coop finally has an accurate, up-to-date record of everyone’s email addresses. Members can easily see descriptions of any workslot—a full rundown of each job pops up whenever you click on a shift. And, most important, say Hoagland and Herpel, it’s eliminated a persistent source of problems at the Coop: the make-up shift. Before the pandemic, if you missed a shift, you were supposed to work two make-ups: your original shift plus a penalty one. Some squad leaders, however, would allow members to avoid the penalty make-up if they canceled early enough—or if they simply wanted to be nice. That led to uneven enforcement of the rules. “It was so arbitrary,” said Herpel. “It was inconsistent.” Getting rid of that, she said, “removes the culture around bias, favoritism, whatever.”

Now members sign up only for shifts they know they can work, and they can cancel up to the night before without penalty. There is no room for discretion—the computer runs the show. Hoagland said that the make-up shifts themselves caused problems: dozens of people would show up when they weren’t needed, while other workslots went unfilled. “Now,” he said, “we’re directing people exactly where we need them, and we can grow and decrease the size of these shifts immediately.” The number of no-shows has become “negligible.”

> “[**THE CURRENT SYSTEM**] IS BUILT ON A PIECE OF SOFTWARE THAT IS INCREDIBLY OUTDATED AND VERY RIGID.”

One final benefit: fewer people are working while ill. “I think the habit was for a lot of people, myself included, that if you’re kind of under the weather, but you’re okay enough to go, you’re gonna push through it. We would bring a lot more sickness into the building as a result,” said Hoagland. Easy cancellations and the end of recurring shifts make it simple to isolate for several days and return to the Coop when you’re healthy.

Up next, Herpel said, is a more complete overhaul of the Coop’s member database, to allow Member Services to work even more efficiently, though that process has been slow. “It’s built on a piece of software that is incredibly outdated and very rigid,” she said. There will also be a return to a recurring workslot option for those members who want it, most likely in April. They’re sticking with the five-week schedule, though. It works, and who doesn’t want a little extra time between shifts?

Christopher Cox is an editor and writer. His book, ‘The Deadline Effect,’ was published in July.

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

July 25, 2022



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 Wolffframm successfully ran again for the Agenda Committee.
Three Agenda Committee members successfully sought reelection: Fran Hawthorne, Kate Spota and Pirco Wolffframm. 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.*