

Collaboration among Co-ops

Co-ops collaborating with each other are a natural part of the cooperative movement. In fact, the sixth guiding Co-op Principle is “Cooperation among cooperatives.” So it is no surprise that the Boards of the Brattleboro and Putney Co-ops have been thinking about working together for several years. A Collaboration subcommittee, consisting of both General Managers and several members from each Board, has started to meet in the last few months. Their broad vision is “to achieve a wider understanding in our communities of the co-op model and its benefits.”

On the subcommittee, Brattleboro is represented by Mike Szostak, Co-Chair, Alex Gyori, BFC General Manager, and Harriet Tepfer. Putney participants include Michael Wells, Co-Chair, Robyn O’Brien, PFC General Manager, and Carol Berry. These members expressed enthusiasm about the possibility of achieving efficiencies for both Co-ops and setting up a model of collaboration for others. The subcommittee has identified many potential benefits such as economic advantages to members and employees, mutual aid in times of crisis and support for organizations with similar values. Four possible collaborative projects have already been defined: a shared cold storage facility, shared patronage dividends, shared outreach and shared staff training and pooling.

At its January meeting, the subcommittee spent the most time on a possible shared cold storage facility which would extend the availability of local fall crops well into the winter months. Michael Wells anticipated that such a facility would benefit both Co-ops and also support local agricultural producers. He is working with Hans Estrin, local Food Network Coordinator from the UVM Extension service, who spearheads the local Farm to Table Movement in Windham County. The



subcommittee would love to hear from any current Brattleboro or Putney Co-op member who has the time, interest and expertise to work on this initiative.

Alex Gyori, General Manager in Brattleboro, reported on progress on another initiative to set up shared patronage dividends. In this plan, Brattleboro and Putney would join each other’s Co-ops. So, for example, if a Putney Co-op member shops at Brattleboro and is not a member in Brattleboro, that person would inform the cashier that he or she is a member of Putney, and the cashier would punch in the Putney Co-op number. When a patronage dividend is paid out, each Co-op would receive a dividend check based on the aggregate purchases of all that Co-op’s members. In this way, both Co-ops would reap patronage dividends from each other, lessening their tax liability and allowing better cash flow. Alex, who has been researching similar plans in other areas of the country, foresees no legal impediments to such an arrangement. Shared patronage benefits might be in place as soon as July 1st of this year.

A third initiative involves shared outreach and community education. As an example, articles such as these, which are of mutual interest, might appear in both Co-op newsletters. In actuality, the two Co-ops have already collaborated, along with Grafton Cheese, on preparing and staffing the cheese tent at the Strolling of the Heifers.

Activities such as this, which require lots of staff time, are more efficient when they are collaborative. Philosophically, such cooperation reinforces the importance of food education and local small farm support.

The fourth initiative identified by the subcommittee is shared staff training

and staff pooling. As members of the National Cooperative Grocers Association and the Neighboring Food Co-op Association, management has had invaluable opportunities to participate in shared training. It could be beneficial to widen such training to include all levels of staff from nearby co-ops, using high quality trainers and sharing the cost and administrative burden of organizing sessions. Further discussion of this initiative is on hold until the Brattleboro Co-op negotiates a contract with the recently adopted employee union.

Michael Wells, Chairman of the Putney Board, enthusiastically summarized the work of the Collaboration subcommittee by stating, “Co-ops working together is part of a larger, growing movement of cooperation among co-ops and an effort to strengthen the continuing expansion of the cooperative business model, especially in these difficult economic times.”

—Christina Gibbons, Brattleboro Co-op shareholder