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July 21, 2020

GM Features Financials, Food, and Friction over BLM Statement

By Hayley Gorenberg

The June 30 GM veered from troubling financials, to a mouthwatering description of what luscious summer produce is on offer, to an online near-uprising over public positioning on Black Lives Matter.

From the outset several hundred attendees learned there would be no open forum or voting, though Zoom polling figured prominently and became the subject of many members' ire.

Financials

Joe Holtz, the Coop's General Manager, General Coordinator, Co-founder and first staff member, presented a preliminary financial report, walking GM attendees through 16 weeks of the new fiscal year (through May 24, 2020, as the Coop's previous year closed February 2). The figures showed sales a whopping \$3.4M lower than sales for the same period last year.

The Coop's gross margin figure, representing sales proceeds used to pay operating expenses, edged a bit over \$2.5M, as compared to over \$3.2M; for the corresponding period this year, the Coop had \$709,000 less to pay expenses. Meanwhile expenses were about \$366,000 higher than last year, primarily due to hiring temporary staff, when the Coop suspended its member labor requirement for the first time in its 47-year history.

(The temporary staff are Coop members working at New York's \$15/hour minimum wage and receiving the benefits required by the City and State. Previous weekly payroll neared \$100,000; temporary staffing has added approximately \$27,500 per week.)

"This is not a good combination, obviously," Holtz said. The "bottom line," he

said, was a negative \$734,000 for the period, as compared to a positive \$264,000 for the period last year, constituting "a \$999,000 swing to the negative."

Another way to view the problem, he offered, is that the Coop is experiencing a weekly "cash burn of \$95,000."

That background was needed to explain financial concerns despite the fact that the Coop's statement of cash flow reflects that the organization started the year with \$3.9M and increased that total to \$4.3M. "How could we be growing our money in the bank when we had all these terrible things happen on page 1?" Holtz asked rhetorically. The answer lies in the Coop's Payroll Protection Program loan (over \$1.4M, which the Coop calculates should be forgiven) and \$286,087 in net proceeds from member-owner equity investments—as compared to last year's MOEI of just \$22,000. With a freeze on new members joining, the whopping MOEI increase comes from concerned and supportive members voluntarily increasing their commitment to the Coop.

Holtz underscored that without the PPP loan and MOEI commitments, the Coop's bottom line on a cash flow statement would stand at only \$2.5M. Holtz noted that "members continued to rise to the occasion" subsequent to May 24, sending an additional \$380,000. While a few members made outright donations, Holtz stressed that the MOEI, as an investment, can be returned upon request, after a couple weeks' processing time. He pitched



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

for all present to consider an additional investment, if financially able, "in any amount," noting that with 17,000 current member-owners, "If everybody put in \$100 we would raise

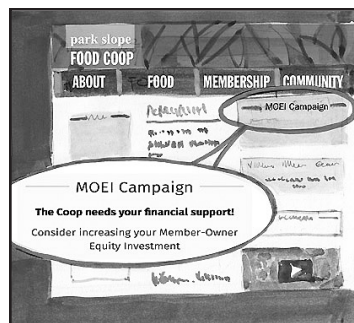


ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

\$1.7 million, and at this point we really need to have more money to weather any future emergencies." (The Coop website's home page, <http://www.foodcoop.com>, has an "MOEI Campaign" button toward the top right corner.)

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Black Seeds of Freedom

By Taigi Smith

It was June 18 and after four months of seclusion, I was on my way to tape an interview at the historic Abyssinian Baptist church in Harlem. I had been producing television from my home for the past four months, and I was desperate to get out and see the world again. It was one day before Juneteenth, the day enslaved African-Americans were finally granted their freedom, and so for me, it was an incredible day to be uptown. As a black woman who had been sequestered in an upscale, mostly white suburb, for almost 4 months, it felt especially liberating to be around black folk. Until this moment, I had no idea how much I had missed being in a majority Black space. As I walked the crowded streets of Harlem, there was an energy in the air that desperately missed after being surrounded by mostly upper class white people for so many months.

The sounds of Harlem moved me—sirens blaring, horns honking, narrow streets jam packed with midday traffic. I felt alive amongst the street vendors selling colorful masks, incense, and fabric. I spent a few hours roaming the streets of Harlem and taking in the energy. Although many parts of Harlem were gentrified years ago, these blocks felt unapologetically Black.

I had a few hours to pass before my shoot and I felt a curious sense of urgency. In those moments before my shoot, I felt desperate to take in all the Blackness that I had been missing social isolation. With Juneteenth just one day away, I was feeling especially liberated. Despite all that was happening in the world—the civil unrest, the police shootings, the protests—I was free. Near 135th street, I stood in a long line unshaded from the sun and bought fried fish and bright red watermelon drink from a group of men cooking on the corner. While waiting for my order, I visited a bakery across the street and purchased 5 slices of red velvet cake and a few cups of banana pudding from a local bakery. I was determined to bring as much of Harlem home as I possibly could. As I was leaving the bakery, I walked a few blocks north and stumbled across a truck overflowing with giant, striped, oval-shaped SEEDED watermelons. These watermelons were the stuff of my childhood dreams.

I had stumbled upon a pot of gold. Watermelons were a dime a dozen, but these black SEEDED watermelons, the mythical species that they had become, were like manna from heaven. Heavenly sweet. A gift from God himself. History tells us that watermelons first appeared in Africa almost 5000 years ago. Egyptian Hieroglyphs revealed etchings of big, circular watermelons, and history tells us that dead pharaohs were buried with watermelons, to be used as sustenance in their journeys towards the afterlife. So for \$20, I bought the biggest watermelon I could carry to my car. I strapped that baby into my daughter's car seat and drove it home like a newborn.

Fast forward. It's now about 7 p.m. and I walk into my home after my shoot loaded down with red velvet cake, banana pudding, and this fat ass watermelon. "Savannnnnnaahh!!! Come see what Mommy has. Look at this. This watermelon right here is about to change your life." I cut her a piece and at first, she's a little confused. You see, her generation had grown up on seedless watermelon, and unless they'd been to the south or to Harlem, most of these middle class black kids have no idea real watermelons contain big, black seeds. She had one piece, then two, then three...that watermelon never had a chance. We destroyed that \$20 watermelon in just two days.

"Seeded watermelons, despite passion from some buyers, are not big sellers," says Cecilia Rembert, a produce buyer at the PSFC.

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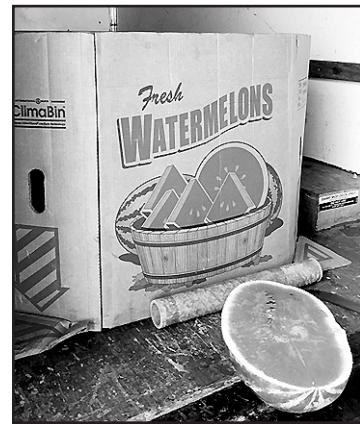


PHOTO BY TAIGI SMITH

GM

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Over the course of the financial discussion, members were polled, and results immediately shown, on topics such as whether they were planning to increase their MOEI (and if so, by how much). Attendees were asked whether they were currently shopping at the Coop, whether they were in town or away, whether they would come back and shop if certain precautions were in place, and whether they would consider extended work shifts.

deals in cheese," including Forever Cheese's one-pound log of goat cheese, "for, like, three dollars." All in all, a "wonderful selection for your picnic baskets," Astrinsky enthused.

Smaller vendors are "coming back," she said, highlighting Il Forno's pizza dough and "the best babaganoush in town, from Tripoli on Atlantic Avenue." And for those who are "still baking," even in summer heat, the Coop has "all that you need, lots of flour, lots of yeast!"

Astrinsky included in her report a video tour of the bulk

aisle, including easy-shop changes like pre-bagged items to cut down on individual scooping from bins, for a new grab-and-go dynamic. With peppy music playing in the background, GM attendees got a video glimpse of a new mechanical bagging device, a hopper Astrinsky claimed to have dubbed "Dennis."

She closed out with news that the Coop had switched refrigerants to a gas compliant with the Montreal Protocol for addressing climate change, "another feather in the environmental cap of the Coop."

Membership Services

General Coordinator Jess Robinson recommended that members use the Coop website to activate their member services account for password-protected communications and virtual opportunities the Coop will offer behind the member services wall.

Black Lives Matter

The GM plunged forward to address a proposed statement by the PSFC in support of Black Lives Matter, composed by member Toisha Tucker: "The Park Slope Food Coop unequivocally supports Black lives and the dismantling of all systems that propagate and empower systemic

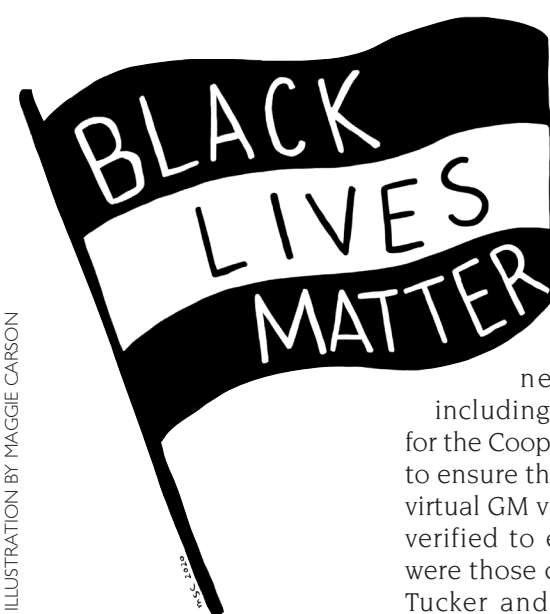


ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

ment, instead engaging with the topic for discussion only, and deferring to a future GM for a vote.

To support this sequencing, Coop procedures old and new were cited,

including the stated need for the Coop to figure out how to ensure that any voting at a virtual GM via Zoom could be verified to ensure members were those casting the votes. Tucker and people attending the GM (who, lacking the chat feature, took to creating a river of comments in the "Q&A" feature of Zoom) responded that the copious Zoom polling earlier in the meeting showed the Coop was crediting polling as valid information for Coop decision-making. Staff objections that a better or more validated method for GM voting would take additional time met biting critiques that "surely" the Coop membership included tech-savvy people who could trouble-shoot valid voting.

A member since 2014, Tucker reflected that their experience at the Coop had been "mostly good... but not a utopic bastion free of racism"

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ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

The extensive polling would return to become a subject of contention in the latter part of the meeting.

Glorious Food

General Coordinator Eliano Astrinsky took the floor for a mouthwateringly colorful paean to summer produce, trumpeting, "In the produce aisle it is finally, finally local season!" She pumped local greens from the Lancaster Farms Cooperative, Hepworth Farms' cornucopia, and Hudson Valley harvests. New Jersey blueberries got their star turn, as did black raspberries ("They're delicious!"). Rock bottom strawberry prices and "every kind of cherry" (except eagerly anticipated sour varieties), "fantastic stone fruit," picnic-prominent watermelon, and "great, great peaches" drew her rapturous praise.

General Coordinator Eliano Astrinsky: "In the produce aisle it is finally, finally local season!"

From a bit farther afield, four different kinds of mangoes were featured, as well as "beautiful" cuts of meat, charcoal for cookouts, and "great

After the General Meeting: BLM Follow-up with Toisha Tucker

By Hayley Gorenberg

Interviewed after the GM, member Toisha Tucker expressed disbelief that the Coop had not spoken up, even after earlier killings of Black New Yorkers like Eric Garner (and many others). Tucker linked food justice, climate justice and racial justice as intertwined and called on the Coop to engage in "reckoning with racism and white supremacy in America."

Tucker recounted that following the GM they had received email from Coop Diversity and Equality Committee Chair Maitefa Angaza, who had attended the GM and invited Tucker to collaborate with DEC and review a new statement. Angaza also invited Tucker to attend a "White Now" meeting, which Angaza described as "intended for white Coop members, calling on them to step up to support the Black Lives Matter movement going forward, holding themselves accountable to its objectives." Angaza continued, "We think among the first steps to be taken are educating themselves about the issues and confronting the consequences of inaction." Angaza added, "Black Coop members will soon be invited to attend a BLM meeting in our own safe and respected space. Not long after, we intend to bring the two group of affinity participants together for a dialogue that we hope will lead to significant action taken on the part of the Coop."

Angaza invited Tucker's response, as well as feedback on a "combined statement" from the DEC, drawing from Tucker's statement, welcoming all to the Coop and condemning "systemic racism and murderous violence, discrimination, oppression and disenfranchisement against which Black people continue to struggle in the United States and the intersectional inequities which often go unnamed and unnoticed."

Tucker wrote back, "I had no intention of and did not attend the 'White Now' Zoom meeting. I have actually been very clear that it is unfathomably tone deaf for the PSFC to center White-

ness when we haven't even made any substantive statement in support of Black lives. In my presentation I mentioned I won't give any more emotional labor to this. I do not wish to be part of the DEC statement or to be associated with the statement the DEC has written. Please remove my name and your heavily edited version of my statement."

Tucker critiqued the Coop's public presence to date, because it "never says we don't support white supremacy, and we don't support racism. It continues to be frustrating and disappointing. I don't want to spend my life fighting the Coop to acknowledge something that simple."

But Tucker remains a Coop member "It's easy to have the kneejerk reaction of, 'I'm just leaving that place,'" they said. Instead, they have decided to "let it play out and see what happens. If nothing happens, and the Coop just stays the same, I can find another place. If it's not going to be value-aligned, why should I give money or time to it?"

Tucker has experience in organizing, including working on Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign and Stacey Abrams' gubernatorial campaign. "I pick races, and I go, and I work for those races when I know they really need the bodies," they said.

Working as an artist, focusing on race and gender, Tucker has plans for additional work based on their longstanding love for Virginia Woolf, who they discovered had appeared in blackface. They are also doing COVID-related work focusing on "what it means to be a citizen in a society that will dig mass graves for you and throw you in." They connected the subject to food production, including meatpacking. "I personally think I could do without chicken if people needed to be safe. I could go without a hamburger if people needed to be safe," they said. "Capitalism really will kill you, and we're seeing it."

Tucker has submitted their statement in support of Black lives for a vote at the Coop's July 28 GM. "There are corporations doing the worst things ever who wrote better statements," they said. "It's disheartening and it's demoralizing to be part of an institution that can't write a statement in support of Black lives. It's totally an act of white violence."



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FASTER COOP VOTES

I'm gonna keep shopping at the Coop because the groceries are great but our collective core is taking a bad hit if the June GM is any indication. The agenda item to make a public statement of support for the movement for Black Lives should have been voted on, and not stalled via process designating it a discussion-only topic. This is not a new problem. Our rules say an item can be submitted for a vote, but the agenda committee routinely slots proposals into a two meeting odyssey with a nonvoting discussion presentation and a second GM

presentation required to take voted on action, against the wishes of the members submitting the proposal. I came across this same problem two years ago when I wrote a proposal to get Camelbak water bottles off our shelves because the parent company makes AR-15s and ammunition, and donates heavily to the gun lobby. It wasn't a big operational plan that needed months of staff support and member discussion, just like making a collective statement in support of Black Lives Matter doesn't need more than one meeting and one membership vote to be decided.

I share the concern that only members should attend

and vote at the GMs. Perhaps the vote mechanism can be behind the firewall of Member Services. I understand that a Zoom poll—since any member with the meeting link could share it—leaves our governing body open to someone trying to stack a vote. Time for a technological equivalent to our all members mailings of paper ballots.

*In cooperation,
Lisa Guido
Pain to Save the Coop*

PAIN TO SAVE THE COOP

Coordinators and some members have now suggested that member labor could

indeed safely resume, something which would benefit the bottom line of the Coop. This is significant because the Coop is still losing money every week the pandemic, which shows no sign of abating, continues.

There are certainly many members who would happily come back, without work credit. This squad leader and many other members have chosen not to retire, although eligible, and therefore did our pre-pandemic workslots without work credit.

But some members, although they're willing to shop, respecting the safeguards established by the Coop, wouldn't want to work.

I propose that we, like many if not most Coops in the world, temporarily establish two levels of pricing, with non-working members paying more for their groceries than those who do work. The members who have temporarily relocated to other places would be unaffected, but shopping members would resume working.

Another alternative would be to condition shopping during the pandemic upon working, with others on temporary leave until they return.

Janet Gottlieb

GM

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or of microaggressions. Tucker expressed deep dismay at an initial statement Holtz posted June 7 deferring to future GM decision-making to address the movement for Black lives, and his subsequent statement for himself and the other General Coordinators, Tucker calling the initial posting "inadequate" and stating "that any actions the General Coordinators initiate to support the Black Lives Matter movement and to address systemic racism would be supported by the Coop's member-approved Mission Statement: we are '... committed to diversity and equality. We oppose discrimination in any form. We strive to make the Coop welcoming and accessible to all....'" The Coop post concluded, "Black Lives Matter."

Tucker opined that every day the Coop lacks an explicit statement in support of Black lives "is a sign of violence and complicity." They reeled off the names of numerous Black people killed by police, observing, "I could read names for the rest

of the night and not be done," and noting that PSFC has been "silent on all."

Objections abounded in the moderated Q&A feature. An anonymous attendee posted, "Could you please enable the chat? It was available for the previous meeting and members should be able to speak to one another. It need not be moderated nor affect the running of the meeting proceedings (similar to how in person, people are able to speak to their neighbors)." Committee Chair David Moss responded, "The chat was not available for the previous meeting. I'm afraid the decision is final not to allow an unmoderated chat."

Another attendee wrote that while Holtz's two statements were "I'm sure well intentioned... I think ShopRite did a better job discussing this issue than the Park Slope Food Coop. History has arrived and we are on the wrong side."

Other notes included, "I'm not sure I can continue to be a member if these voices are silenced. We have to do better."

One attendee pressed that

with more than 300 people at the meeting, and a sense that most would vote for Tucker's statement, the agenda should be changed, and a vote taken.

At that point a poll was taken asking attendees whether they would be willing to support a statement regarding Black Lives Matter, and the results showed Yes-95%, No-5%.

In the Q&A, one attendee asserted, "Those 5% of members who do not support a BLM statement do not need to be members. That is not what the Coop is about. That should have been 100%!!!!"

Board member Imani O'ryn proposed to submit the results of the poll to the Board to "take under advisement," and reiterated ongoing effort to ensure some form of secure voting.

Tucker objected to polling only to "say that information is only valid when I say it is." They reasoned, "If it's not useful, then don't poll us on anything... then you can't use it at all for anything," concluding, "You're doing everything possible to silence us." If the virtual GM with polling "is not a platform to have a voice, then

why are you doing it?" They offered that in the alternative, the staff could simply message, "Shop at the Coop!"

Board member Rachel Asher said the Coop was contacting vendors and assessing modes for voting, and talking with IT specialists, and that the Coop is "struggling with day-to-day operations," as well as "different levels of comfort using Zoom." She conceded, "I know we should be able to do better and move faster."

An attendee responded, "I disagree with Rachel, this is an issue of our mission statement. All the people talking about logistics right now are completely obtuse. Black Lives Matter has nothing to do with pre-COVID times. It is a part of our human rights statement that the Coop was founded on."

In the accompanying Q&A, an anonymous attendee wrote, "the Board is subordinate to the membership. They should not censor speech of members in attendance. Chat should be enabled. This 'procedural' silliness is institutionalized white supremacy in prac-

tice—it functionally silences people of color's voices."

Responding to points about the need for additional technological expertise, one attendee wrote, "Please invite member labor so that you can improve these meetings. A group of us offered you support for this and were ignored."

"Many members have offered their skills and expertise on online meeting facilitation," another wrote. "It's OK if you don't have the expertise to do better. But you need to be able to support member contributions to make things better for everyone, not get defensive and hold onto your control."

O'ryn concluded that the Board, having "heard advice of the membership," would meet the following day with the General Coordinators "and can come up with a statement or review Toisha's." ■

EDITOR'S NOTE: Following the June GM, Linewaiters' Gazette reporter Hayley Gorenberg, a Coop member since 1993, has agreed to co-sponsor Toisha Tucker's proposal to vote at the July 28 GM on a statement of support for Black Lives Matter.

Proposed PSFC Statement on Black Lives Matter Submitted by the Diversity and Equality Committee

By the Diversity and Equality Committee

The Park Slope Food Coop supports the Black Lives Matter movement and a dismantling of all systems that empower and enable systemic racism.

The Coop's Diversity and Equality Committee (DEC) applauds the millions of people here at home and around the world protesting nonviolently to dismantle racism in the justice system and beyond. We condemn the systemic racism and murderous violence, discrimination, oppression and disenfranchisement against which Black people continue to

struggle in the United States and the intersectional inequities which often go unnamed and unnoticed. Our hope is that the recent massive protests in our city streets will continue to inspire resistance to the trauma and injustice still endured today, yielding positive political and social change.

We will continue to work to ensure that Black Lives Matter at the Coop, that all member-owners feel comfortable and respected. We're willing and able to help members seek redress for any bias or discrimination they experience at the Coop. The DEC will also expand

our outreach efforts already begun to make the Coop's healthy and affordable stock more accessible to those who need it most. We will also continue to serve as a resource to members and staff through training, events, mediation, and more. The DEC welcomes and will seek out opportunities to be part of the catalyst for turning passion into policy in the Coop and beyond.

The Park Slope Food Coop unequivocally supports Black lives and the dismantling of all systems that propagate and empower systemic racism. #BlackLivesMatter. ■

Black Seeds of Freedom

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Because of this, fewer distributors grow organic seeded watermelon. According to Cecelia, prime watermelon season is Memorial Day to Labor Day. “When the weather starts warming up, people want their watermelon. At that

to myself. It’s already 4 p.m. So Savannah and I return home empty-handed, and while I’m disappointed, I am also determined to meet the mysterious Vailsburg Park Watermelon Man face to face.

A few days later, I take the same drive down the Garden State Parkway and once again, exit at Vailsburg Park. As I come off the parkway, I see a U-Haul truck and a small sign that simply says “Watermelon.” And this is where I meet, Yah-Yah aka Watermelon Man. As I drive up to his truck, I see a line of cars waiting. Everyone seems to have the same idea. How could it be that I was the only person who didn’t know about Yah-Yah?

I tell him I’ve been looking for him and am desperate to know why seeded watermelons are so rare. Once he confirms that I’m not a police officer, he settles in for a nice conversation about the virtues of seeded watermelons. “The seedless watermelons... that’s not a real watermelon. That’s not real. Because everything comes from the seeds,” says Yah-Yah, and then he picks up a beautiful deep red piece of watermelon to make his point. “It’s sweet. Take a picture of that. See how red that is? You ain’t gonna find this everywhere. The seedless watermelon. It ain’t like this. It’s got all those little white seeds. Those are fake. That’s man made.”

Yah-Yah Livingston, who is from Columbia, South Carolina has been selling watermelons near Vailsburg Park for 10 years. He inherited the business from his father who sold watermelons and produce in the exact same spot for 35 years. On a typical day, Yah-Yah sells 70-100 watermelons a day. “Corona messed up everything but people... they gonna get watermelon.”

*The watermelon pipeline
begins in Mexico, then flows to
California, Florida and Georgia.*

“My father, Mr. Rims, put me on the corner when I was 13 years selling roses. Everybody in the neighborhood knew my father. Rims’ Fruits and Vegetables. He used to tell me how they would go in the fields down in South Carolina. They would go out into the field and punch a hole in the watermelons and take out the heart. That was the sweetest part,” remembers Yah-Yah.

The stream of customers is steady and the business runs like a well-oiled machine. Most people never even get out of their cars. They drive up and one of Yah-Yah’s family members greets them. They request a melon — the choices are big and bigger—and within seconds, someone from Yah-Yah’s team is loading a watermelon into their car. “Everybody wants black seed cause it’s natural,” says Yah-Yah. “Due to the Black Lives Matter more people are supporting Black Businesses, too. My father started it. People out here know. Just come out here to get watermelon.”

While most of the watermelon purchased at the PSFC is seedless, the Coop does sell mini seeded watermelons later in the season. “They come from Lancaster Farms, where they originate in Pennsylvania, and that’s the beginning of the real local watermelon,” says Cecelia.

The watermelon pipeline begins in Mexico, then flows to California, Florida and Georgia. According to Cecelia, the local watermelon season starts in July. “They need heat to grow well. The melons, cucumbers... that whole family, zucchini. They are plants that like heat.” While most of the watermelons carried by the PSFC are organic, the Coop will sometimes purchase conventional watermelons from Texas.

On this hot July afternoon, business is going well for Yah-Yah. “It’s been non-stop. This morning, I’ve already



sold 70 watermelons.” When asked why big grocery stores don’t sell black seeded watermelons Yah-Yah tells me:

*“A lot of people say the white people feel
it’s easier to eat a watermelon they don’t have to
pick seeds from. They prefer a seedless.
So, they sell that in the white community.
But we want this. That’s what we’re raised on.
Watermelons with seeds.*

*When I was a kid, we used to spit the seeds.
It was a game. We would see who could spit the
seeds the farthest. It’s about health.
Most people take the seeds, the rind,
you juice it. It’s good for your heart,
high blood pressure. Prostate.”*

Yah-Yah even tells me, “Viagra is in the rind.” Watermelon, how I love thee. Let me count the ways...

As I talk to Yah-Yah, I remember my own summer days, spent in Irvington, New Jersey with my Granny. I have vague memories of eating cold, sweet, watermelon on hot summer days. I remember watermelon at summer camp and eating seeded watermelon with my cousins. The memories after so many years are vague, but they

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COORDINATOR'S CORNER

Sustainability of Our Coop: July 10 Update

By Joe Holtz, General Manager and Co-Founder

There are four questions that stand out to me as I assess the state of the Coop during this crisis:

1. How can we steer the Coop to financial sustainability during the pandemic?
2. How do we provide food to members/owners who are at higher risk of COVID 19 and don't shop in the Coop during this pandemic?
3. What is the best way to serve the members/owners who are experiencing difficult financial situations during this time of high unemployment and reduced income for many New Yorkers?
4. How do we continue to be a good employer in keeping with our mission?

The Coop's leadership, along with staff and members, is in the midst of discussing these questions.

As a business it is essential that we maintain solvency. We can be the most wonderful, healthy place in the world, but if we continue to lose money every week at this rate, the Coop will cease to exist by mid-2021. As a member labor Coop, it is essential that we adhere to our model and to our mission. We could change our model or our mission, but then, the Coop that we have worked to maintain for 47 years and that so many members love, we will cease to exist. So, in my opinion, the answers to the questions above must support both financial and mission stability.

As I write this we are losing about \$95,000 per week as compared to last year when we were slightly above breakeven. We are losing money for three reasons: 1. We have drastically reduced the number of transactions per hour by drastically reducing the number of people in the Coop; 2. We have significantly reduced shopping hours; 3. We have incurred the costs of tempo-

rary hourly wage labor when the Coop's Member Labor program was suspended on March 23 due to safety concerns that our Committee/Squad system was by virtue of its structure possibly not in compliance with "New York On Pause". We are very thankful for the members who stepped up and became essential workers when the Coop needed them most. Temporary labor costs are now more than \$27,000 per week. We began providing lunch for the entire workforce of the Coop in mid-March at an additional \$3,000 per week in order to maintain safe distancing during meal times.

We must stem the tide of continued losses. Some of the ideas the staff are currently discussing:

1. Bring back member labor, as soon as possible. We are actively looking into systems and processes that would enable a labor system to work in this era while continuing to observe the safety protocols that have served the Coop well to-date.

Of course, we cannot jump right back into our old squad system. One idea is that Member Labor would be brought back in much smaller groups with the PSFC work requirement remaining suspended. Members would continue to shop without working.

Members who volunteer to work would receive work slot credit that they would "bank" in our Future Time Off Program (FTOP), receiving credit to be used when member labor requirements are restored. No work credits would be "used up" during this period when all members may shop without working.

Would you be willing and able to work shifts at the Coop? How? Your answers to these questions will inform us on the best way to bring back member labor. Please visit foodCoop.com and complete the Member Labor Survey.

2. Expand shopping hours without increasing payroll to make the Coop accessible to more members. Expanded hours makes it possible to serve more members which means increased sales dollars which in turn reduces the weekly cash burn. I estimate that by increasing hours significantly, income from sales will increase by roughly \$25,000 a week.

3. Should we raise prices? Our Coop is known for excellent prices and is premised on the idea that by working together we can keep prices low. While an increase would possibly help us financially, it could be a burden on those members/owners who can least afford it. It is also a risk to the Coop in a less obvious way. As our prices rise some members could choose to shop elsewhere. Increased prices have come up numerous times and fellow General Coordinator Joseph Szladek and Receiving Coordinator Margie Lempert have submitted a discussion item for the July General Meeting. We look forward to having a robust discussion on this topic.

A major way of increasing the sales volume is already underway. With everyone continuing to wear masks and without compromising our important social distancing protocols, we realize we can gradually increase the number of people in the store. We can have more shoppers in the produce aisle and eventually more than the 35 total shoppers in general in the store. If we only increased to 42 shopping members, this is a 20% increase in capacity. It's possible that we could safely go even higher. At only 20% the money produced is potentially another \$25,000 per week. Please come shop!

The dollar figures mentioned above yield the following in dollars: \$27,000 savings in labor costs, plus \$25,000 in increased income from

expanding our hours, plus \$25,000 in increased income from additional shopping members. That adds up to \$77,000 less loss and significantly extends the period in which we can operate as, hopefully, the COVID-19 crisis becomes more manageable. If nothing else, this plan buys us significantly more time while restoring our model of member involvement.

As we stem the current solvency-threatening losses we can address secondary concerns. Once we get close to maxing out our capacity while still being safe and adding many more shopping hours, we can then consider the possibility of giving work credit to members to shop for and deliver to members who are in the high-risk categories. Once we bring back Member Labor we can hopefully add back money saving items such as conventionally grown limes and lemons. We have discontinued several non-organic produce items because we do not currently have the labor needed to sticker produce. In at least one case we have discontinued the organic item and kept the conventional item.

By working together to protect the Coop's finances, we will protect the Coop, our model and our staff. We should, whenever possible, have a balanced approach to what we do for both our member/owners and our staff.

We have no idea how long it will be that many New Yorkers will be out of work. We have no idea when the need for groceries will abate in the face of the vast reduction of restaurant meals and capacity. During this time of COVID-19 with all of its uncertainties, now is the time to plan for the fall and beyond.

We are committed to progressing safely with a balanced approach. Raise your suggestions. Raise your concerns. Let's work together to ensure the Coop survives COVID-19 and any future pandemics. ■

Black Seeds of Freedom

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

are etched somewhere in the recesses of my mind. It's those memories that send me searching for black seeded watermelon so that my own daughter can know what it means to be black and do black girl things like spit out watermelon seeds on a balmy summer day.

This summer I am reclaiming my right to eat water-



melon because for years, I was too embarrassed to eat it around white people. Historically, watermelon has been used to demonize and embarrass Black folk. As slaves, African-Americans were forced to pick and harvest watermelons, but when we won our freedom, African-Americans began to grow and sell watermelons as a way to build wealth. White southerners, angry that Blacks were no longer slaves, began to depict us as lazy, big-eyed watermelon eaters. According to Smithsonian Magazine, "many Southern whites reacted to this self-sufficiency by turning the fruit into a symbol of poverty. Watermelon came to symbolize a feast for the 'unclean, lazy and child-like.' To shame black watermelon merchants, popular ads and ephemera, including postcards pictured African Americans stealing, fighting over, or sitting in streets eating watermelon."

These racist caricatures appeared in newspapers, advertisements, even on salt and pepper shakers. These images were hurtful and infuriating, and while I didn't know then why I wouldn't eat watermelon around white folk, I certainly do now. The irony of Yah-Yah selling this delicious fruit is not lost on me. Years ago, my people were ridiculed for attempting to better themselves by selling this fruit, but out here in Newark, here's this proud brother selling the sugar sweet melon to his community in exactly the form that it is meant to be eaten—with big, black seeds. To me, those black seeds symbolize the joy of summer and the strength and resilience of my Afri-

can-American people. Just as so many of us have been weeded out, displaced, or forgotten about, we have survived and thrived. And we are here. Just like the black seeded watermelon.

It would be fair to say that I am on a watermelon crusade of sorts. I cut up Yah-Yah's melon and shared it with just about every friend and family member who crossed my path. No one has been spared a chance to taste the bright red deliciousness. I sent Savannah on a playdate with a big hunk of watermelon and later that afternoon, the child's mother sent me a simple text. "This watermelon is EVERYTHING." With the seedless watermelons, no one ever sent texts, but their black seeded cousins demand we pay attention.

A few days after I meet Yah-Yah and haul home two of his watermelons, my daughter is playing outside of our home with her friends. It feels like a perfect time to slice up the melon and hand it out. Her friends are white, and unlike me, she is not shy to share her love of watermelon. In fact, she takes the slices outside proudly, knowing the joy the sweet taste of Yah-Yah's melon will bring on a warm summer day. I watch Savannah's friends from the window, and they seem perplexed by the black seeds. I watch them as they pick out all of the seeds, inspect them, and discuss the seeds amongst themselves. I watch as they ponder the seeds, and before I know it, I'm yelling out of the window. "Just spit them out. Spit them out in the grass." ■

COORDINATORS' CORNER

Discussion Item at July General Meeting to Increase Coop Mark-up from 21 to 25%

By Joe Szladek, General Coordinator and Margie Lempert, Receiving Coordinator and Meat Buyer

In March, the Park Slope Food Coop took the unprecedented measure of suspending member labor in response to COVID-19. We hired members to work as temporary staff, narrowed our hours of operation, constrained the number of shoppers allowed in the store, and implemented other safety measures. As a result, we have been able to mitigate risks to both staff and shopping members. We were able to implement a new labor structure thanks, in large part, to the safety net of our cash reserves. The problem, however, is that suspending member labor, coupled with restrictions on how many members can shop at any one time, has resulted in a weekly operational loss of about \$90,000. If the Coop continues operating at this level of loss, we will have roughly \$1,800,000 left in our cash reserves by the end of this calendar year, covering operating expenses for only the first

20 weeks of 2021. There is an ongoing conversation among staff about how best to return to breaking even. One of the ideas being proposed, which will be discussed at the July 28th General Meeting, is a potential temporary mark-up increase from 21% to 25% on all items for sale in order to reduce our current weekly losses and extend our solvency. Some staff feel that this, in concert with other changes to our daily operations, is the safest and most obvious tool we have to provide and maintain a necessary financial cushion for the Coop. With a temporary 4% markup increase, members would see a \$50 shop turn into \$52 and a \$100 shop turn into \$104. We know that raising the mark-up at this time of financial uncertainty for many Coop members could cause some members greater hardship. We recognize the negative financial impact of any price increases on our most financially vulnerable members, and we are actively exploring ways that the Coop

could mitigate it and hope to present ideas at the July 28th General Meeting. Our flat 21% mark-up, which is well below typical grocery mark-ups of 35-100%, is possible because of the “working members” tenet of our mission. Our model is built upon an endless supply of hands on deck. In exchange, we all benefit from good food at low prices. By suspending member labor, we have temporarily altered this model. As a result, the 21% mark-up is insufficient to cover the costs of running the Coop. We have a responsibility to restore member labor as soon as it is reasonable and safe to do so. Restoring member labor in full has the potential to reduce our weekly expenses by roughly \$27,000. For safety reasons, however, it is likely that, at best, reintroduction will happen in stages over time. Even then, uncertainties are far-reaching. Though New York finds itself in a relatively safe position now, health experts warn of a potential surge in late

August into the Fall. If, for public safety reasons, we are not able to fully bring back member labor as soon as we would like, or if we do begin the initial stages of a phase-in plan this Fall and are then forced to suspend member labor again, the Coop’s financial position will continue to weaken. Increasing our mark-up to 25% for a temporary and defined period would immediately reduce our current weekly losses by about \$25,000. If we also assume increasing weekly sales from \$770,000 up to \$900,000+ by the end of September, which is possible by gradually adding to store hours and the number of shoppers allowed in the store at one time, then the 4% increase becomes more valuable. These things taken together would leave us with \$2,700,000 in cash reserves at the end of this calendar year and 65 weeks of cash on hand at the start of 2021 – a significantly more comfortable financial position. These projections purposely leave out any savings

from member labor returning. Because of the uncertainty of the extent to which member labor will be possible over the next few months, it is wise to look at ways to maintain a healthy financial position in the absence of member labor, all the while working to restore it as soon as it is reasonable and safe to do so. The proposed increase to our mark-up will allow the Coop time to sort through the logistical challenges we face, and to see how the next phase of the virus will play out. We all want the Coop to be able return to the best parts of itself – member participation is at the top of the list. This is why it is essential that we implement a temporary increased mark-up as part of a collection of strategies that will see us through this remarkable moment. As we consider all options to navigate the Coop through this challenging time, it is important that the choices we make put us in a financial position to keep the Coop running and does so in a way that errs on the side of safety for the staff, the members, and the broader community. ■

OBITUARY

Jim Thompson

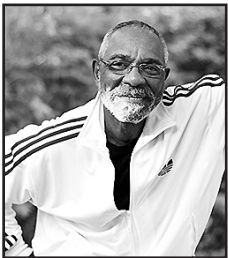
By Thomas Rayfiel

Jim Thompson, whose membership in the Coop spanned five decades, died May 17 due to complications from the coronavirus and kidney failure. He was 75. Jim spent almost his entire pro-

fessional career in the Fort Greene Housing Projects (the Walt Whitman Houses), working first as an assistant teacher, then for a drug intervention program, and as a counselor for at-risk elementary-school-age children. He also volunteered

for early morning breakfast programs and a weekend basketball organization which emphasized leadership and team-building. A true community activist, Jim served on the District 13 school board as well as Fort Greene Council Inc., an organization dedicated to serving seniors, children, and enriching the lives

of families living throughout the neighborhood. Jim joined the Coop in 1978. His wife of 46 years, Dolores Brandon Thompson, worked both their shifts. Fellow member Ramona Collier recalls: “Jim was one of the kindest and most joyful people I have had the pleasure of knowing in



life. He was generous of spirit. He was one of the first neighbors who introduced himself to me in our building, and he knew everyone in the neighborhood and greeted all of us with the warmest hello and an invitation to a conversation. He turned an apartment and neighborhood into a home.” In addition to his social work, Jim dedicated significant time and energy to local politics, working to pass initiatives that funded senior centers and day-care facilities. As his wife writes: “He was beloved in the neighborhood and made a real difference in the lives of the children he served (and amused,) as well as the teachers and principals he never said “No” to. Parents knew they could love him and trust him to love and care for their children as if they were his own.” Jim is survived by his wife, his brother Tom, as well as many aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews. ■

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

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