

Nobody Is the Enemy

by Betsy Barnum

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If you've been following my writings on the Members Caring for Seward Co-op Facebook page and the Seward Rooster website, you know that I am concerned about what is happening at Seward Community Co-op.

There is plenty to be concerned about. But as we who are concerned marshal our information and arguments for what we think ought to happen, there's also plenty that we need to understand.

One important thing to understand is that everyone involved cares about Seward Co-op and wants it to succeed. Everyone involved is doing what they are doing out of a belief that the path they want to take is the best one for the co-op and its community.

When we seem to have such different visions of what is best, sometimes it can be hard to remember that underneath it all, we really want the same thing. But I think it's critically important.

We live in a cultural milieu that has become highly polarized. There's a tendency in public discourse to engage in "us-them" thinking, to see those who don't agree with me as the enemy. And it can be easy to attribute nefarious motives to "them," such as "they want the co-op to become a corporate store," "they are ashamed of the counterculture origins of the co-op," even "they have found ways to personally profit" and "they like having the power to make decisions without interference from members."

And we who have agitated for a different path for Seward Co-op's future have been seen by those who disagree with us as "crazy," "paranoid," perhaps "conspiracy theorists," "old hippies," "people who want to dictate but don't understand the complexities of co-op governance."

There are probably some grains of truth in many of these ascribed motives—but only small grains. My commitment today and going forward is to think beyond them, and

remember we are all people concerned about the future of Seward Co-op. No one is trying to destroy the co-op. No one is seeking raw power without a thought for the realities of the market or how people are being affected. No one is evil, no one is ignorant, no one is crazy--no one is the enemy.

What we need, instead of speculating on each other's motives, is to seek dialogue. So much of what the board does is in secret, which makes it hard for concerned members to have a conversation with board members as individuals or as a body. And when we don't communicate, misunderstanding can, and almost always does, arise.

But that may already be changing. Former board President Mary Alice Smalls wrote in the 2018 Scorecard (<https://seward.coop/coop/scorecard>), "At the same time, we engaged in dialogue with some owners that led to changes to our co-op governance processes. The great number of observers to our work this year intensified board deliberations to be more open, and presented more opportunities to clarify what the board does and does not do."

Though Smalls does not offer any specifics regarding what changes have been made, the statement that there have been changes seems to be a hopeful step in what I would call "the right direction"—away from secrecy and toward more open communication between board and members. We have a ways to go in recovering trust on both sides, but with more willingness to make board deliberations open and to listen to members, we have a good chance to do that—especially if we members can hold up our end by being willing to listen and engage in open dialogue with our board.

When we can be open and listen to each other, all of us, we can start to have the desperately needed dialogue about how to ensure a successful Seward Co-op. What, really, is the best path forward? How can a small store like ours survive in a market that is getting more competitive by the day? How can we activate our membership to greater participation economically and socially? How can we recommit to the co-op values of democracy, community, equity, diversity and local economics so they support a successful co-op in today's world that is so different from that of 1972 when Seward Co-op began?

These are rich and timely questions that the entire Seward Co-op community needs to be

part of. And we at the Rooster have some ideas for how to do that. Stay tuned!

I firmly believe all who are concerned about the future of Seward Co-op can open up our thinking to each other and discuss our differences with the purpose of using all our resources together to create a thriving path forward for our co-op.

That's my intention for 2019. Are you with me?

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