

Notes from Breakout Groups
Plainfield Co-op Community Forum I
June 29, 2022

Because the 6/29 meeting was cut short by a storm, we didn't have a chance to review responses from individual groups. Below are the take-aways. We need a path forward! Let the discussion continue ...

Notes from Breakout Group 1, shared by Jess Taylor:

Ideas for reducing scale of present Co-op:

- Open 6 days instead of 7.
- One 'set' of employees if hours were less.
- Reduce variety of non-grocery items.
- Determine what specialty items sell.
- Determine core sales items.
- Pre-buy local/core items such as meat.

Present Co-op:

- Walkable for many.
- Part of the community.
- Dark and cramped.
- Hard to keep steady staff.
- Deferred maintenance is catching up.
- Not enough buying power.

Move:

- More support for local farmers.
- Better buying power.

- Price of moving/building.
- Challenges with melding with hardware.
- Huge opportunities to work with other businesses.

Notes from Breakout Group 2, shared by Genese Grill:

- Strength 1: Walkable from downtown [contra: current location a pain if you are not in town]
- Opportunity 1: Allenwood Property on Rt. 2 is walkable from downtown too. \$877,000: Under VT Land Trust except for center/land could be used for: petting zoo, community gardens??
- Opportunity 1 a) Switch town offices and co-op, moving co-op activities to forefront of Main Street and using upstairs for café, etc. Community center would make sense as part of/extension of town offices.
- Strength 2: Experience from former difficult times has taught us that solution need not be either or, thus
- Opportunity 2: Could have small walkable co-op in current location (perhaps with bulk items only—see below) AND large store on route 2, either Plainfield Hardware or Allenwood or elsewhere
- Strength 3: Town Community/Love of town.
- Opportunity 3: Strengthen downtown by making co-op more vibrant at current location, drawing people into the downtown.
- Strength 4: Community Center energy (negatively affected by Covid)
- Opportunity 4: Raise money by renting space for classes, events and also draw shoppers in to store/Revitalization of community center!
- Opportunity 4.a: Although many discussions of how to reach out to neighboring towns and possible shoppers have been had, we have not yet implemented any strategies for radically increasing outreach. Marketing Team to work on this.
- Strength 5: Money available for downtown revitalization

- Opportunity 5: if co-op building became non-profit, money for repairs, renovations, historic preservation would be accessible.
- Strength 6: Expansion Grant
- Opportunity 6: Consider new energetic management
- Opportunity 6 a.: cost analysis of jobs created/lost/expansion costs
- Strength 7: History of co-op
- Opportunity 7: Consider going back to bulk order/once a week pick up, perhaps in conjunction with active community center and larger store elsewhere.
- Strength 8: In the past we were told we needed to reach a critical gross amount of 1 million (viable)
- Opportunity 8: Consider why, if we have been reaching this for last 10 years we are still not breaking even. Opportunity to come to 0 and at least not lose money.

Notes from Breakout Group 2, shared by Rose Paul:

Strengths/Opportunities:

- Coop is in the village. This is also a weakness as it lacks visibility.
- World issues will prompt people to buy more local. Increasing price of gas makes goods cost more, but can local customers be convinced to drive shorter distances?
- There's a lot of money available for downtowns and villages (this member is on the Regional Planning Commission)
- The hardware store location on Rt. 2 is an opportunity
- Four people said they'd like to keep our village building AND have a store on Rt. 2, and have just convenience goods in the village building and re-imagine other uses as well.
- People recognize there's an attachment to the building and keeping co-op in that location.
- Can we offer more conventional goods so that a wider array of people might want to shop there? Can we survey people to find out?

Weaknesses:

- In the village so it lacks visibility
- Less buying power for price breaks. If we had twice or thrice the goods we have now, we'd get a better price.

Notes from Breakout Group 3, shared by Lucy Blue:

- Someone was strongly in favor of having a space for folks to have concerts, get-togethers, a creative space. Sounded like a description of the Community Center. He went on about importance of having a community performance and gathering space!
- Someone mentioned something about not feeling well informed about the Co-op's financial situation. They mentioned the Flexible Capital Fund, as a possible helpful resource.

Notes from Breakout Group 3, shared by Erok Gillard:

- Generally there was a lot of enthusiasm to move to the Hardware Store. There also two different ideas:
- One person said Plainfield Co-op building should become a wellness co-op—not groceries, but rather healing and wellness and workshops.
- Another person grew up in Minneapolis. Shared about a lot of co-ops and how they chase the money. Cautioned against the expansion, that it would lose its heart and soul in the process of paying the loans.
- Jaquelyn Rieke wrapped it up. She is one of the main people spearheading Buffalo Mountain Co-op's move. She knows about the source of lots of different grants and mini-loans. They were able to raise over \$680,000 in community loans and donations. She attributed that to a really strong executive director, who provided leadership. Jacqueline is the founder of Nutty Steph's Chocolates, that became Rabble Rousers, which is a worker-owned co-op.

Erok recapped his own thoughts:

- The Co-op should buy the Hardware Store. Right now the Hardware Store is for sale as a profitable business. It's obviously not simple. Ostensibly we could keep itself

going. However, at the pace we're going—if we do the whole feasibility study, we may well miss the opportunity and we may already have!

- It seems like we've done so many good survey and studies to see what the members want (café, accessibility, better parking, expanded groceries—beyond specialty items—Rt. 2.) It just seems like a no-brainer. It fits, it fits, it fits!!! It is expensive, it's going to take a lot of energy, enthusiasm, leadership.

Notes from Breakout Group 3, shared by Jaquelyn Rieke:

In general:

- A wellness grange at the existing location
- More programming in the existing community space
- Renting the Hardware store before buying/ Renting a portion of it
- We have the opportunity to remain "grass roots" and remain low-debt as a means to not becoming capitalistic, by staying in the current location
- We have the opportunity to shepherd this organization into a conscious death process

Relating to a PURCHASE of the Plainfield Hardware:

- Diverting economic power from wall street to Main Street by doing the fundraising that would be needed to buy the Plainfield Hardware. (When we get our members to loan or donate \$2k or \$10k or \$30k to the new co-op, then some of those people will retrieve those funds from their stock holdings)
- In the Plainfield Hardware space: performance, art studios, community events
- With the budget involved in such an expansion, we have the opportunity to establish an extremely adept, experienced Executive Director
- We could have a volunteer shuttle program to bring any carless Plainfield villagers to the new co-op on a routine basis

Notes from Breakout Group 4:

Strengths:

- Membership: shoppers and volunteers
- Hardworking staff
- Community goodwill
- great food
- local suppliers/farmers
- building paid for
- can put canoe in river behind co-op

Opportunities:

- more parking elsewhere
- hardware store available
- opportunity for growth
- interest in local food trending
- be more consistent with food stock
- and larger store would allow this
- more space for inventory for variety and quantity
- larger space would allow more “full time” shopping
- merging with conventional (like Buffalo Mountain) to specialize better
- margin not adjustable yet, cap on revenue and wages so need to expand
- consider the difference in winter and summer e.g. what’s offered, hours, etc.
- more traffic on RT 2 for shoppers
- swap town clerk and co-op
- strong interest in historic preservation and in VT preservation grant
- save both hardware store and co-op food store

Plainfield Co-op Community Forum II

Mon., Aug 1, 2022 from 6 to 7:30 p.m.

Rain date: 8/2 @ 6 p.m.

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Let the discussion continue...

