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Fewer Attendees at Virtual PSFC General Meeting, But Plenty of Lively Debate

By Jess Powers

The Coop continued the pandemic tradition of General Meetings through Zoom on Tuesday, July 27th. Charlie Rogers of the Chair Committee deftly facilitated the meeting, beginning with mic checks of the speakers and a summary of the purpose and expectations for the GM. (This article is based on viewing a recording of the meeting.)

During the Open Forum portion, members raised concerns about the future of the Coop given ongoing revenue losses and the Delta variant. Mitzzy, an FTOP worker, shared that concerned members meet over Zoom on the second and fourth Sundays of the month at 8pm. Interested parties can email psfcgovernance@gmail.com for details. There were questions about how the General Meeting agenda is set. Agenda items can be submitted via the website at <https://www.foodcoop.com/generalmeeting/>, by email to the agenda committee at psfcac@gmail.com, or to Ann Herpel, or in person at the office.

PSFC member George inquired about plans for the return of the *Linewaiters' Gazette*, which he views an integral part of Coop democracy, as well as the stairwell message boards. Helen, of the international trade education squad, asked if the Coop could carry COVID kits for self-testing ahead of the fall and winter season. Ellen, a single parent, expressed that it is difficult to manage shopping or a shift without childcare, and noted that other single parents are leaving the Coop as a result.

Joe Holtz followed with another bleak but optimistic Treasurer report. There was a \$1.16 million loss on the income statement for the 20-week period ending June 20, 2021. There were some inputs to our cash flow: the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan in April 2020 of \$1.5 million, member investments of \$0.8 million, temporary price increases provided \$0.9 million and a second PPP in March 2021 of \$1.7 million. This brought the total cash available to \$8.8 million, of which, \$5.9 million was used for operations. Holtz projects additional diminishment of \$1.1 million by the end of January 2022.

The Coop lost 4,000 members via attrition during the pandemic. He noted that resuming member orientations and admitting 100 new members per week is a reachable goal. The Coop is currently open 84 hours per week, down from the pre-pandemic 100 hours. So far, there hasn't been an uptick of sales dollars with members returning to work.

On the positive side, he continued, the return of member labor reduces staff costs by \$30,000 per week and savings will increase to \$40,000. The Coop is expecting but has not yet received Employee Retention Credits (ERCs) of \$2.2 million in federal government funding. The ERC is greater than the projected cash loss. Holtz added four sunflowers to a slide explaining that the outlook can be good if we implement solutions in a timely manner.

For the General Coordinator reports, Holtz reported that during the board election at the June 29, 2021

GM, incorrect numbers were reported, but the outcomes were correct. There was an error with the Simply Voting software.

GC Joe Szladek reported that it was a great first week (beginning July 12th) of the return of member labor. Of the 1,450 shifts available, almost all were filled, with almost everyone showing up for their shifts. (There was a 3% no-show rate—compared to 25% pre-pandemic.) With too many extra hands in receiving, the needs were adjusted downwards the following week. He remarked that the FTOP system provides ample flexibility to respond to changes in labor needs.

Roughly half of available shifts are in receiving. They are now divided into two types: receiving, lifting and receiving, stocking. The online scheduling system added functionality to search the next week for the same type of shift.

New shifts are released at 12:01am. There is a plan to have squad leaders soon on weekend shifts.

GC Ann Herpel explained that the next five-week work shift cycle runs from August 16th to September 19th. The length is a match between available workers and needs. She said that members will need to rethink what a work alert means. It is now a reminder to do a shift before the five-week cycle ends, with no penalty added. Moving forward, there will be a hybrid model of regular shifts and FTOP, with a platform to handle changes and to “take the Coop into the 21st century.” Members will also be able to check their workshift balance online.

Orientation will be offered online, with arrangements made for those without internet access. The *Gazette* will return in a new, all digital format, hopefully at the end of August.

During the Agenda portion of the meeting, during which items are brought to the agenda committee by members, the first item was the Hudson Valley Farm Coop Committee (HV FCC). As part of the requirements for new committees, the purpose was to share the structure and reporting methods proposed by the committee.

Jonathan Farber, a nearly 30-year Coop member, explained that the HV FCC was discussed at the October 2020 GM, proposed at the February 2021 GM and granted provisional approval at the April 2021 GM. The HV FCC is an ambitious plan to purchase and operate 15 farms in the Hudson Valley and hold a direct public offering. The Coop is slated to purchase \$10,000 worth of shares if the venture launches, with dividends paid to the Coop. Nine members and GM Joe Holtz will create a business plan, establish an offering and recruit cosponsors. He sees it as an opportunity for members to own a stake in progressive and ecologically regenerative farms and invest in the local food chain. Farber added that the committee will update the Coop by quarterly reports at the General Meetings, and possibly through the *Gazette* and website.

After clarifying questions, a passionate debate

ensued. Members were concerned about transparency, special interests, and the timing of this investment. Another member countered that this is same process for all committees, to share how the committee will report to the broader Coop. Member Viren echoed both sides of the debate, admiring the effort, but wanting a more transparent selection of members to the committee, additional online reporting, and a more meaningful amount of money invested. Another member, Martha, questioned why we'd invest in a \$30 million startup venture “when we're struggling to survive.”

GC Ann Herpel rounded out the comments, expressing concern about what she sees as a “lack of flexibility” and urging the sponsor to “[accept] some of these friendly amendments” from fellow Coop members to improve the proposal. Members voted on whether or not to accept this reporting structure.

The vote was returned with 86 “no” votes and 35 “yes” votes. The Chair encouraged the sponsor to go back and look at the structure and reporting proposal and to return with new ideas at a future General Meeting.

Susan Metz—a self-identified elder who is “not as tech savvy but is good with people”—brought forth the next agenda item. The subject was to discuss the formation of a “Squad Leader Organizing Team.” Metz strongly believes that the PSFC needs to “[reconstitute] squads with Squad Leaders.”

She encouraged listeners to download a copy of the most recent version of the Membership Manual at <https://www.foodcoop.com/manual/>, to understand the reasoning behind her proposal. She framed the values that we stand for as “equity, solidarity, resilience and sustainability.”

In her view, FTOP is a temporary solution, but her sense of “pride, caring and ownership [in the Coop] was enhanced by being a member of a squad.”

She wants to form a committee to get squad leaders together so that “we can be ‘ready to roll’ at the right moment.” She sees squad leaders as an essential “vibe check” during a squad.

GC Ann Herpel clarified that some squad leaders are being tapped for newly created floor monitor positions. She explained that there are plans for squad leaders to return to receiving shifts in particular. The responsibilities of the role itself, she noted, will change. With a more efficient system of electronic check-ins, there will be fewer elaborate questions around attendance.

Metz interjected to ask if this proposal would be brought to the GM. Herpel countered that it's a 21st century member labor management system.

The Board accepted the minutes and the HV FCC vote. The Chair committee is looking for additional members. Those interested can email psfcchair@gmail.com. ■