

LINWAITERS'

GAZETTE

Established
1973



100%
SOY BASED
Ink System
Contains no halogenated
chlorides

Volume PP, Number 8

June 8, 2021

Financial Woes, Concerns Over Coop Unity, and Term Limits: The Latest Virtual General Meeting

By Jessica Powers

On May 25, the Coop General Meeting was held over Zoom. More than 96 members participated, even though there is currently no workshift credit for attending. Josef Szende, also of the Chair Committee, was co-facilitator.

During the Open Forum portion of the meeting, Rachel Porter raised concerns both for “member voices not being heard” as well as for our “model of democracy.” Like others in the meeting, she worries that publication of the *Linewriter's Gazette* continues to be stalled. She asked that the facilitators turn on the chat feature in Zoom.

Another member, Susan, wanted to know when the squads will be up and running again. She believes its part of the “central cohesion” of the PSFC and worries that FTOP shifts alone will not help us to rebuild.

Elizabeth T. was frustrated that a survey about entering the Coop with or without masks did not include a third option.

Sandy asked when the bulk section would return to its pre-pandemic state. And Wally wanted to know, given a decline in Coop shopping, what would it take and how likely it is that people will come back.

Once again, Joe Holtz's Treasurer's report painted a worrisome picture. Sales dropped to \$9.9 million during the 12-week period ended April 25, 2021, compared to \$11.9 million in sales for the same period the year before, just as the pandemic was starting. In dollars, the gross margin is almost the same for each period but there is a \$337,000 difference in expenses in the most recent 12-month period. In Holtz's words, “we are burning money at a rapid pace.” Fortunately, the Coop's cash position is strong, due to two government relief loans totaling \$3.1 million.

In sum, expenses are higher and sales volume is lower, with an average loss of \$64,000 per week. If the Coop continues to spend more money than it makes, Holtz worries we will be out of money within a year. However, he added that a return to member labor will reduce personnel costs. Encouraging members to come back and restarting new member orientations will bring in more shoppers, and, in turn, raise revenues.

If this first line of response isn't enough, Holtz said the Coop may reluctantly have to restart the campaign to encourage members to voluntarily increase their Member Owner Equity Investments (MOEI), a strategy that raised \$800,000 earlier in the pandemic, or raise the required MOEI, which is currently \$100.

The Coop could also take on debt by either a new member loan program, mortgaging the building or taking out a bank line of credit. Finally, cutting staff costs and raising prices could be considered.

After a member comment, Holtz acknowledged that data from a “pandemic timeframe” is perhaps less useful. Comparison with 2019, the “last normal year... might be more helpful.”

Members expressed concern that they be included in the brainstorming to protect the Coop. Again, it was emphasized that some of the ways that the Coop creates and reinforces community (through the newsletter and squads) are currently absent.

General Coordinator Jessica Robinson then talked about member services. On the Coop website members can log into their member service account to sign up for FTOP shifts before the work requirement returns in the middle of July. Members can also request temporary or permanent leave and temporary and caregiver disability through their member service account.

Robinson shared that the preliminary results from the survey on a return to member labor “bore out expectations,” with 76% of the 4,600 members responding being “ready, willing and able to return to work.” For some, she continued, life is simply more complicated right now, with kids at home remote learning or other caregiving issues. She shared that the Coop is in the process of creating a new IT infrastructure to manage member labor because the old system cannot handle a phased reentry.

GC Elinor Astrinsky explained that a full return to bulk shopping is uncertain. It is more efficient to bag bulk foods elsewhere to ensure a quicker flow through the Coop, she noted. Astrinsky shared the comings and goings of Coop staff. Brandi Harper, Sara Greenfield, Ron Zisa, Laurel Berger-Chun, Jessica Gath, Jonathan Foxx and Janet Farrell have all left the Coop. Recent new hires include Tomoaki Mizoguchi, Gustavo Lopez, Moussa Thiam and Tim Mahoney. Debbie Parker left and returned.

Notably, Jessica Robinson, a General Coordinator for 21 years, has retired, although she will help into July with the logistics of tracking member labor.

The Annual Revolving Loan Committee held an election during the meeting. Rachel Porter explained that the committee was started 10 years ago to help other coops who want to use our model. The Green Hill Food Coop received \$20,000 in low interest loans. Other groups are not ready to sign a loan, but

the committee advises them. Committee members, therefore, switched to an FTOP, work on an as-needed basis—something she urges similar committees to consider. Loan Committee members Porter and Wendy Fleischer were both up for re-election. When votes were later tallied, Porter and Fleischer were re-elected by the majority.

The next proposal concerned term limits for the Dispute Resolution Committee (DRC). Bisi Iderabullah, also known as B.C., and founder of Imani House, which provides support to marginalized communities in both Brooklyn and Liberia, believes that term limits will improve equitable treatment, decrease the possibility of discrimination in decision making and foster greater inclusivity. She argued that term limits “strengthen democratic institutions over the long term.”

Helen Koh, a DRC committee member, responded to the “accusation,” by explaining that there is “natural attrition,” that one-third of the committee members are people of color, that they have diverse ages, professions and lengths of membership in the Coop. She argued that a three-year term limit would shrink the committee from seven people to two. She also clarified that the DRC initiates investigations but does not decide the outcome of a particular complaint.

Valerie, a staff member, stated that it takes time to understand all of the DRC policies and procedures. Deborah C. asked what is being done to educate people about this committee and whether it is possible to have the terms staggered.

B.C. responded that if the DRC could have up to 16 members, it would be beneficial to do so. She explained that while she doesn't have anything against the Committee personally, she has witnessed decisions she doesn't like and has studied the DRC and its bylaws. She asked: “Could you imagine if the jury in every case was the same group?”

After the discussion a vote was taken and the proposal did not pass.

The minutes of the last meeting were approved. Someone requested the announcement of a *Gazette* reporter, if present. (Please note that this reporter watched the recording of the General Meeting and was not present during the live meeting.) Board of Directors confirmed the decisions of the members during the meeting. To wrap up, Padwa, of the Fun Committee, added a pitch for a trivia night as a way to build community. Before adjourning many people thanked our essential workers for their service. ■