

The Plainfield Co-op Newsletter

Summer 2020

Support the Co-op: Shop locally



Art: Sarah Albert

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 Stella Brown, *Produce, Floor Staff/Cashier*
 Laura Conklin, *Beer and Wine, Supplements,
 Body Care, Household and Gifts Buyer*
 Jezebel Crow, *Produce, Cheese, Coffee, Tea,
 and Bulk Herbs Buyer*
 Eben Markova-Gold, *Floor Staff/Cashier*
 Audrey Isom, *Floor Staff/Cashier/Receiver*
 Kevin Levesque, *Operations Manager and
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Staff who are on leave are not listed here.



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Advertise in the Newsletter: Spread the word about your business! Support the Co-op!

Deadline for the Fall issue is September 1, to be published mid-September. The newsletter is published quarterly in a black & white paper version and in color online. To place an ad, contact Elizabeth Mathai, ad co-ordinator, elizabethmathai@yahoo.com

Electronic graphics files are preferred, but we are able to work with any clear copy. For questions about ad copy or help in designing your ad contact Sarah Albert, 802-476-0526 or sarah@vtlink.net.

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About This Newsletter

Questions abound. More questions than answers. The newsletter is trying to report what's going on in a rapidly changing scene—report not just the decisions but the stories behind the decisions and stories of the results of those decisions. The Co-op is people thinking together, acting together, learning together.

It was hard to imagine what was going on inside our closed building and what the Board was having to consider. I asked Gail to interview some of those people for "The Inside Story." Then there was "The Outside Story" of some of the shoppers. And more than ever, a concern about our Co-op's survival financially.

At this time, when we need the energy of our members coming together in person to brainstorm and commit to action, meeting is still impossible. We hope this newsletter will help you feel more connected while apart. Meanwhile, we can all shop more. And cook more--check out the recipes in this issue and in back issues posted on the Co-op website plainfieldcoop.com.

Thank you all for reading our newsletter and supporting our Co-op. We invite your submissions for the next newsletter— photos, letters, poems, book reviews, etc. The newsletter is a place for looking in depth at issues and people central to our Co-op. Deadline is September 1.

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Vermont Yarn Shop



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Plainfield Vermont

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454-1114

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Co-op Re-opening to the Public June 22nd

by Peter Youngbaer, General Manager

We are pleased to announce a phased re-opening to the public beginning Monday, June 22nd. Due to popularity and out of respect for our more vulnerable community members, we will be continuing our phone-in/email ordering and curbside pickup, as well as our Express Window.

- All vendors—small and large—must continue to come to the back door and wear masks, hand sanitize or wear gloves when in the building.

We want to express our deep gratitude to our members and the community for understanding and cooperation over the past three months. Special thanks to the working members who helped with answering the phones and making the curbside pickup model possible.

As we have expanded our curbside pickup hours, added the popular Express Window, and re-introduced

cash to the retail operation, we have edged closer to the time when we could (and need to) re-open in some fashion.

However, we are still operating under strict COVID 19 restrictions from the state. This limits how staff can work in our space, and how many customers can be in the store at once. These limitations still inhibit us behind the scenes, so we cannot have in-house working members at this time.

It also means that the limited floor staff cannot handle curbside orders, the Express Window, and customers in the store at the same time. Hence, the model and schedule above and the details below.

Call-in and Email Orders/Curbside Pickup: This model has kept us going and the community fed during the past three months. We have gained new

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Hours and Operations as follows:

Monday–Saturday:

9AM–Noon: call-in/email orders & curbside pickup

Noon–7PM: store open

7PM–8PM: call-in/email orders & curbside pickup

Sunday: 11AM–3PM: store open

Express Window (all of the times above):

Mon.–Sat. 9AM–8PM Sun. 11AM–3PM

COVID 19 Restrictions:

- Only four customers in the store at any time—check at the Express Window if uncertain.
- All customers must wear masks.
- Please wash hands or hand sanitize before entering the inner store.
- If you have any symptoms—coughing, sneezing, difficulty breathing, loss of sense of smell—or have had known contact with anyone with COVID 19, please do not enter.
- Please only one shopper per household, if possible.
- Re-usable shopping bags/totes permitted—you pack up groceries
- No coffee bar, returns or egg cartons. Only milk bottles with deposit accepted.
- The children's area and Community Center remain closed.

members because of it, and any number of our older or more at risk community members have expressed the desire for this feature to continue. Our new schedule allows us to continue this six days a week, Sunday being the only exception. You can email us anytime at orders@Plainfieldcoop.com. Orders will be filled during the 9AM–Noon hours daily, and again between 7–8PM. Please only phone in orders during those hours. Floor staff will not be available to take phone orders between Noon–7PM. We will not have any real idea of the volume of customers who will prefer this method once the doors are open, so we may adjust this in the future, as with anything else COVID-related.

Open Store: Yes, the store will be open, but limited. The biggest limiting factor will be allowing just four customers in the store at a time. This is due to the social distancing requirements imposed by the state and by our very tiny retail space. We ask that you take a look at the parking lot when you arrive and see if the store might be crowded. If you have any doubt, please ring the bell at the Express Window and check with staff. They'll be happy to wave you in, or let you know if there is a wait.

We also ask you to please shop efficiently. Have a list (our inventory is on line and updated), if possible. While you may be tempted to hang out and talk with staff and neighbors, please respect the fact that others need to get in and shop. Just for perspective, our data shows that the afternoon hours during summer have usually brought upwards of 20-24 people per hour. If only four at a time can be in the store, you can see that we are hard-pressed to turn over traffic and generate our typical sales revenues (see financial article).

That said, we are hearing from members that they miss being able to see and handle groceries during their shopping experience. It is hard sometimes to even remember some of the products we carry. We welcome you back to again experience all we have to offer. We encourage impulse buying! Seriously, we need our members and the community to step up your buying in order to support the long term financial health of the Co-op.

Express Window: This has proven to be a very popular feature. We will continue to operate the Express Window all day long. Staff who are filling curbside orders will also answer the window (ring the door chime) and take your small orders—6 items or fewer. When the store itself is open, they are still available to take your small orders. Having the window open will help relieve pressure on the number of people inside the store, particularly if only for small orders. It will also give those customers who are uncomfortable coming into a small store the availability to do convenience shopping at their Co-op.

Staff: Finally, let me say a word about our staff. They have been troopers throughout this whole time. They have completely changed the way we operate. They have done so with fewer colleagues, in tighter space, with personal protective equipment, and at risk to their own health. Opening back up to the public—even in a limited way—exposes them to more risk. Yet they understand and balance all these things and are willing and happy to continue to serve you. They deserve your support.

So, please, come in, shop efficiently and spend like your Co-op's life depends on it. It does. ♦

Board Report

by Cat Klarich, Acting President

Since the beginning of the CoVid-19 pandemic, I've witnessed the community come together in support of our most vulnerable community members and the essential workers who make it possible for us to meet our most basic needs. The diligent Plainfield Co-op staff, under the leadership of the indomitable Peter Youngbaer, have faced difficult challenges to stay open and provide this essential service to the community. For many of us, hunkered down during the Stay at Home Order, the Co-op was the safest place to get groceries. Our members and shoppers have entrusted the Co-op staff and Board to navigate this current crisis while staying true to our values.

I am so proud to be serving as Vice President on the Plainfield Co-op Board of Directors. It was after last year's Annual Meeting when the Membership voted to cultivate the current Co-op that I was inspired to lean in. I joined at a critical juncture when the Co-op had a volunteer General Manager, finances were dismal, and the staff had a wage freeze. The membership stepped up and started buying gift cards, saving thousands in processing fees, and the generosity of the community at large poured in providing wonderful holiday gifts for the staff, just to say: "we love you."

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(Thank you to Barr Hill, Salaam, Cabot, Wellspring Farm, and Twinfield for their generosity.)

I joined the hiring committee tasked with interviewing a dynamic pool of candidates, including one that quickly rose to the top of the pool--Peter! Things were really on a roll when COVID-19 tabled our regular work and we went into crisis mode. We did what any good Vermonter would do--picked ourselves up and scheduled a Zoom meeting! The Board still has by-laws to uphold, minutes to approve, and Policy Governance to monitor, but first, we unanimously approved hazard pay for the Co-op employees.

As we look ahead to safely opening the store, I need to be honest here. The Plainfield Co-op needs your support now, more than ever. It's been an adjustment to change the way I shop and the phased opening is something I am really excited for. In the meantime, save gas and purchase your summer favorites at the express window! You might even get a chance to catch up with a friend in line, which feels like old times.

Here are some of my favorite ways to support our local Plainfield Co-op: shop exclusively at the Co-op for the items that are the same price there as they are at the bigger stores--sour cream, half and half, local veggies, coffee, craft beer and wine. You know, the essentials! Stock up on bulk spices, flour, and nutritional yeast, and I always check for special deals posted on the express window. Ideally, I load up my store credit by dropping off a check in the exterior drop box which helps the Co-op save in credit card processing fees. Being able to avoid wayward, mask-less, crowds at the big stores is priceless!

We have postponed the Annual Meeting until it is safe to gather enough of the membership to reach a quorum. This is an important opportunity for us to come together and as restrictions loosen, we are hoping to be able to plan an outside, safely distanced meeting with virtual access for any members who cannot attend. Meanwhile, we welcome your thoughts and invite you to join one of our regular Board meetings. Our next meeting is **Monday June 22, from 6-7:15. Zoom Meeting ID: 802 454 8579 Password: 558222 Join Zoom Meeting <https://zoom.us/j/8024548579>**

Ready to roll up your sleeves and join the Board? We're currently recruiting new Board members! The Board is proud to welcome Rose Paul, our newest Board member, who brings an even keeled and thoughtful approach. The Board recently invited Roseanne Scotta to join us and are eager to welcome her experience and energy. We say a fond farewell to Giordano "the numbers guy" Checchi who has resigned from his position as Board Treasurer after four years of service. We are sad to see him go and wish him the very best in his future endeavors.

The Plainfield Co-op has deep roots in the community and for nearly 50 years we have grown together.

Thank you.
Thank you for your continued support and altruism. Until we meet again at the Express window...air hugs! ♦



Co-op Financial Overview – COVID 19 Exposes Underlying Weaknesses

by Peter Youngbaer, General Manager

Political pundits have said that the coronavirus, COVID-19, has exposed some fundamental structural flaws in our society – in our economy, our health care system, and in other parts of our society. For the Plainfield Co-op, it is much the same.

While we have necessarily focused on staff and customer safety, reduced hours, closing to the public, curbside pickup, and the like, the unfortunate and inconvenient truth is that COVID-19 has underscored the Co-op's own structural financial shortcomings.

The Co-op was financially fragile prior to COVID 19; it is even more fragile today. Last year, the Co-op had to enact extraordinary measures to get through the fiscal year. The membership participated in several meetings and strategic brainstorming, and ultimately stepped up by increasing their purchasing.

This was terrific. We finished the year with a small surplus, enabling us to distribute a modest patronage dividend for the first time in five years. We have also been able to keep current with payments to all our vendors, including the local growers and producers that we aim to support.

The budget adopted by the Board for 2020 made assumptions about maintaining that level of financial activity and support. It was confident enough to fund a General Manager's position, some marketing enhancements, and other

operational goals. In putting that budget together, staff and the Board understood that the winter months are slow for us – we historically lose some money that time of year - but the summer months are when we can really shine – under normal circumstances.

No one anticipated a worldwide pandemic. Now, reality is hitting home. While we did what we needed to do in crisis mode to keep the Co-op running and the community fed, now we must step away from crisis mode and understand the ongoing seriousness of the Co-op's situation.

As I write this article, we have just received the May financial reports from our bookkeeper. Here are the actual figures for the year 2020, through the end of May:

	Actual Profit/(Loss)	Budgeted Profit/(Loss)
January:	(13,008)	(2,054)
February:	1,288	(4,730)
March:	(5,300)	(331)
April:	(17,149)	(1,852)
May:	(15,175)	2,088
Total:	(49,344)	(8,967)

These numbers show us nearly \$50,000 behind for the year. We weren't doing too badly until mid-March, when COVID 19 hit. You can see the impact it has had. Behind those numbers are lower sales figures and increased costs, due to conditions imposed by the pandemic.

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Sales figures are slower due to far fewer transactions. Typically, we were averaging 150 transactions per day (shoppers). With the curbside pickup model, staff could only handle 50 per day. Fortunately, the size of each transaction averaged 2.5 times the historical level, so it was almost a wash. The store has been running at capacity for the curbside model, given the physical limits of the staff and store under social distancing restrictions.

Unfortunately, our expenses grew due to unexpected costs: store and personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies; bulk containers for liquids; paper bags for shoppers; much higher transaction fees as nearly every purchase was by debit or credit card; supply chain issues; phone and security costs; hazard pay for staff.

The \$50,000 we are behind for the year as of the end of May essentially wipes out our retained earnings. Setting aside our member equity (@\$80,000) that leaves what's in our checking accounts – about \$42,000. Those monies include the Payroll Protection Plan loan we received – which we believe will be 100% forgivable, as we are using those funds for payroll and utilities, as intended, turning the loan into a grant – a saving grace at this time. We also carry a line of credit with the Cooperative Fund of New England, which we have reduced from last year at this time from \$32,700 to \$26,200, but we still owe the rest and make a payment every month.

Thus, our cash flow from sales must cover what we pay our vendors, our operating expenses (utilities, supplies, maintenance and repair, etc.), and our payroll.

So, what does the future look like? As you read elsewhere in this Newsletter, we are opening our doors to the public again. After increasing our hours and opening the Express Window, the only place for us to physically and fiscally grow is by public retail sales. In order to hit our budget targets for the year, we need to hit the sales projections below. If you look at June (actual through June 11, then projected through the end of the month), we are on pace to come up almost \$40,000 short just this month. Another month like that, and we will be in as much of a crisis as we were last year, if not more so.

	Gross Sales	Budgeted Sales Projections	Differential
June:	25,720 (70,145)	109,897	(39,752)
July:		119,252	
August:		119,052	
September:		107,083	
October:		105,918	
November:		95,979	
December:		103,415	

We do not have the reserves to absorb anything like that. That's the major reason why I worked with the Board to prepare an application for a federal Small Business Administration Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) in the amount of \$277,000. This would have been six months' working capital, calculated to replace projected revenue losses through the end of the year. We calculated flat sales at \$87,000 a month. May fell short of that, and June is looking the same.

Unfortunately, the SBA shut off accepting applications seven weeks ago, just as we were prepared to submit. Congress

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passed additional legislation and funding, but the SBA didn't open the spigot for almost a month, and then only for agricultural enterprises. We have been in regular touch with our Congressional delegation, which is supportive, but nothing has changed. Even here in Vermont, EIDL loans have been proposed, and we've been in touch with our Representative and State Senators, and the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, but nothing

has happened. Without a loan like that, it falls back to us entirely.

As we have looked at various models for responding to COVID 19, staffing, store hours, sales styles, etc. we keep bumping up against some harsh realities. We have a tiny retail space. Our back stock and office space isn't generous, either. This imposes severe limitations, especially with social distancing. To pump out more groceries, we would need more staff, which we can't accommodate in the space we have.

We would also need more customers. When our members stepped up last summer and increased sales, we were running between 24 and 40 transactions an hour. With the current limit of only 4 customers in the store at once, it is nigh on impossible to hit those kinds of numbers. Yes, we're continuing with phone and email orders, and the Express Window provides some physical relief, but those actions alone won't solve our underlying problems.

And so, we share this information – not happily – but out of a sense of responsibility to the membership. We may celebrate re-opening and feel good about that, and we should, but the limits on that re-opening underscore the reality that our sales simply aren't keeping up with expenses.

That our current model isn't sustainable will come home to roost harshly in the not too distant future, if we are unable to figure out another path.

We ask you, our members, to step up again. Please shop the Co-op as much as you can. That may buy us a little more time. Thank you. ♦



Marketing Committee

by *Bob Fancher*

The Marketing Committee has been busy the last three months with several projects. Here are the highlights.

The Co-op building will have a new sign on it soon! A new, large metal sign featuring the Co-op logo and name will be mounted on the side of the building facing the parking lot. The sign was designed by the Marketing Committee and will be fabricated by Matthew Denton, a local artist and farmer. Look for it in the next few weeks.

If your mailing address is in Plainfield or Marshfield, you should have received a large postcard type advertising flyer from the Co-op. We are reaching out to EVERY household in the area to let people know about the Co-op, what we sell and how we are responding to COVID-19.

Our Community Center and Gallery is temporarily closed due to the pandemic. To keep the spirit going, we have assembled images of some of the artwork that has been displayed in the Gallery and videos of some past presentations. Plus, there is a virtual tour video. All of this is on our website at <http://plainfieldcoop.com/Gallery.html>

As always, the Marketing Committee is looking for new members to help. The pandemic has hurt the Co-op's business and we are trying to find creative ways to boost sales. Please consider joining us.

If you want to join the Marketing Committee or if you have any feedback on any of our activities, please email me at bhfancher@gmail.com ♦



Vanilla Overnight Oats

Overnight Oats are a wonderful healthy breakfast! Eat it as is, or add fruit or other flavorings. Be creative!

Ingredients

1/3 cup plain Greek yogurt or regular yogurt
1/2 cup (heaping) rolled oats
2/3 cup milk of choice
1 tablespoon chia seeds or ground flaxmeal
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
Pinch of salt
0–2 tablespoons honey or maple syrup

Preparation

Whisk together all ingredients in a medium-sized mixing bowl. Spoon into a jar with a tight-fitting lid. Close and refrigerate for at least 4 hours, but preferably overnight before eating.

Blueberry Lemon Overnight Oats

Add 1/2 cup fresh or frozen blueberries and 1 tablespoon lemon juice to the above recipe. Omit vanilla.

The Inside Story

by Gail Falk

The Co-op doors were shut, I (Glenda Bissex) picked up my grocery bag outside the store without talking to anyone. I wanted to know what was going on inside. When I wrote Peter about doing an “inside story” for the newsletter, he replied: “There is so much that has taken place behind the scenes to make things work. Do folks want to hear about the state and federal legislation that affected paid leave, Unemployment Insurance, what the board did for hazard pay and other compensation for staff? The federal emergency loans? Supply chain issues? Technical glitches with the

phone/email/computer systems?” I didn't know enough to even ask such questions. I was thinking more about questions like how the call-in pick-up system had been devised.

Gail Falk interviewed five “insiders” to get their stories: Manager Peter Youngbaer, Lead Buyer Chloe Budnick, volunteer coordinator Paula Emery, Board member Les Snow and supplier Kagen Dewey of Littlewood farm. Here are their stories of what was going on behind the scenes the past three months to keep the Co-op alive.

GB

Peter Youngbaer, General Manager

My first day on the job as General Manager was February 17, and within three weeks we had staff going into quarantine. We never had a chance to be physically all together. I was in the early process of learning what and how the Co-op does things, and then suddenly we had to completely reinvent what the Co-op does. I expected a steep learning curve, and then we drove off a cliff!

At first we cut back hours the Co-op was open because we had trouble filling shifts: staff were going out on leave for quarantine or because they were high risk or for child care. We began implementing safety measures like handwashing and extra cleaning, but staff became uncomfortable with having any customers in the building. We knew that a state closure order was coming soon, so planning was underway for how we might operate.

On a Sunday, Paula Emery got volunteers to call in orders, and we did a test drive of phone ordering, and it seemed practical. The next day, we closed the doors abruptly, but we were completely closed for only one day. We had a staff meeting, and the staff agreed to go forward with curbside delivery.

Originally, we thought we would have a volunteer stand outside to hand people their orders, but that lasted less than a week. We couldn't have volunteers inside the store, but we realized that volunteers taking phone calls would be a big help to staff, so located them upstairs in the Community Center. We got orders of all sizes—from \$200–\$300 to just a few items. The store began to look quite differently inside with prepacked bulk goods all over.

There were some notable glitches. One day the e-mail forwarding system failed,

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and we didn't realize that people had send in e-mail orders for a 24-hour period. The phone lines broke another day. At first the phones were frequently busy creating a log jam, so we added extra lines. It took time, but we were able to get the inventory online, and more and more people are ordering now by email.

Meanwhile, I was busy identifying and applying for federal programs that could help us. One program provided 100% reimbursement for up to 80 hours of sick leave for staff out because of the virus. We received a Payroll Protection Plan loan (which is 100% forgivable) to cover eight weeks of utility and payroll losses. But the big program, which would have been a lifesaver for us (Economic Impact Disaster Loan), is stalled in Washington.

I see communication as part of my role. I have been sending a weekly newsletter to staff. I am in frequent touch with the Board, and I have been sending out e-mail updates to our members, and using social media, as well.

By early May we finally had gotten the bugs out of the system. Delay times to fill orders were less and less and we had staff available for longer hours to fill orders. We could take a breather and go back to looking at the basic store operations.

Now we are expanding back to regular hours of operation (9am – 8 pm) except Sundays. We are taking special orders again. The walk-up window is open for orders of six or fewer items. Staff are very safe now; there is a finite circle of people coming into store, including vendors.

We have no definite date to reopen the store yet. The small size of our retail

space creates logistical issues; with current social distancing guidelines we will be limited to 3-4 customers inside at a time. Many customers like curbside ordering and want to continue that.

Financially, though, we have to re-open or we will die. Summer is the time when Co-op sales are traditionally highest and cushion us for the low winter months. We have a lot of extra expenses because of the pandemic: new phone lines, safety supplies (gloves, containers, cleaning supplies), store supplies (paper bags, plastic bulk liquid containers), overtime, hazard pay, and financial transaction fees because credit card use has more than doubled. The Co-op hangs by a thread economically, and the virus re-exposes the long-range vulnerability.

It is great that we have been able to feed the community, but it costs us every day. Here are some important things that members can do to help:

- Buy more! (Even with all the curbside activity, sales are down compared to last year)
- Use your credit card less often (Pay by check or put more on your gift card when you do have to use a charge card)
- Make sure we have your email address on file (There are 200 members who haven't give us their email address, and we have to send them stamped letters, which takes time and money).
- Place special orders! Except for paper products, our supply lines have stabilized and we'd love to help you stock up on what you need – and at a 10% member discount.

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Chloe Budnick, Lead Buyer

Peter gathered the staff for an all staff meeting (with social distancing). Those not able to come to the Co-op were able to participate electronically. From what I remember, staff were very clear about being in favor of moving to curbside. I remember that Buffalo Mt. Co-op had gone to curbside, and when Peter asked me if I thought we should move to curbside, I said yes. It was an easy, but hard decision.

We made the change to curbside over a single weekend. The shift was definitely a learn-as-you-go. Was it perfect? No, but I think we did a pretty good job.

Every day has been so different. I immediately had to put a stop to special orders as I was having such a hard time

getting any bulk or even our entire order to show up. Early on, I did some extraordinarily large bulk orders and that really saved us...keeping us in rice and beans and oats pretty much through the past few months. I may have ordered enough red lentils for the rest of the year so prepare to see those on sale in the coming months. Much time was spent finding alternatives.

In the past few weeks, I've been able to get yeast and flour without much issue. Maybe we don't have the same number of choices available, but shoppers have been pretty willing to be creative with what we do have. Special orders have now started up again, which was the real measure of the supply chain being able to fill the demand.

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In terms of differences in what people are buying, bulk and produce are up. Snack foods went way down. Beyond that, I can't say I noticed a dramatic shift. Because we were able to stay fairly well stocked, folks still had quite a lot of choice. The brand may have been different, but it was rare that we were fully out of anything for too long.

I can only speak for myself, but that first month was not great for me. I was working 50 hour weeks, covering for multiple folks who were quarantined, trying to support staff in learning a new way of feeding our community, trying to keep our shelves full. I'm so grateful to our staff for helping to keep our store open, for being forgiving of my frayed nerves, and to all the volunteers that continue to help take phone calls, especially Paula Emery for organizing the volunteers.

Once we made the decision to close to the public, there was a clear message from the staff that we wanted to maintain social distancing within the store, which meant fewer staff on at a time, and no volunteers on the store floor or helping with backstock. We had local folks supplying us with hand sanitizer and we implemented guidelines for gloves and masks. We posted signs saying that delivery folks needed to be masked. Speaking only for my own experience, I did feel safer with these changes, but I still went through a rigorous routine after every shift for months after returning home and certainly held a lot of fear. I have to say that it is so taxing to have to have the same conversations over and over with customers who think we are being overly cautious, who are unwilling to wear a mask, or are unhappy with the way we are doing business. Those few make for long days and an apprehension for when we do open back up.

It was/is more work—different work—fluctuating, but not less. My hours have stabilized, the Co-op is moving closer to our old hours of operation, we have VERY busy days followed by VERY slow days. I'm worn out, but grateful we were able to weather and hope that folks continue to shop here.

Paula Emery, Member Volunteer Coordinator

In March, as things were closing down, Peter had recently started as General Manager. Staff were feeling uncomfortable with having customers in the store, but there wasn't a plan about how to go forward. Then the store closed.

Les Snow and I were talking one day, and we went to talk with Peter. We were thinking about how member volunteers could help. We persuaded Peter to do a dry run of people calling in orders. We got several people to call in, and we ran around the store filling their orders to show how it could be done.

At first, we had been imagining someone standing outside the store to take orders or put the groceries in a customer's bag, but we showed that calling in could work. We had volunteers ready to deliver orders to people's homes, but only one person requested delivery. The staff didn't want volunteers inside the store filling orders, but they needed help answering the phones.

I learned how to create a public Google sheet and figured out a phone duty schedule by talking with Peter. We put it out and, Boom, volunteers signed up. I was impressed that many of the first to sign up were people who are busy and very responsible. People were glad to have a way to help.

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The need for volunteers to answer phones is fading now. I imagine new roles for volunteers. I know the Co-op is facing perils, and no way am I going to stand by and let this place collapse!

Les Snow, Co-op Board member

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Board started meeting two to three times a month, instead of monthly. There were so many unknowns and it was hard to plan. We had to turn on a dime from long-term planning mode to day-today crisis response.

We have been meeting by Zoom. We opened the meetings to members by publicizing the time and Zoom number. We tried to make it as easy as possible to participate but so far there hasn't been any member participation.

Peter Youngbaer had been General Manager for only about a month when staff started going out on leave and the safety guidelines started coming out. Some of us on the Board had been dealing at our own jobs with the same Covid-19 issues the Co-op was facing, and we tried to provide leadership and feedback to Peter, who made the day-to-day decisions.

In March Sarah Phillips had to step away from being Board President because of the intensity of her emergency work as

director of the state's Office of Economic Opportunity. Cat Klarich had just recently become Board vice president and was fairly new, but she picked right up on what she had to do to prepare the Board agenda and chair meetings. Rose Paul became a new member, and the same meeting she joined the Board was the meeting when the decision was made to close the store.

One of the first things we had to do was postpone the Annual Meeting, which was scheduled in April. We don't have a new date yet, but it is a priority for us to figure out when and how to have an annual meeting.

The member survey was a Board initiative. We felt it was important to reach out to the members and get their input. Most of the questions centered on operations, but at the same time we wanted to get feedback about the long term purposes of the Co-op. I was blown away by the speed and number of responses – more than 190 – and also by how much the Co-op means to people. It was heartening to read the overwhelming appreciation for the staff and the Co-op.

There were quick and very meaningful operations changes in response to the survey: the store got more phone lines; they started letting people know where they stood in the queue, and they got the inventory online. I think it was a help to management to know what was going on for shoppers.

We are very appreciative of Peter Youngbaer, the staff, and the volunteers, and are supporting the new General Manager as much as possible to assure long-term success for the Co-op and for him. So far I think it's been a good relationship in every way.

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Kagen Dewey, Littlewood Farm

The biggest change for us was that we had to cancel the Littlewood Farm Plant Sale. In the past, that was typically our season opener and the big social event of the year. People liked to come and chat and greet each other while looking over the plants in the greenhouse. But we had to decide not to do it and offer curbside pickup only.

To put the plant sale online, we needed to develop a website. I didn't have any experience with that, but we got a lot of help from community organizations in the state. NOFA put out resources and the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers has a list-serv which was very helpful.

So far, our curbside sales from the online Plant Sale have been fairly comparable to last year. There are more customers, but the amount of sale per customer is smaller. With people unable to wander around the greenhouses, we have less impulse buying. But there are more people interested in gardening than last year, partly because folks are at home and have more time and partly because people want to be self-reliant.

We are still wholesaling vegetables to the Plainfield Co-op and Hunger Mountain. So far, demand there is as strong as ever. People seem to be just as excited as before to buy local

food and appreciate the importance of supporting local food systems.

More people are calling and are interested in buying straight from the farm. If there isn't a farmers' market in Plainfield this year, we will have to figure out some other way to sell direct to customers, such as a CSA or joining forces with another farm. We've already been supplying spinach to Tamarck Hollow Farm, which makes a weekly delivery outside Plainfield Hardware.

My big takeaway from all this is that small-scale farms are more resilient. We and our customers can be flexible together. Local food systems are less susceptible to the hiccups and interruptions of the global scene. It is very reaffirming to us to do this type of work and see how we and the community can be resilient together. ♦



The Outside Story

by Nicola Morris: Co-op member and shopper

On March 13, at a regular medical appointment, our Doctor told us in no uncertain terms to go home and stay home to avoid the virus that was already spreading in Vermont. Here we are some twelve weeks later, with no end in sight. We could not have survived without our Plainfield Co-op. At first three friends shopped for us. We were very grateful, but we also worried that we were putting them at risk.

It was both a relief and a liberation when the Plainfield Co-op instituted their call-in-to-shop system.

I was first called by Annie Reed, who patiently walked around the store as it was about to close and collected my groceries. Chia seeds, which, having minds of their own, found their inevitable way out of the plastic bag and onto the floor. Ice cream with no dairy or gluten, which involved peering at tiny ingredient lists. She coped with grace and encouragement. Several times I shopped with Audrey who was new to the Co-op and wished she had met everyone before the Co-op closed its doors to customers. And recently a young man who liked my accent. Everyone from the Co-op who has called me and shopped for me has

been helpful, looking for items, telling me the various options or flavors or scents. Going into the back to see if there were green bananas. Telling me what vegetables they have. And everyone has been friendly. In isolation I have felt part of the community each time I've shopped.

What a difference it has made to us to be able to get groceries without gambling with our health. A completely safe set up. At least for the shopper. I really hoped that the staff were also safe in the store, able to wear masks and gloves, able to protect themselves.

And then recently came the further liberation of the window, where I could stand under the blooming lilac tree and buy six items so I didn't have to wait for bananas or avocados or soap until I had a longer list.

I don't think I can possibly express how grateful I am to the Co-op for creating a safe way to meet our grocery needs. And so often the groceries arrived with a flower. What a sweet gift amid the anxiety and worry and loneliness. Really, thank you Plainfield Co-op, for making life safer and possible. ♦



Rose Paul: New Co-op Board Member



Photo credit: George Springston

Rose Paul has a long-standing commitment to the town of Plainfield and to the environment. She recently retired from a 21-year career at the Nature Conservancy. She served Plainfield on the Water and Wastewater Commission for 15 years, chairing it for 14 years. As a member of Friends of the Library, she is very active in the plant and book sale. You may have seen her and/or her spouse George Springston walking to or from their home near the bottom of East Hill Road with a backpack full or waiting to be filled with groceries from the Co-op.

“I wanted to step up and participate on the Co-op Board to help support this vibrant community that I’m very attached to. My spouse and I are dedicated to buying all our groceries at the Plainfield Co-op. When I enter the Co-op to shop, I know most of the staff by name and I always see friends there—I have wonderful conversations and I feel upbeat when I leave. I want our Co-op to continue to be a vibrant neighborhood grocery store that serves our community with great ethics and full heart! That means we have to stay financially healthy, and this is a challenging time for small businesses. Will people’s heightened interest in locally sourced food bring new patrons to expand our customer base? What can we do to attract and keep first-time or occasional Co-op shoppers? I hope to contribute my common sense, practical approach to decision-making and a talent for brainstorming to help our beloved Co-op thrive.” ♦

Pesto

Ingredients

- 2 cups fresh basil leaves (no stems)
- 2 tablespoons pine nuts or walnuts
- 2 large cloves garlic
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ cup freshly grated parmesan cheese or romano cheese

Preparation

1. Combine basil leaves, pine nuts or walnuts and garlic in a food processor and process until very finely minced.
2. With the machine running slowly dribble in the oil and process until the mixture is smooth.
3. Add the cheese and process very briefly, just long enough to combine. Store in refrigerator or freezer.



Chris Thompson

by Glenda Bissex

Saturday, May 30, the peak of the planting season. When I look down my field to the acre or so that Chris Thompson farms, I see not Chris alone, as is usual, but maybe eight people working his garden, one tilling, others planting, at least a half dozen trucks and cars parked along the road.

Chris Thompson is maintenance coordinator at the Co-op. He is also on the Plainfield Fire Dept. He is also owner and main farmer at Owl Hill Farm, which supplies fresh produce to the Co-op and the community, including through the Montpelier farmers' market. Chris, with his wistful smile and humble demeanor, does it all. Or he did until May 27 when during an emergency surgery he suffered cardiac arrest and was transferred to Burlington.

A few days later the hot weather broke, rain finally came, and conditions were ideal for transplanting. Chris Jackson, former Co-op staff and board member,



Photo credit: matchoo

Aedan Scriven and Kate Darakjy helped organize a crew of volunteers, mainly from the Fire Dept. and the Co-op plus random friends, to till and plant. Twenty or so volunteers put in two gardens at Glenda Bissex's place, and another couple of gardens plus two greenhouses at Karl Bissex and Mary Terice's place. They worked most of the day, doing what Chris would have done single-handed though over a longer time.

How did they know where to plant all those flats of seedlings Chris had nurtured? Kate, who has worked with Chris, had suggestions but nobody knew for sure. "Maybe it's not planted right, but there's a lot of love in it," said Kate, whose goal is to keep the farm going until Chris can come back to it. That means more planting,



Photo credit: Glenda Bissex

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putting up row covers, weeding, watering, tying up tomato plants in the greenhouse, harvesting early crops.

When I thanked any of the volunteers for helping Chris, they inevitably said that he was always ready to help them. And when I observed that this effort was all about co-operation and community, one responded, “It’s all about our love for Chris.”

Love. Community. Cooperation.
We’ve got lots.



(As of June 7, Chris was out of the hospital.)

Photo credit: Glenda Bissex

Blueberry Cobbler

Ingredients

Berries:

4 ½ cups fresh blueberries

⅓ cup sugar or other sweetener (or none)

1 tablespoon all-purpose flour

Dough:

1 ½ cups all-purpose flour

½ teaspoon kosher salt

1 ½ tablespoons sugar

2 ¼ teaspoons baking powder

6 tablespoons cold unsalted butter, cut into 1/2-inch pieces

¾ cup heavy cream, plus additional for serving, if desired

Preparation

1. Heat the oven to 375 degrees. Place berries in a bowl and toss with the sugar and flour. Set aside.
2. To make the dough, mix the flour, salt, sugar and baking powder in a bowl. Cut in the butter until mixture resembles coarse meal. Add the cream and mix lightly, until the dry ingredients are moistened.
3. Put the blueberries in a baking dish. Make patties out of the dough, 2 to 2 1/2 inches in diameter and 1/2-inch thick. Arrange them over the top of the berries. Bake until the topping is brown and the juices bubble thickly around it, about 35 to 40 minutes.
4. Let cool slightly. Serve warm, with cream to pour on top, if desired.



The Saint Corona Fund

After discussion among staff about what to do for members of our community who might find it particularly difficult in these times to access the pre-paid system, Peter Youngbaer created this fund and made the first donation to it. About that time, one of our staff, Karen Starr,



Photo credit: Peter Youngbaer

created a little Saint Corona display as a humorous way of responding to the virus situation. That inspired the name, and a handy visual representation for social media of what we were going to do.

This special gift card fund allows anyone who can't cover their shopping needs to access the Co-op. Good for anything in the store, it currently allows up to \$60 a week for anyone requesting to use the fund. We have received over \$3,647 in donations, with 79 uses of the fund to date (May 5), totaling \$2,914. Donations are being made to it about every other day or so, and the fund is being used almost every day.

If you'd like to make a donation, you can mail checks to the Plainfield Co-op, P.O. Box 266, Plainfield VT 005667, or have your in-store shopper make an addition to the St. Corona fund with your credit or debit card. Thank you, everyone, for helping ensure all community members continue to be able to access healthy, nutritious, local foods. "Concern for community" is one of the seven guiding principles of co-operatives. ♦

A Saint Corona Fund shopper

How did you learn about the St. Corona Fund?

A friend who is a Co-op member told me that a new Saint Corona Fund had been established and that it was described in the latest Co-op newsletter.

What differences has it made in your life? your eating habits?

The St. Corona Fund has provided nutritious food that I would not have been able to afford without the Fund, especially produce that is local or organic and bulk foods such as rolled oats, nuts, seeds, and maple syrup. The Fund has also provided tomato and broccoli starts for my garden.

Do you have any suggestions for how the fund and the way it's administered could be improved? Is \$60 a week enough to make a real difference?

\$60 a week does make a real difference. Because my household includes two people, we also buy inexpensive food elsewhere, but the Saint Corona Fund provides fruit and vegetables and other nutritious food that we might not otherwise be able to eat.

Perhaps the Fund could provide somewhat different amounts depending on the size of the household? For instance, maybe \$50/week for one person and \$70/week for two or more people?

I don't know how to thank the donors, but I am extremely grateful. ♦

The Plainfield Community Center Gallery

by *Alexis Smith, Curatrix*



Credit: Peter Schumann

Sadly, our Community Center and Gallery are temporarily closed due to the pandemic. To keep the spirit going, we have assembled images of some of the performances, artwork, exhibitions, events and activities that have happened upstairs over the years in the Gallery and Community Center. All of this can be seen on our website <http://plainfieldcoop.com/Gallery.html>

The new website has a Virtual Tour in which Curatrix Alexis Smith outlines a brief history of the Plainfield Community Center from the 1970's to present together with filmmaker Jerome Lipani. One of the Bread & Puppet Garbagemen wanders into the space to introduce Peter Schumann's large prints of his Possibilitarian Uprising show in the lobby gallery. Artist Matthew Denton, whose work is featured in the

main gallery, speaks about his remarkable paintings made with recycled materials. The videos and much of the work were produced at ORCA by Jerome Lipani.

If you are interested in exhibiting your work in the gallery or can contribute memorabilia materials for the website archival collection of the Community Center please contact Alexis Smith our Curatrix: vpiegirlco@gmail.com



Credit: Matthew Denton

PLAINFIELD COMMUNITY CENTER

Space available for your:



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Parties

Workshops

Art Gallery Exhibitions & Special Events

\$9/hr. for Co-op Members, \$15/hr. for Non-Members

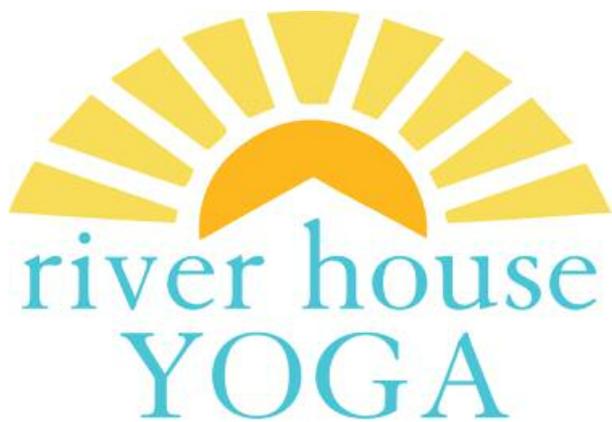
Events: \$35 for Members, \$50 for Non-Members

Scheduling Book at Co-op Register

More Information?

Contact Kevin Levesque at the Co-op

Using the Community Center benefits The Plainfield Co-op



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