

Co-op Corner

Your Local Food Co-op: Beyond Good Food

This month, Nicholas Monica, a junior at UMASS Amherst, is covering Co-op Corner for me so he can tell you more about his internship with the Neighboring Food Co-op Association this past summer. I hope you enjoy it! — Erbin Crowell

Every year, the Neighboring Food Co-op Association (NFCA) surveys its Member Co-ops as part of its effort to communicate the impact of food co-ops in communities across the New England and New York. This year, the survey included more than 35 food co-ops and start-up initiatives, locally-owned by 130,000 people, and generating shared revenues of \$300 million. Member Co-ops had a dramatic impact on the economy, employing over 2,000 people and purchasing over \$60 million from local suppliers.

Food co-ops in our region also had a lot to say about their efforts in ecological sustainability, food security, member participation, and inclusion. The amount of work being done in these areas was very inspiring. In fact, there were so many great examples that it is difficult to narrow down what to highlight.

The number of sustainability initiatives at our region's food co-ops was particularly impressive. Of the co-ops that responded to the survey, 8 have installed solar power systems, 12 have switched to high efficiency/LED lighting, 6 heat their stores with reclaimed energy from their refrigeration systems, and 21 have composting programs or are divert-



ing food waste. One example that stood out is Monadnock Food Co-op in Keene, NH. In 2016, Monadnock implemented commercial composting so that they can handle post-consumer waste such as one-use to-go items so they can divert more waste away from landfills. They also piloted a community supported solar array, meaning that the local community developed, funded, and owns the photovoltaic system on the co-op roof, giving the co-op the option to purchase the panels in ten years. To support and sustain these efforts, Monadnock has also implemented sustainability trainings for all staff.

Many of the co-ops surveyed also had food security programs, reflecting the NFCA's emphasis on Healthy Food

Access over the past few years. Of the co-ops surveyed, 13 co-ops had a "Food for All" program in place, with more stores looking to implement initiatives in the coming year. Brattleboro Food Co-op in Vermont reported over 265 people participating in their program, which offers educational programming and discounts to members on limited incomes. River Valley Co-op in Northampton, MA, donated 21 tons of food to local food banks in 2016. Many NFCA member food co-ops offer subsidized membership and payment plans for low income people and their families, empowering people to not just purchase healthy food at the store, but to become member-owners of a local business.

Food co-ops have also been focusing on member participation, with the majority of co-ops hosting member appreciation days and other events during the year. Portland Food Co-op in Maine co-organized an event called "Feed the 5,000" to raise awareness of food waste, where member volunteers gleaned fields and prepared food to feed 5,000 people. As part of its website redesign, Franklin Community Co-op (Green Fields Market in Greenfield, MA,

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and McCusker's Market in Shelburne Falls) created a member-only forum, while River Valley Co-op reported a 25% increase in member participation in Board elections as a result of their transition to online voting.

As a student intern with the NFCA, I noted that engaging young people is an area where food co-ops can do more. Of the groups that have specific programs in place, most focused on internships for high school and college students, or programming for elementary school children. Franklin Community Co-op had 6 total internships with local college students, hosted school group tours, and attended high school health and wellness fairs, job fairs, and community college job fairs. Co-op Food Stores in New Hampshire and Vermont hosted kids' camps, high school classes, and job shadow days as well as holding programs in local schools focused

on Fair Trade and world foods. And, of course, the NFCA and the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-ops (VAWC) partner with the UMASS Department of Economics to manage and offer internships as part of the undergraduate Certificate in Applied Research in Co-operative Enterprise.

Many co-ops acknowledged that diversity and inclusion is an area where they want to do more. For example, GreenStar Co-op Markets in Ithaca, NY, works with community leaders and organizations to recruit candidates for the Board of Directors and to review their hiring practices, while Portland Food Co-op in Maine is developing store signage and information in multiple languages in order to be more welcoming.

Overall, the NFCA survey showed that food co-ops around the Northeast are doing a lot of good. When you shop at your local co-op, your consumer dollars are also sup-

porting community ownership, sustainability, food security, and economic inclusion. There were so many exciting examples from this survey that it was difficult to decide which ones to include in my report. And by working together and sharing ideas, food co-ops in our region can continue to benefit their communities and contribute to their shared success for years to come.

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