



# Plainfield Co-op Strategic Plan

October 2016

## Introduction

The Plainfield Co-op is a community-owned grocery store which has grown from a buying club in the early 1970's to a co-operative grocery store with more than 500 member/owners and an annual budget of more than \$1 million. The Co-op has been at its current location in the old Grange Hall in downtown Plainfield since 1972. This is both a strength, as the store is a familiar, beloved landmark in town, and a weakness, as the physical limitations of the location and the historic nature of our building constrain growth.

Through a series of conversations with our member/owners in recent years, the Board of Directors determined that we will remain in our present building for the foreseeable future. The location is familiar and convenient to a large proportion of our core

customers and beloved by many. The building is structurally sound. We own the building and property free and clear of debt, and the resale value of the property is low. We are an important institution in the historic Village of Plainfield. Moving to a new location would require financial and organizational resources beyond our current and foreseeable capacity.

Having decided that we are going to remain where we are does not mean, however, that nothing should change. On the contrary, last spring and summer, the Board and the Management Collective met together for two retreats where we agreed we needed a process of Strategic Planning to focus and coordinate planning for long-range priorities.

## The Strategic Planning Process

Overall direction of the Plainfield Co-op is the responsibility of the Board of Directors, who are elected by and accountable to the member/owners. Daily operations of the store are the responsibility of the Management Collective. In the spring and summer of 2015 the Board and Management Collective met together at two half-day retreats facilitated by Co-op member Andy Robinson. The two groups named a Strategic Planning Task Force: Michael Billingsley, Gail Falk, Bob Fancher, Dawn Fancher, Petra Gates, Ryan Gillard, and Karla Haas Moskowitz. The Task Force was charged with researching and framing recommendations for four goals:

**Goal One. Develop a master plan for the building**

**Goal Two. Involve members as more than customers**

**Goal Three. Become more welcoming to everyone in our community**

**Goal Four. Address food insecurity in our community**

Over the winter the Task Force developed and distributed two surveys: one for member/owners and one for non-members.. We collected 99 responses from non-members and nearly 80 responses from members. We interviewed stakeholders, researched building usage and needs, permit requirements, potential funding sources, and practices of other Vermont co-operatives to address food insecurity.

The Task Force presented the Goals and the survey responses at Annual Meeting in April, and then prepared a draft of this report for review by the Board and the Management

Collective and incorporated their thoughts. The public and members were invited to comment on the plan at a Public Forum in September 2016.

## Next Steps

**August - October - December 2016** Board and MC collaborate to recruit member/owners<sup>1</sup> for the five new committees and one existing committee called for in this Plan:

- a. Membership Committee
- b. Food Access Committee
- c. Building Construction Committee
- d. Internal Layout Committee
- e. Building Finance Committee
- f. Communications Committee (exists now but will have new duties)

**Quarterly, starting January 1, 2017** Management Collective reports in the newsletter and on the website on the status of implementation of the Plan.

**Annually, starting in 2017** Management Collective provides a detailed report to the membership on implementation of the plan at Annual Meeting.

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<sup>1</sup>Note that the term “members” anywhere in this Plan means “member/owners.”

## Our Ends

All parts of the Strategic Plan will be implemented with a goal of achieving the Co-op's Ends

1. Distribute healthy, affordable food and other goods
2. Actively seek local producers and growers, and support the local and regional economy.
3. Sustain the environment through its operations and the products it offers.
4. Increase awareness of cooperative principles and of other cooperative businesses.
5. Foster awareness about the quality and source of our food.
6. Build connections that are essential for a vibrant community.



# Goal One: Repair and Update the Co-op Building

## Introduction

The Strategic Planning Committee was tasked with coming up with a master plan for the building that takes into account major repairs, current and anticipated space needs, accessibility, and service improvements. A master plan is needed because the nature of our building means that most major changes impact other changes. For instance, the location of an elevator or a more accessible entryway, impacts the layout of both the first and second floors. New flooring is needed, but we do not want to install flooring until we have addressed the entryways and addressed changes in the internal layout of the store.

In order to come up with a Master Planning process, the Strategic Planning Committee studied our overall building needs and prioritized those that seem most important to our members and most important for the store to thrive.

## Community Input

In the spring of 2016, the Co-op surveyed both members and non-members. The results favored:

- increasing the store size
- making the store and Community Center accessible to all
- undertaking a building project possibly requiring a loan

Results were mixed about the Co-op providing a deli or café. Grab-n-Go was the preferred method of providing prepared food.

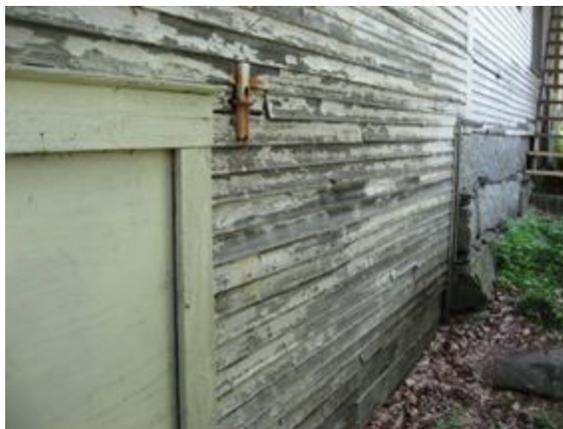
Other inputs from members strongly favor keeping the Co-op in the current location.

The full survey results are available on our website – [member survey](#) [non-member survey](#)

## Major Repairs Needed

The Building Committee of the Co-op did an in-depth survey of the building in May, 2014. Some of the smaller issues they identified have been addressed, and some are in process now. But, there are some issues that other major projects we have not tackled yet, either because of their cost or because they are interconnected to plans for expansion or improvements. The major repairs that are priorities include:

- **New siding for the outside of the building.** The siding on the outside of the building is in need of re-painting or replacement. The west wall (opposite the parking lot) cannot be re-painted; it is too worn and must be replaced. (Below: south wall, north wall, west wall)



- **The stairs to the second floor.** The stairs are too narrow and too steep. They are impossible to navigate for people with mobility concerns and dangerous for many of the rest of us. . The stairs are 9.5" deep and 8" high. The stairway is 31" wide. The ADA requirements are 11" deep minimum and 4-7" high maximum and at least 36" wide.



- **The front entryway.** The front entry is narrow and congested and the doors are old and need replacement. This could be solved with renovations to the store front (see below in the Improvements section.) and a redesign could make the Co-op's face to the community more welcoming.
- **Store floor.** The floor of the store area is worn and needs to be re-surfaced.



- **Cooler and Freezer.** The cooler and the freezer in the store area are both old and need frequent repair. We would like to replace them with new, energy efficient models.

- **Windows.** The windows, especially in the second floor Community Center are very old and worn and are not energy efficient. It is believed that these are the original 1800's windows.



- **Infrastructure upgrades.** There are several areas of the building that are hidden from view that need upgrades to be compliant with current building codes. One of these, the fire alarm system is being upgraded now. But, other areas including plumbing, electrical and accessibility issues need some work to be code compliant.

## More Space Needed

- **Back stock space.** That is where we keep our inventory of products waiting to go on the shelves. The current back stock space is full and overflowing. There is a total 276' of shelving in the back stock area. On a random day in June, there was only 9' of empty shelving left. Some products had to be stored on the floor in the aisles.



- **Office space.** We have TWO office seats for the entire MC and staff. One of the seats has a PC and the other has a terminal for the inventory/POS system. When several MC members or buyers (a total of 8-12 people) need to access one or the other, they must wait.



- **Aisle space.** Our aisles are too narrow for comfortable shopping. They are also very restrictive for customers with mobility concerns. The store aisles vary from 28" to 48". Most are at least 36" which is required by the ADA. However, we do not have sufficient space at the end of the aisles for wheelchair turning. Shoppers are reluctant to use a shopping cart due to the confined aisle space, which discourages large purchases.

- **Shelf space.** If we are to add to our available products, we are going to need more room. Many people are interested in having "Grab-n-Go" prepared foods (see survey results below). That will take store space. As we work to expand our product line to provide lower cost and more varied products for our customers, we will need more shelf space to accommodate them.

- **Meeting space.** We have one room upstairs, but that has often proved to be not enough. The other space, which is very small, is multi-tasked as the 1) staff lunch and break area, 2) secondary office seats and 3) part-time meeting area.



## Improvements to make the store more welcoming, functional, and accessible

- **Access to the Second Floor.** The Community Center and meeting room on the second floor have no means of access for people with mobility concerns. As a result we cannot hold our Annual Meeting or other public events in our own building. An elevator would provide this much needed service for our community.
- **Improve the Store Front.** The front entrance of the Co-op can be made more appealing and inviting while still maintaining the historic character of the building.. Also, a new entrance would provide direct access that would be less congested and more accessible for all customers. The original exterior wall would be preserved, but the entry door would be replaced and moved to provide direct access into the store. New signage would also be added.



- **Register Area.** The checkout area needs a new layout to reduce congestion. The area for customers checking out is also one of the main aisles in the store. A new register area layout would also increase staff security. After a recent robbery it became clear that staff could be trapped in the register area.



- **Equipment for Grab-n-Go Food.** Providing more prepared food for take-out was very popular in the customer surveys and is viewed as filling an important need in the community. It is also expected to generate an increase in store sales. Some equipment will be needed to expand this product line. We will be a new dedicated cooler and a sandwich prep area with stainless steel tables and possibly a dishwasher.
- **Kitchen.** The committee looked carefully at the options of adding a commercial kitchen for extensive food preparation and/or a cafe, and decided that these are not priorities at this time, even though many people would like to see them in the Co-op.

## Next Steps

The next step is to consolidate all the items listed above into one master plan, to be implemented in phases as funding is available, with the goals of:

- ★ Building an expansion to the store of approximately 600-700 square feet. The expansion would be one story and will be on the side facing the river. We will be doing an initial design study from which we can calculate the construction costs. Once we know the costs, we will determine how to proceed.
- ★ Remodeling the existing building to include as many of the repairs and improvements listed above as is financially possible.
- ★ Purchasing as much of the equipment listed above as is financially possible.

This will create a very large project for the Co-op. There will be many, many details to be investigated and finalized, and it is understood that, in the course of development, it may be determined that aspects of the project, including the expansion, are beyond our financial means. The recommendation is for the project work to be divided into three basic domains: Building Construction, Internal Layout, and Financial. Each area will have a committee to work through the details, There will be an overall Project Coordinator.

- **Building Construction.** This committee will encompass all phases of the actual construction, including design, contractor selection, building material selection, utility planning, planning to minimize construction impact on daily store routine, working with the contractor, applying for permits, liaison with government officials, etc. (Note: Since the Co-op building is a Plainfield historic building, any exterior modifications must adhere to town historic requirements.)

The composition of the committee (5-6 people) would be:

- A person knowledgeable about building construction
- A member of the Board
- A member of the Building Committee
- An MC liaison
- Other interested people

- **Internal Layout.** This committee will determine the internal layout of the first and second floors of the building. Shelving placement, aisle configuration, checkout area, office space, back stock expansion, meeting area(s) and equipment layout.

The composition of the committee (5-6 people) would be:

- MC Buyer
- 2-3 other MC members

A member of the Board  
other interested people

- **Financial.** This committee will include obtaining and managing finances for the project. It will include loans, gifts, fundraisers, grants (ADA, historical and others) and government funds, as well as projecting future costs and future income resulting from the project. The Financial Committee will advise the Board and the members about the Co-op's financial capacity to proceed with some or all of the project. The committee will manage the capital fundraising campaign.

The composition of the committee (5-6 people) would be:

Board Treasurer  
MC Financial Controller  
3-4 other interested people

Each of these pieces is dependent on the others. That will require compromises and all of the desired modifications/additions may not be able to be done if we are not able to raise the necessary funds.

## Risks

As with any project, this project has risks. Some we can foresee and some will arise as the project progresses. Each risk must be addressed so it can be minimized. Risks we have identified include:

- **Parking.** The Co-op does not own the parking area that our customers use. The Town of Plainfield owns it. If our business grows due the expansion, that will aggravate our existing parking problem.

- **River Corridor.** The Co-op building is within the government defined "River Corridor" which is establishes the boundary of severe floods for the Winooski River. It is anticipated that this fall the Town of Plainfield will adopt The River Corridor and its corresponding zoning restrictions. This will create some time restrictions for our project that we will need to meet or, if possible, obtain extensions.

- **Store Closure During Construction.** Since we will be altering and adding on to the existing building, there are times the store may not be safe for our customers due to the construction. Each day the store is closed will have a real impact on our income. We must carefully plan to minimize store closures.

- **Financial.** The project depends on our ability to pay for it. We may not be able to raise enough funds upfront to pay for it all. We will most likely need to borrow some money. There is a risk that the Co-op's business will not be able to support the loan payments. Also, construction projects often are 'over budget', which may cause financial concerns.

Again, these issues are known, and we will address them accordingly, but they are still risks at this time.



# Goal Two: Increase member involvement in the activities and governance of the Co-op

## Introduction

The vitality of our co-operative depends on an active, engaged membership. While some members may choose to have a customer relationship, making their annual equity payment and shopping at the store, the co-op will flourish if more of our members are involved in governance, social activities, education activities and volunteer work. Currently about 8% of members are working members, either through membership in committees or the Board, or through hands-on work at the store

## Member Survey Results and Other Background Information.

Many members have told us that they are too busy to become active participants, but the 2016 member survey revealed that 23 of the 80 people who responded to the survey were willing to become working members, either through doing work in the store, or through alternate contributions, such as grounds maintenance, repairing the boat path, committee work, and outreach. On the whole, people who answered the survey find the register discount of 7% for two hours of work per week to be sufficient. A few people would like a higher discount, and others are unable regardless of the discount. Many people (37% of responders) did not know that a member can qualify for a working member discount by serving on the board or a committee. Some people said they would like to do work that could be done on a flexible schedule.

The survey revealed that many of our members stay informed by reading the quarterly newsletter. A whopping 93 % of survey respondents said they read the newsletter sometimes or all the time. Fewer report reading the new monthly sales e-flyer, but a

number of those said they didn't know about it, or know how to get it, so there is room to expand readership. Members listed surveys and a suggestion box as the best ways to get member input. As to the Suggestion Box, some people didn't realize we had one; others suggested it be in a more prominent location, such as the front counter, or near the exit.

Through discussion with members, the Task Force learned that people who wanted to volunteer have been discouraged in the past because they didn't get called back in a timely way or didn't feel their skills and limitations were recognized or couldn't find out what work needed to be done. The MC's Membership Coordinator is starting to address these concerns.

Volunteers doing physical work in the store can pose liability challenges. The Co-op recently succeeded in purchasing liability insurance for volunteer workers, but the liability protection is limited. Despite the potential complications, the Board and MC are committed to continuing and expanding our Co-op's tradition of working members.

Longtime members recall that the Co-op used to have social events that brought co-op members together and provided a valuable bonding experience.

## Findings

1. There is untapped capacity for involving more members as working members
2. The 7% register discount is an important incentive for involving members in work and governance, and should be retained.
3. Many members would like the option of volunteering on a flexible schedule or for special projects, such as work parties, perhaps for a limited-time discount.
4. The newsletter is an effective method of communicating with members. Many members do not yet know about the monthly sales e-flyer.
5. The system for applying to be a working member needs improvement, including a written application that includes a waiver of liability.
6. Members would be more likely to volunteer if they were aware of the variety of committees and tasks in need of volunteers.
7. Coordinating volunteer workers and documenting eligibility for working member discounts is the responsibility of the Management Collective. The MC's new Membership Coordinator is energetic and aware of the needs but is limited to 8-10 hours per month for this task, which makes for slow progress. A Membership Committee could supplement the work of the Membership Coordinator in recruiting and involving members.

## Goals

1. Increase working member hours in the store by 25% by 2020.
2. Increase number of members on governance and activity committees by 25% by 2020
3. Conduct at least three membership social or educational activities each year.

## Next Steps

1. Create a Membership Committee responsible for working with the Membership Coordinator to accomplish the Goals, using some or all of the following strategies:
  - A. A pamphlet about working membership together with maintaining updated info on the website and on Facebook.
  - B. Ideas for jobs/roles for working members.
  - C. An assessment of work schedule options for working members, such as work parties, flexible hours, and longer shifts a few times a year.
  - D. A constantly updated list posted in the store and on the website with volunteer needs and opportunities.
  - E. A written volunteer application
  - F. A system for recording volunteer hours
  - G. Group work parties for activities such as grounds work, boat path maintenance, store clean-up
  - H. Social events throughout the year where members can get to know one another
  - I. Educational events relating to Co-op Ends and led by knowledgeable community members
  - J. A system for monitoring the Co-op's success in increasing member involvement, and reporting annually to the MC and the Board.
2. Continue to support the Communications Committee as the Co-op's primary channel of communicating with members. Include within the Communications Committee's charter the responsibility to inform and inspire the members to be involved in governance, social and educational activities, and to become working members.



# Goal Three: Be more welcoming to everyone in our community

## Introduction

The Plainfield Co-op seeks to welcome **all** residents of Plainfield and adjoining towns -- not just those who subscribe to a particular lifestyle or philosophy of eating. We realize that being welcoming involves a combination of factors: Are staff and other customers friendly? Is the outside and inside appearance of the store inviting? Can I find my way easily? Does signage appeal to me and a broad range of others? Do the products and prices fit my needs and preferences and budget?

## Member Survey Results and Other Background Information

To learn how we might become more welcoming to our neighbors who have not joined or shopped at the Co-op, the Strategic Planning Committee created and circulated a survey for non-members. We handed it out at a variety of venues, including Town Meeting, Maplehill School, Twin Valley Senior Center, and the Fire Department. 90 people filled out the non-member survey. The majority of these live near the Co-op -- most within a mile of the store.

Virtually all who filled out the survey have shopped at the Co-op, and 20% shop at the Co-op more than anywhere else, letting us know that we failed to reach non-shoppers with the survey.

There were a wide variety of answers to the questions about whether the Co-op carries products the individuals surveyed want or need, and no particular pattern emerged in the answers. Lower prices, fresher better local produce, more gluten free, and specific new breads were each mentioned by two or more responders, but none more than seven times. About equal numbers of respondents said they would and would not shop more if the Co-op expanded its selection of lower cost non-organic products. A majority

of respondents said they would (37%) or might (18%) shop more at the Co-op if there were take-out food. 46 said they would like to have a cafe at the Co-op. More than half the responders did not know they could special order products not on the shelves.

Physical accessibility did not emerge as a barrier for most respondents; for those who said it is an issue, navigation of the entry and of the aisles was most mentioned.

Nearly everyone knew that you don't have to be a member to shop. While many respondents said they felt welcomed by staff at the store, nearly 25% (24.4%) of those who answered this question said they felt welcome only sometimes, or that it depended on who was on duty. Some respondents described the Co-op positively as "intimate," "cozy," "cute," "funky," "quirky," "small", while others described it as "dark," "cramped," "crowded," "too small." More than half like the layout the way it is (some particularly mentioned the kids space), while a few mentioned that it is "worn," "needs sprucing up," "and recommended improved signage, improved layout, and more lighting.

Half the people who completed the survey said they would like to hear about monthly sales and specials through e-mail. We have not previously tried to build an e-mail list of non-members for communication and marketing.

22% of respondents did not know about the Community Center, and virtually none had concerns about its accessibility. Almost no one said an ATM would bring them to the store. A small percentage (16%) said they would or might shop more if the Co-op offered discounts for low income people.

Some Strategic Planning Committee members have had discussions with community members who do not shop at the Co-op because they think of it as a place for "hippies." Some area residents do not realize that you can buy meat, alcohol, pet food, and toilet paper at the store. Some people think of it as a health food store that doesn't have food they know how to cook or are used to eating.

## Findings

1. Many regular shoppers are not members of the Co-op. The Co-op lacks a systematic, practical way to invite shoppers to become members.
2. E-mail and social media offer promising methods of communicating with non-members about sales, specials and products we carry.
3. Offering prepared food for take-out would fill a need for many non-members.
4. There is room to increase positive customer service and atmosphere by staff with the goal that all customers feel welcomed when they shop at the Co-op.
5. Building design, signage, lighting, and store layout (including customer check-out design) can make the store feel more welcoming for some shoppers.

6. Many residents of Plainfield and surrounding towns do not realize that the Co-op is a convenient place to buy products they use in their daily lives.
7. We need additional strategies to understand what barriers are keeping community members who never shop at the Co-op from considering the Co-op to be their local village store.

## Goals -- by 2020

1. Increase the average daily traffic (number of shopping transactions) in the store by 10 percent.
2. Increase the number of regular shoppers who are members. Increase membership by at least 20 per cent by 2020.
3. Increase by 30 % the number of non-members who receive Co-op email and social media communications.
4. Increase the number of non-members who say they were welcomed positively by staff to 95%.

## Next Steps

1. Grow membership through an annual Membership Campaign. Set aside a defined and publicized period or periods for Membership Recruitment, with signs (a graph of new members?), register conversations, flyers, and email solicitation. (Membership Committee)
2. Create an email communication list of non-members who would like to get email information about sales, specials and products. (Communication Committee)
3. Provide all staff with training in positive customer service. Include customer service in annual staff evaluations. (MC)
4. Include careful consideration of layout, lighting, customer checkout, and ease of navigation of aisles in building renovation (Internal Layout Committee). Redesign the entryway to be more welcoming. (Building Construction Committee).
5. Offer significantly more prepared take-out food, and purchase a cooler where prepared food can be attractively and safely displayed. (MC/Internal Layout Committee)
6. Develop advertising that emphasizes products and good pricing on products that appeal to a wide range of residents of Plainfield and nearby towns (e.g., carrots, milk, eggs, local apples, butter, cooking oil .....). Develop an advertising strategy that will successfully reach all households in Plainfield and Marshfield with this information (MC and Communication Committee.)
7. Become more known and trusted by participating in community activities. (Communication Committee).



# Goal Four - Addressing Food Insecurity

## Introduction

The Strategic Planning Committee was tasked with researching and framing recommendations for addressing Food Insecurity in our community. Reasons for food insecurity are as numerous and highly individualized as people themselves. Food insecurity exists among our members and in our community. While it is a common problem it is often invisible. Can the Co-op play a role in softening the hardships of food insecurity, and if so, how? How can practices supporting this goal that are already in place be supported and, where possible, improved or expanded?

## Member Survey Results and Other Background Information

Responses to the member survey indicated a general uncertainty and unawareness of food insecurity in Plainfield. Members supported a percentage discount or other support for qualified persons. There was also support for selling certain staples at a lower mark-up as in the “Co-op Basics” program at some other regional co-ops. The non-member survey did not include questions about addressing food insecurity, so at the moment we have no data collected on whether non-members would be more likely to shop at the Coop if discounts or other support were provided.

The Co-op donates unclaimed patronage dividends to the Onion River Food Shelf and Twin Valley Senior Center. The Co-op also collects donations of food items for the Onion River Food Shelf. Survey results show members support this idea with many listing it as a way we can help. Survey responses also suggested we partner with a local organization that addresses food insecurity. The Co-op currently works with the Twin Valley Senior Center and donates food to them to use in their programs. These donations typically consist of fruit and bulk spices.

Discounting or donating less fresh food was mentioned by survey respondents. The Co-op currently sells less fresh or unsightly produce at a 50% discount, this is below our cost. Other foods are marked down more modestly close to their freshness date.

Cooking demonstrations and community meals or potlucks were also mentioned in the survey responses.

NFCA, the regional grocery co-op organization to which we belong, supports member co-ops in creating Healthy Food Access Programs such as Food For All (discounts for people in qualified programs such as SNAP, WIC, and SSI) and Co-op Basics. They offer extensive documentation on developing and implementing such programs. This information can be found at <http://nfca.coop/hfaprograms>

Surveys, both member and nonmember again mentioned our prices as a deterrent to shopping here, especially for those who need to shop on a budget. Mark-ups are already as low as financially feasible and buyers actively try to find the best deals that they can. Expanding our product line as mentioned in Goal One and Goal Three could greatly help in the effort to provide more affordable healthy options.

## Goals

1. Work toward implementing a Food For All or Co-op Basics program or both.
2. Expand discounting of products (including less marketable, quality food) to ensure minimal waste and encourage the movement of products.
3. Explore partnership programs that increase equity of access to food (e.g. Partner with TVSC and Meals on Wheels and have an order and delivery system for seniors that cannot shop at the coop)
4. Continue our support of Onion River Food Shelf and Twin Valley Senior Center and access options for expanding this support.
5. Create and periodically update a food security map of community needs and our resources. (e.g. What supports we might offer to lower barriers to healthy food access, including non-financial barriers such as transportation)
6. Expand product lines to include more affordable options with consideration of the new opportunities that will be afforded by a likely sales floor expansion as discussed in Goal One.

## Next Step

Create a Food Access Committee to assess options for food access programs and study the costs and potential effectiveness of various options. This committee will be made up of:

- 1-2 staff members

- 1-2 Board members

- 1-2 other member-owners

At least one member of the committee should be a person who accesses food assistance programs or has a similar situation. The Task Force is responsible for determining the practical steps and timeframes needed for speedy implementation of the six strategies listed above.