

Food co-op winning more fans

Middlebury store may soon expand

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — The Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op (MNFC) is studying the possibility of once again expanding its store — perhaps by as much as 50 percent — onto property it owns to the west of its store at 1 Washington St.

Expansion of the increasingly popular MNFC is but one of several ideas laid out in the organization's latest long-range plan. Other priorities in the document include purchasing products in volume to keep prices down, creating a space for education classes on nutrition and healthy food preparation, improving energy efficiency, adhering to longstanding buying criteria that emphasize locally and organically grown foods, and employing "state-of-the-art digital technologies," wherever possible, to improve customer service.

"The next 10 years are loaded with potential; the challenges and opportunities have never been greater," said MNFC board President Tam Stewart. "Providing healthy foods for everyone in our community while keeping prices down and remaining central to the strength of our local food system,

has never been more important, even as our commitment to things like environmental best practice and remaining downtown raises the bar."

Glenn Lower, MNFC general manager, noted the long-range plan is part of an ongoing dialogue with the co-op's 4,200 member-owners on how they would like the store to evolve in an era of increasing sales and a burgeoning local foods movement in Addison County.

"Over the past four decades, the co-op has evolved from a buying club in neighborhood living rooms, to a pre-order cooperative, to a retail cooperative natural foods store that has expanded four times since the old train station location," the long-range plan narrative reads.

"As we look to the future, however, we imagine the co-op as something bigger than the store," the plan reads.

Co-op officials credited an active MNFC membership for being active participants in the planning process.

"All of last year was about having

this conversation with our various stakeholders," Lower said on Tuesday. "We learned a lot ... Hopefully, this plan is laying the groundwork for implementation success (for the ideas in it)."

One of the recurring themes of the plan is the need for more space within the store to implement the member-owners' ideas and to provide a better shopping experience for customers. Co-op boosters continue to lobby for a second customer restroom, expanded café seating, more aisle space to reduce store congestion, and more retail space in the bulk, cheese, meat, seafood, deli and dairy departments.

"In order to be able to offer these services and an expanded product line, we will need to expand our store," the long-range plan states.

The store is currently 6,000 square feet and MNFC's annual sales are now in the \$12 million range. The co-op has received a noticeable sales bump during the past year in the wake of the closing of Greg's Meat Market in Middlebury and Mountain Greens Market in

"With the purchase of the adjacent property last December, we are potentially able to expand the store by about 50 percent in size."

— Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op long-range plan



GLENN LOWER, LONG-TIME general manager of the Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op, is implementing some of the recommendations in a long-range plan for the popular business. The recommendations include possibly expanding the store.

Independent photo/Trent Campbell



THE MIDDLEBURY NATURAL Foods Co-op is considering an expansion onto property that it owns to the west of the store off Washington Street. No expansion will take place before 2017.

Independent photo/Trent Campbell

Bristol.

"With the purchase of the adjacent property last December, we are potentially able to expand the store by about 50 percent in size," the MNFC plan indicates.

The property in question, to the west of the current store, includes the garage in which Addison County Automotive is located.

Lower stressed there is no definitive expansion plan at this point. A feasibility study is under way that could lead to a building addition project by 2017 at the earliest, officials said.

Meanwhile, the co-op is already taking other steps to improve its operations. For example, around 650 members this past spring voted overwhelmingly in favor of a switch in MNFC's dividend policy. Historically, the co-op has extended its members a 2-percent discount on store purchases to reflect their contributions to the operation. Members have now agreed to receive dividend compensation based on store profit at the end of each fiscal year, which will be redeemable through store credit, a dividend check or some other mechanism, according to Lower.

This new patronage dividend system will give MNFC more financial

flexibility and therefore allow it to be more nimble in making improvements, Lower said.

Co-op officials have mapped out some additional goals that do not involve bricks and mortar. Among them is an effort to make organic, locally grown food more accessible to more Addison County residents. That strategy will in part involve dispelling the myth that all organic food products are more expensive than their conventional equivalent. Plans call for the co-op to expand its "Food For All" program, which provides individuals and families who qualify for federal food assistance a 10-percent discount on their everyday shopping.

In addition, Lower said MNFC will continue to contribute money and food to food shelves run by Helping Overcome Poverty's Effects and Addison Community Action. The organization is also committed to offering classes on purchasing, storing and preparing foods to help promote a healthier diet.

Next year, MNFC will mark its 40th birthday. It has established itself as a countywide leader in the local foods movement. The store currently does business with 270 separate food producers, a number that increases by the month. And

Lower routinely fields requests from folks in other Addison County communities curious about establishing food co-ops of their own. Lower and other co-op officials cannot commit to developing MNFC spin-offs in other towns, but they are able to dispense advice — which usually begins with the suggestion that interested groups form their own food buying clubs. If those clubs prove successful, the groups can then consider moving on to store operations, he explained.

"It's definitely an exciting time for food co-ops," Lower said. "There are more of them cropping up around the country. There is a wave of interest in local foods and organic foods, especially in Addison County."

Stewart believes MNFC is well positioned for the future.

"The alignment at every level of this organization is impressive," he said. "From directors and staff to our growing membership, network of suppliers, the community at large, and neighboring co-ops, there is a deep-seated core of commitment and shared vision that will inspire and sustain us all for a very long time."

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