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A Virtual General Meeting In May

By Christopher Cox

On March 20, 2020, a representative from the New York City Department of Education emailed Jason Weiner, the Membership Coordinator in charge of renting space for the Coop's General Meetings. The Coop's permit to hold its March General Meeting at John Jay High School was canceled, and the possibility of holding future meetings there or at any facility controlled by the Department of Education was in question. "Please do not call the school or Borough Office for further information, as this is a time of uncertainty," the email concluded. "Be reassured that you will hear back from us in regards to next steps once schools have reopened."



ILLUSTRATION BY VALERIE TRUCCHIA

How do you hold a General Meeting when it's too dangerous for the membership to gather in person?

The cancellation forced the Board of Directors to confront a novel issue: how do you hold a General Meeting when it's too dangerous for the membership to gather in person? The General Meeting has been a part of the life of the Coop since the very beginning—it's the only means for the Board to hear directly from the membership. According to Imani O'ryn, who has been on the Board of Directors since 2005, there was never any question that the General Meetings had to continue: "It's very important for us to involve the whole membership, or as much of the membership that wants to be involved, in our form of government."

Like many organizations adapting to the coronavirus crisis, the Board quickly turned to the idea of holding meetings remotely through a video conferencing platform like Google Hangouts or Zoom. O'ryn and a few other members of the Board looked into options for holding the May meeting remotely—the planned April 28 meeting was judged too soon to get a new system for participation and voting in place. O'ryn mentioned that the Board was aware of some of the privacy issues with Zoom in particular and were looking for a virtual-meeting option that protected members' security.

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The bylaws of the Coop require that Board of Directors meet ten times a year and that a portion of that meeting be devoted to hearing the "advice" of the members—that portion is called the General Meeting. Votes taken at the General Meeting are not binding on the Board but are used to poll the opinion of the membership. That distinction might be important in remaining in compliance with another of the Coop's bylaws, which states that during meetings all votes "shall be cast in person and no proxy voting shall be permitted." The Board itself, however, is bound by the "in person" requirement, which could complicate their ability to enact important changes as the Coop navigates the next several months of disruption. The bylaws could be amended to remove the "in person" requirement, but that requires a two-thirds vote of the Board—at a meeting.

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At Hepworth Farms, It's Full Steam Ahead PSFC's Leading Supplier Pivots to Meet the New Age



ILLUSTRATION BY CATY BARTHOLOMEW

By Frank Haberle

Hepworth Farms is the Park Slope Food Coop's oldest—and one of its biggest—working partners. Located in Milton, New York in the Hudson Valley, the 550-acre farm, run by twin sisters Amy and Gail Hepworth, has worked with PSFC Coordinators to plan, produce and deliver an incredibly diverse array of produce to our shelves. For four decades, the PSFC produce aisle—a place we might have taken for granted 6 weeks ago, but certainly not today—is bursting year-round with fresh, seasonal produce delivered from Hepworth Farms and other providers. In the case of Hepworth Farms, the relationship that has been forged over the years means that Amy, Gail and their staff can plan their planting seasons around what the Coop and its members need and want. At no time has this partnership been more valued, and more tested, than it is today.

Any PSFC member who has braved the lines and entered the Coop in recent weeks has seen that social distancing requirements, among other factors, have taken a toll on our produce shelves, with a less diverse array of offerings spread apart to create more space for shoppers. As city dwellers, we know what it looks like from the receiving end—the long lines, the shopping restrictions, the appearance of less produce options. But what does it look like from the production side—from the people who work so grow and deliver our produce for us?

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"What we are made to realize, in an event like this, is the interconnectedness of our worlds. This is impacting everybody," Gail says. "What the Park Slope Food Coop is going through, we're going through. Like the staff at PSFC, we are dealing with new variables every day. We are doing whatever it takes. We are adapting to the new realities." At Hepworth Farms, new realities this spring include the extra steps the farm must take to ensure the safety of the food it delivers to its partners, the health and stability of its workforce and a sudden change in the demand for fresh produce—declining because fewer shoppers

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ILLUSTRATION BY VALERIE TRUCCHIA

Images from January General Meeting.

Keeping it Clean at the Corona Coop

By Jiwon Choi

Seven weeks ago, when lines were just beginning to snake up Union Street and items like toilet paper, frozen and canned goods started growing scarce, the Coop proactively instituted policies to ensure a safer shopping and working environment for its members. Sanitation safety protocols were posted at the entry check-in and on the Coop's website and social media platforms. Signs mandated using hand sanitizer upon entering the Coop, wiping down one's cart handles, and maintaining social distance. Shopping lanes displayed markers demonstrating the recommended six feet of separation. According to the Coop website, the number of shoppers allowed in the building would be limited to comply with Governor Andrew Cuomo's executive orders on social distancing. Restrictions would also apply to those waiting outside. In this fashion, the Coop prioritized the health and safety of our paid staff and shopping members over sales.

The new hygiene protocols extended to member workers, before the work shifts were canceled, and now to the team of members who are working part-time paid shifts: No eating while working; wash hands before your shift; clean your work area; call in sick if you're feeling unwell.

Karen Mancuso, Membership Coordinator, described the expectations for workers: "Checkout workers use the

wipes we provide to clean their stations as much as possible during their shifts. We have a smaller number of checkouts in service to promote social distancing. Entrance workers are making sure every member uses hand sanitizer before they enter the store and making sure they wipe down their shopping cart handle." Though the Coop has put out repeated reminders about everyone not eating while working and shopping, checkout workers report having to "ring up empty food wrappers and half-empty beverage bottles." According to Mancuso, as the weeks went by and the line to get into the Coop grew from one to two or more hours, members were receptive to these measures: "I think most members are just so grateful that the Coop is open that they will do just about anything to be able to shop here, including wait outside in a four-hour line."

Facilities Coordinator Crystal Goldenstein reiterated the importance to "adhere more closely to the spirit of the Governor's executive order" so as to limit the number of people working in the Coop. "For receiving coordinators, this is meaningful" as it will cut down on interfacing with an estimated 14,000 members who show up for their monthly work shift. To that end, the Coop suspended workslot requirements for the first time in its 47-year history on March 23 and started running the Coop with "paid staff and a group

of temporary, part-time employees." Other recent changes have included requiring all shoppers to wear a face mask, designating Thursdays for seniors/high-risk members, and

the Coop staff! Everybody be super nice to the Coop workers! Let's all double down on the precautions and act as if someone's life depends on it. Because it does!" Members posted updates based on where they are standing in line e.g. Union and Sev-

or create our own to serve best our members and keep people safe." The Coop has asked members to refrain from the constant stream of recommendations as they work to remediate the long lines. A recent response post from the Coop on Ins-



PHOTO BY CAROLINE MARDOK

Please read the Shopping Protocols. Do your part to help the Coop provide a safe working and shopping environment.

limiting shopping. At this point, Seniors and high-risk members have the Coop to themselves on Thursdays. For the most accurate shopping and wait times, check the Coop website for all the latest schedule changes.

Members have signaled general approval of these changes on social media, echoing shopping squad leader Tom Paul's feeling that "the Food Coop leadership has done an amazing job" and been thoughtful in "figuring this process day-by-day to figure out what is working and what can be tweaked."

Clean Communications

Although interfacing between members at the Coop is no longer an option, "sanitary" social engagement has moved online to the Coop's Instagram and Twitter accounts. The discourse has generally focused on several themes: appreciation and gratitude for the Coop Coordinators and front-line staff, ideas and recommendations on how to make the Coop lines run more smoothly, and lamentations for the long, long shopping lines in "the good old days." @lulax007 posted "Keep up the great work @foodcoop staffers! We're grateful beyond words for you #superheroes." @guidoo wrote "Big appreciation for



PHOTOS BY LISA GUIDO AND KAREN MANCUSO

enth Avenue so that potential shoppers could judge wait times.

Another big theme of discourse has been suggestions and requests for the Coop to test out strategies for cutting down on the long lines. These suggestions include calls for scheduled shopping time slots, online shopping and pick-up/delivery options. As @irrogo asks, "have you considered creating a DMV like scheduler for shoppers to book for shopping time?" And @helloesme suggests that it is "time to collaborate with delivery services

tagram stated that "The GCs have decided, for now, that our top priority is to stabilize the operations of the Coop and understand how the drop in sales and number of shoppers is having an impact on Coop finances, etc. All of the options members want us to pursue have drawbacks."

It is clear that the leadership is working tirelessly and valiantly to keep the Coop open, but what is also clear is that the struggle to keep a balance between shopping demands and member/worker safety will be ongoing. ■



PHOTO BY CAROLINE MARDOK

Extended shopping hours, 10 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. beginning Wednesday, April 22. Big shout-out to Coop staff and temp workers.

Hepworth

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

are buying in the Coop, and because a wider percentage of people, concerned about food shortages and wanting to space out their trips to the Coop, continue to buy more frozen and canned produce than before.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY HEPWORTH FARMS COLLECTION

Baby Swiss Chard

Keeping Workers and Produce Safe

If it seems challenging to stay six feet away from people in the PSFC bulk aisle, imagine what it must be like on a working farm. “I used to ride in the tractor with somebody else often, mostly for training purposes,” Amy says, “but as the caretaker of my mom, those days are over.” Over the winter, Hepworth Farms invested in building better housing for temporary agriculture workers—but with the H2A Program temporarily suspended, the new workers have been delayed for at least a month. Hepworth Farms has a regular staff of 20-30 people; the delay has been a mixed blessing because it has given them the opportunity to spread the staff out more and

create an emergency apartment in case workers need to be quarantined. The staff have been divided into specific work teams as much as possible to create additional separation. In normal years, Amy holds a ‘huddle’ at 6 a.m. where the whole staff come together and reflect on the importance and the mission of the days’ work; today the teams are separated and go out to the fields in one-hour intervals to create more distance between workers. Additionally, Hepworth Farms is creating its own sanitizer for its workers.

As farmers, pivoting in mid-season to keep our farm running is nothing new; now we have to deal with the pandemic. We’ll do whatever it takes, whatever is necessary to keep everybody safe and keep the produce coming.

The Produce Keeps Coming

Recent media stories have relayed how American farms are plowing over their fields and pouring milk out into ditches because they have nowhere to send their food. For Hepworth Farms, the strong relationships they have built with partners like PSFC mean that they can plan, change and adapt to a changing market. “As farmers, pivoting in mid-season to keep our farm running is nothing new,” Gail says. “We deal with droughts, insects, hail and heat waves. So, now we have to deal with the pandemic.

We’ll do whatever it takes, whatever is necessary to keep everybody safe and keep the produce coming.”

Amy adds that, as farmers, “we know how to pivot. We’re pivoting now. We are completely tuned into your needs, and we wake up every morning to bring you food. We are here to make it happen.” Amy adds that the relationship PSFC shares with Hepworth Farms allows them to plan and prepare for changing needs. “Usually, at this time of year, we’re speaking with the Coordinators about plantings we’re going to start doing now in preparation for the summer season. For example, in a normal year, right now, we’d be asking if they were planning to carry seven types of Summer Squash this year, and they would have a couple of weeks to decide. This year we need to adapt. We can manipulate the speed of how our tomatoes progress in the greenhouses if we have to by changing temperatures, e.g., cooling them down.” The limited movement of produce in the Coop poses a different set of issues. “A few weeks ago, we started harvesting our overwintered greens, an amazing assortment of greens for this time of year—collards, kale, spinach, rapini. Surprised, I asked the Coop—‘are you sure you don’t want more greens?’ It didn’t go to waste; we picked and shipped it to an Alberts near Philadelphia, a trusted distributor who PSFC also buys from. Of course, we would prefer to deliver direct to the Coop. But by the time



PHOTO PROVIDED BY HEPWORTH FARMS COLLECTION

We are still preparing our fields. This stage of preparation is foundational to the crop cycle and cannot be treated with any less care than other stages.

our spinach gets to PSFC through a distributor, it’s just not as fresh as when it arrives at PSFC. With PSFC, what we pick today goes on the truck tonight to PSFC.”

Economic Impact

Like all small businesses, Hepworth Farms has definitely felt the short-term impact of the changes to the economy. “When a partner as important to us as the PSFC suddenly isn’t ordering food in the same volume it normally does, we obviously are affected by that,” Gail says. “It’s a challenge but we’re doing what we can do. At the same time, some of our suppliers are giving us a little more time and flexibility in paying our farm’s expens-

es, which is helpful with the decrease in sales which goes directly to pay our workers this time of year.”

One option Hepworth Farms is exploring is the expansion of its Farm Box program, which brings fresh produce from their farm directly to people’s doors. If Hepworth Farms can gain enough interest, they will try to launch the Farm Box Program in New York City. Please visit <https://www.farmbox.us/> to register your interest. To learn more about Hepworth Farms—or if you would just like to stare for an hour at amazing photographs of beautiful open spaces where your food comes from—please visit <https://www.hepworthfarms.com/>. ■

Virtual GM

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O’ryn promised to tell the membership as soon as possible how the May meeting will be conducted. Although she acknowledged that creating a new sort of General Meeting would require work and some flexibility on the part of the Coop’s members, she was optimistic about what the change might mean. “This is our opportunity to finally be able to engage even more of the membership,” she said. “With all that the coordinators are discussing and the various things they want to do, I think the membership should be involved.” ■



ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL BUCKLEY

STATEMENT ON THE COOPERATIVE IDENTITY

DEFINITION

A cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

VALUES

Cooperatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.

PRINCIPLES

The cooperative principles are guidelines by which cooperatives put their values into practice. The International Cooperative Alliance adopted the revised Statement on the Cooperative Identity in 1995.

They are as follows:

1. Voluntary and Open Membership
2. Democratic Member Control
3. Member Economic Participation
4. Autonomy and Independence
5. Education, Training and Information
6. Cooperation Among Cooperatives
7. Concern for Community

REFERENCE: ICA.COOP

COORDINATOR'S CORNER

Report to the Member/Owners April 12, 2020 from Joe Holtz, General Coordinator, General Manager and Co-Founder of the Coop

Dear Members,

Thank you, our members, for your support of the Coop and the staff. Thank you, our staff, for your exhausting, tireless, dedicated and excellent work as we all adjust to life in this time of Covid-19.

Part 1) How has Covid-19 affected the Coop financially?

In a typical pre-COVID week, the Coop sales averaged over \$1.1 million, consisting of over 2400 transactions per day. Since March 23, weekly sales averaged less than \$600K and approximately 350-380 transactions per day. The reduced sales volume, translates to more than \$500K less in weekly sales revenue or \$90K less in weekly gross margin. In addition, our increased payroll (see part 3 below) adds about \$20,000 in payroll costs, bringing the weekly reduction in our bank balances to about \$110,000 weekly. As I stated in an interview in the first ever digital *Linewaiters' Gazette* see this link <https://linewaitersgazette.com> I have to expect that the social distancing protocols will go on through mid-August. This means a significant drop in our financial liquidity and is not sustainable. But what if it goes beyond mid-August?

There is an additional drain on our funds that I did not take into account at the time of the *Gazette* interview. Typically we purchase so much food and sell it so quickly that we essentially are in a perpetual state of owing our vendors and farmers about \$2,000,000. Due to our lower sales volume and therefore lower purchases, we now owe our suppliers around \$1,000,000 less than we usually do. In recent weeks I transferred more than \$1 million dollars from an interest bearing account to our checking account to ensure that we don't bounce checks. Our cash balance is therefore already depleted before taking into account the weekly losses. We start-

ed this year with more than 3.9 million dollars in the bank, so the weekly losses plus owing our suppliers less money would bring our bank balance down to around \$500,000 by mid-August. This is not a sustainable amount for running a cooperative that is this size.

Part 2) The Coop needs financial help:

In order to shore up our cash position and ensure continued operations for the foreseeable future, I have applied for two loans from the Small Business Administration and will be applying for a line of credit from Sterling Bank, the Coop's primary commercial bank. But we do not know when funds from these sources will be coming in nor do we know the terms of these possible loans. We do know that one of the SBA loans, if our application is accepted, might convert a major part of the loan into a grant that we would not need to pay back.

What can you do to help address the Coop's pending cash liquidity crunch?

One option is to Donate to the Coop. After the April 9 digital edition of the *Linewaiters' Gazette* <https://linewaitersgazette.com> was posted on our website, two members decided to mail in a donation check to support their Coop. Their check is not tax-deductible because the Coop is not a 501C3, but their generous gesture is helpful and appreciated.

Another option is for members to voluntarily increase their Member/Owner Equity Investments (MOEI). Members are required to make a member/owner equity investment upon joining the Coop and most members have made a \$100 investment in the Coop. An additional contribution to your member/owner equity investment directly adds to the Coop's working capital. Since MOEIs are not interest-bearing, there is no cost to the Coop. And, if you find that you need the excess

investment back, it can be returned within weeks to you upon your request. It is important to note that donations to the Coop are taxable income to the Coop whereas increased member investments remain as an asset for each member and therefore are not income for the Coop. The MOEI can be made at any checkout. Years ago, some members increased their Member Investments as an alternative to lending the Coop money. The restarting of our Member Loan program may take at least three months since we have learned that NYS is now taking longer than usual to approve such programs. We need additional money before that.

Either of these two options (donation or increase in MOEI's) will help us weather this cash crunch as we remain steadfast in keeping the Coop open during these trying times. If you decide to mail in a check please make sure that you include your name and member number and clearly state if it is an increase in your member/owner equity investment or a donation. (PSFC, 782 Union St. Brooklyn, NY 11215)

We are learning and will continue to learn many things as we operate the Coop during this pandemic and under restricted conditions. Clearly, the Coop needs to be prepared with more than \$3.9 million cash reserve to withstand any future unforeseeable, catastrophic, events. We already see that in a mere matter of months how quickly our operating funds can be reduced to levels that threaten the Coop's ability to function financially.

Part 3) Report on various decisions and challenges:

In the face of this pandemic, the General Coordinators and the entire staff as well are working tirelessly to figure out how to best serve our members, maintain our principles, and ensure economic viability.

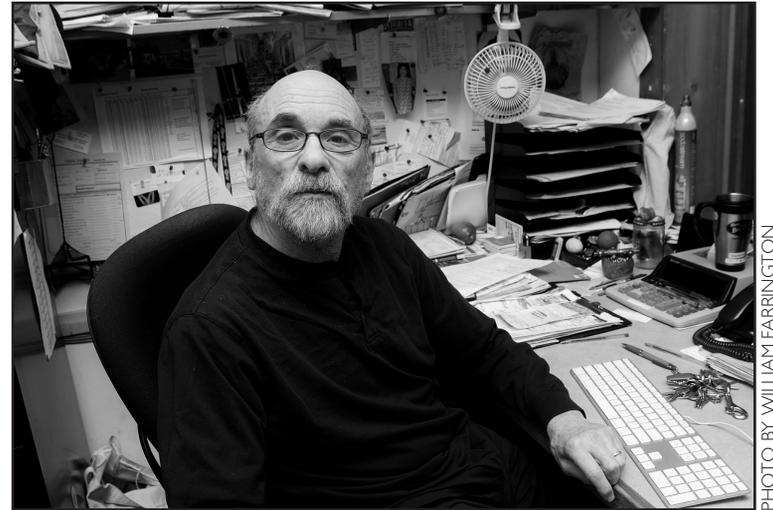


PHOTO BY WILLIAM FARRINGTON

Coop General Manager Joe Holtz in his Coop office.

Over the last six weeks, the General Coordinators, as the Coop's Chief Administrative Officers, have made many significant decisions about running the Coop in response to the public health crisis and directives and recommendations from our local, state and federal authorities.

On March 22, Governor Cuomo's New York State on PAUSE executive order plus health and safety concerns for our staff and members led us to the heartbreaking decision to temporarily suspend our defining member labor system and to cancel March and April General Meetings. It is impossible for me to overstate the gravity of these decisions because I believe that for 47 years our Coop's greatest strengths are our participatory member labor and governance systems, the very things our Coop was built upon.

It is important to keep in mind that, in the 1970s, the Coop went 2.3 years without any staff at all. When the Coop decided to hire a staff person (me) it was with the understanding that there was a danger that any staff person who we hired might, instead of working to enhance the member labor system, would in fact destroy it. My explicit goal was to support and enhance the member labor system and that has not changed.

We have hired more than 55 members as temporary employees to replace the labor contributed by Coop

members on their work shifts. And we may need to hire even more. For the first time in our history, and in contrast to our mission, the Coop is relying solely on paid staff to do all the work necessary to run the Coop. I want to assure you that the General Coordinators are committed to restoring our member labor system as soon as the pandemic restrictions on New York State are lifted.

I am very concerned that members are waiting a long time to get into the Coop, the result of reducing shopping hours and maintaining 6 foot physical distancing requirements inside the store. This directly impacts the number of members allowed to shop at any one time but is critical to stopping the spread of the virus and keeping staff and members safe and healthy. As much as we regret the length of the line, public health concerns are our higher priority. The GCs and the entire staff are constantly considering additional ways we can serve more and more members while always maintaining high levels of cleaning and safety measures.

I thank everyone who has been able to help keep the Coop going whether by shopping or working or expressing kind words of support. I want to assure you that I have great confidence in you to help preserve our wonderful, unique cooperative. ■

LETTER TO THE EDITOR**EDITOR,**

Just got home from shopping the third time since the COVID crisis took our Coop and changed it—hopefully not irrevocably. I wanted to express my deep thanks to the entire staff of the Coop. Today my heart really went out to you and what all of you are doing so that we members can continue some aspect of our lives in a normal way. Meaning the ability to have access to the best food NYC can offer. If we could start a fund, I would have it so that we can send the whole lot of you away to a resort so that you can decompress when this ordeal is finally over. Those who can offer any kind of health services to the PSFC staff should be welcomed to do so. This has been a huge impact on all of us, but especially those in our

immediate circle who have kept the ball rolling. Thank so much.

*Regards,
Bruce Zeines*

RESPONSE TO JOE HOLTZ 4/12 NOTICE**EDITOR,**

Has the Coop considered taking shopping orders to be able to expedite more transactions? It could work essentially like the other e-commerce based companies doing this. Perhaps, with some exceptions:

No produce (where people tend to be most picky about their food choices).

All other products okay.

Must give the Coop three days (or more) lead time to process orders.

All orders to be picked up at designated times with strict adherence to when groceries are picked up.

Coop not responsible if your ice cream melts.

Picking up groceries can be done outside under a tent.

Jeff Wolfman

SENIOR HOURS**GREETINGS,**

Thank you so much for the thoughtfulness that went into planning a time for seniors to shop. I hope that many were able to get the message about Thursday 4/9/20, I didn't see it until the same day.

After spending three hours on line and one-and-one-half hours inside I had no intentions of coming back this Thursday.

But I hope the strategy will be in place at least one more week so that I can make good use of it.

Thanks again for honoring seniors in that way.

*Peace and be well,
Nina*

LETTER TO THE EDITOR**TO THE COOP,**

Nancy and I fled Park Slope to Vermont since I am less than a year from 80 years old. Our sons insisted that we leave. And we are so fortunate to have support in Brooklyn, our tenant who has kept track of our mail-texting us photos of what is important and sending us packages—and here in Vermont where neighbors have been shopping for us.

However, I would like to mention how we feel about the Brattleboro Food Coop. Yes, their prices are much higher than those at the Park Slope Food Coop. In fact, when we shop there in normal times, Nancy will not allow me to enter the Coop with her because of my constant complaints about their prices.

But during this period, they have been great, mak-

ing us feel safe shopping there. We call in to make an order—no more than 12 items (however, we were allowed to order 15 items). We then drive 10 miles to the Coop, open our trunk and a worker comes out with our order in a cart and puts it into our trunk.

Perhaps the PSFC can work out something similar. Shoppers could come to the Coop with bags, boxes, carts or a car and our staff could come out with an order and transfer the order. For those who approve of this, the wait would be much shorter. And I think all would feel safer.

Lew Friedman