

Thriving as a Co-op in a Corporate Food System

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One of the most important issues on which I would like a “say” as a member of Seward Co-op is the question of how to have an economically successful co-op in the highly competitive market system of today. Should we be shaping the co-op to compete in this corporate-dominated market? Or could we be showing how a truly cooperative enterprise can not only survive but thrive alongside that system, presenting an authentic alternative to corporate capitalism?

The economy of the 21st century is very different from that of the 1970s when Seward Co-op and many other food co-ops got their start as a way for people to get organic and bulk food not available in supermarkets. Now Walmart has the largest sales of organic products, and organic chains like Whole Foods and Fresh Thyme are springing up all over. Other chains—giant, like Target and Costco, small/local, like Kowalskis, and international like Aldi and Trader Joes—are also crowding into the organic market that was opened up and enlarged by food co-ops over the past 50 years.

It is undoubtedly true that unless the co-ops remain economically viable, they will fade away. This has happened—I myself have been a member of two food co-ops that have bitten the dust. Co-op economic survival is a real concern. The Seward board and management have decided that the path to survival is running the co-op more like a for-profit food store and less like a co-op, to try to compete in the viciously competitive natural foods market. You can see the logic of their thinking. But is this the only way to go?

I wonder, I really wonder, whether making our co-op like a small Kowalski's is the route to a thriving co-op. Already membership is losing its meaning—we are supposed to be “member-owners” but our only role other than shopping is to vote in the annual board elections, where most candidates are not known to us and the vast majority of members do not even vote. Oh, and we get a quarterly member discount and member specials. We are excluded from decision-making, and have no voice in product selection except to post a request on the bulletin board. We are treated as little more than customers.

Walmart, Aldi and Whole Foods exist to make money. Their drive to market domination fuels the viciously competitive situation that the co-ops now find ourselves in. But Seward is founded on a very

different set of values that include ideals like democracy, sustainability, community and diversity. Those values will never be inherent to corporate food stores, but they are shared by co-ops all over the world. And while not all members of Seward Co-op joined because of those values, I'd be willing to bet they are important for a lot of members.

Trying to compete against giant food stores requires adopting their values. We're seeing this at Seward in the way workers are treated (as a cost to be minimized rather than as a pillar on which the success of the co-op as a whole rests) and the way members are being shut out of board decisions and kept in the dark regarding finances. It is also evident in the growing number of products that are the same ones sold at Walmart and Target—products from giant agribusiness companies often packaged in non-recyclable materials, some that are not organic and/or contain GMOs, farmed fish, etc. (Under Policy Governance, the decisions to carry such products are not even being made by the board, but are the sole province of the general manager, who is answerable to the board but not to members. Yes, it's convoluted.)

No one has asked us members of Seward if we want our co-op to run more like a for-profit corporate store. We have not been consulted on watering down the cooperative values in favor of adopting the values of corporate capitalism. This has happened almost beneath our notice, while official words in The Sprout, on the website, and on store signage have lulled us into assuming that Seward is still a co-op and being managed according to the values of cooperation.

It's clear that food co-ops can't return to the early days. I'm not suggesting that. But I'm arguing that there is another way to pursue economic stability in a market dominated by huge, deep-pocketed corporations, a way that not only doesn't sacrifice precious cooperative values, but puts those values at the forefront and shapes the operations of the co-op around them.

For starters, let's ditch policy governance and involve members more directly in democratic decisionmaking. How? This is a conversation we should be having, and making a place for it is one of the reasons for the existence of the Rooster.

Next, how about if we stop treating members as merely shoppers (<https://seward.coop/coop/ownership>), and stress the opportunities for connection and community-building that co-op membership could offer? What if our co-op became a hub of engagement in social and environmental issues, inviting people to shop at a community grocery store that also organizes around issues like climate change and affordable housing? This is a way the co-op

can draw people in to membership and grow its customer base, and it will lead to a stronger co-op with deeper roots in the community. I long for a co-op that lives its values in this way—do you?

And speaking of community, co-ops started out as community grocery stores, serving their geographic neighborhood. This is still true, and it offers many possibilities for strengthening community bonds. Seward's geographic area is one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the city, possibly in the country. How great would it be if our co-op could be a place to truly engage with each other, learn about other cultures, and deepen understanding across the bounds of race, religion, language, and other kinds of difference?

It's easy to throw around the word "community"—the big stores are using it now with no content. It's just a feel-good word to them, and sometimes I think it is only that at Seward co-op, too. Just a word.

But community is not just a word—it is a real cooperative value, one of those values that make co-ops fundamentally different from corporate food stores. I'm quite sure that with some encouragement, Seward members would develop plenty of ways to make community and the other co-op values more than words once again.

And I, idealist that I am, believe moving back toward our co-op roots, refigured to be relevant in this moment, is a way for cooperative values to take root more deeply, and really point the way to a sustainable, liveable, dare I say beautiful, future for everyone. I'm definitely up to be part of that process.