



**“Focus on Local”  
a report prepared for**

**The Takoma Park – Silver Spring Food Cooperative Board of Directors**

**presented by  
The Local Foods Committee**

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## 1. Introduction

In 2008 the TPSS undertook a strategic planning process with a 10-year horizon. A Strategic Plan Committee comprised of board members, staff, and other members gathered input from members, other shoppers and community leaders on their vision for the Co-op. Hundreds of ideas were collected using numerous participatory methods. These were categorized, refined and ranked using several techniques (for details on this process refer to the Strategic Plan Report (<http://tpss.coop/strategicplan/TPSSFeb09Plan.pdf>)).

Concepts related to having more local foods at the Co-op were very prominent among the many responses, ideas, dreams and suggestions.

To elucidate and expand upon the findings of the Strategic Plan Committee, the Board chartered a Local Foods Committee (LFC) to undertake a number of activities (see Appendix A for the full charter): including:

### Local Foods Committee Chartered Responsibilities

- Drafting an Ends Statement that defines goals for increasing the amount of local goods at the store;
- Considering potential metrics to track local foods sales and measure the success of the initiative;
- Gathering information from other Co-ops about their Buy Local programs; and
- Communicating with members.

As a board committee (rather than one serving at the request of the general manager) the purview of the LFC is restricted to articulating goals for the Co-op, researching possibilities and offering recommendations. The General Manager retains the responsibility for operational decisions in implementing the Ends Statements of the Board. Thus, while the committee's enthusiasm for the subject appropriately veers more towards advocacy than dispassionate analysis, the members are acutely aware and accepting of the limitations of their role.

The Local Foods Committee was comprised of two co-chairs (one a Board member) and ultimately 12 active members. A list of the members is provided in Appendix B. It is useful to highlight the level of enthusiasm, expertise and dedication to issues related to and local foods and to the re-establishment of regional food infrastructures on the part of the members. Most are actively engaged in local food systems in their personal and professional lives, and were more than willing to contribute their time and knowledge to the Co-op's initiative. The existence of this well of resources is revisited in the recommendations section as a potential source of assistance in the implementation phase through establishment of a General Manager's Committee if so desired by the General Manager.

## 2. Activities Summary

The committee met monthly from April to November 2009 and worked through a Yahoo Group "TPSS Co-op Local Foods Committee" list serve after that time. Members took on numerous sub-projects and worked on them in

between meetings. Their findings and suggestions were reviewed and discussed at committee meetings. Their work is included in this report.

**a. Draft an Ends Statement that defines goals for increasing the amount of local goods at the store**

Given the clear importance that locally produced food and products have to the over-all mission, the Board requested that the LFC draft an Ends Statement for consideration that reflects the importance of locally produced food and products expressed by Co-op members.

The committee discussed the ends statement in considerable detail. In the end, it was decided to recommend introducing a commitment to local foods as a modification of the Co-op's "E-1" Ends Statement. The draft was submitted to the Board and was accepted at the November 2009 Board Meeting. It reads:

*New Ends Statement*

"The Co-op and Co-op customers will promote sustainable local and organic food and food systems, and have access to goods produced in socially and environmentally responsible ways, at reasonable prices and in welcoming community marketplace settings."

**b. Review of Local Foods in the Strategic Planning Process**

The mandate from the strategic planning process led the Board to consider numerous questions such as: What does "local food" mean? How much local food does the Co-op currently carry? How could it carry more in an economically viable manner? What is the potential for local food sales at the Co-op? How can the Co-op measure local food purchases and sales? Are there any innovative ways to increase local foods at the Co-op through partnerships with local producers, processors, and distributors?

To provide an initial orientation for the committee to address these questions, we reviewed the Co-op's strategic planning process and the data and conclusion regarding local food. The following summary statement from the committee captures the strength of expression around local foods in the visioning and planning process. (For the full Strategic Plan, see here: <http://tpss.coop/strategicplan/TPSSFeb09Plan.pdf>).

*Local Foods In the Co-op Strategic Plan*

"Based on the comments of respondents, one vision that comes into focus when looking at Product Selection and other themes is one of promoting urban agriculture projects and increasing the percentage of locally-grown food sold in the TPSS Co-op. This vision includes concepts such as a cooperative partnership/contract system with current local producers to provide a set amount of certain fruits, veggies, cheese, meat, etc. per season. It could also include concepts that would increase the amount of local food available to the coop through a "New Farmer Matching Service"

matching new/nascent producers with free land available via volunteer area residents with large backyards who agree to allow farming in exchange for a share of the harvest. Both types of concepts would include marketing, and could include optional opportunities for co-op member investment."

In sum, members and shoppers participating in the strategic planning process were strongly and consistently interested in the Co-op's increasing the availability of fresh, local food. They offered many ideas for ways the co-op community can be involved with the local food "movement." They saw procurement and sales of local foods as strongly contributing to the Co-op's core values.

### **c. Defining local**

"Local Food" is currently defined in many different ways by the many organizations, programs, and agencies that develop local foods initiatives. The definition is important since it helps groups clarify values, objectives and practical considerations.

The LFC did not attempt to create a definitive meaning for the term. However, the committee does feel that is essential that the Co-op develop its own definition of which products will be considered local, and which will not so that the Board, General Manager and members can have a shared understanding. The research and discussions of the LFC provided some options to consider.

#### *Defining Local*

- 1) Maryland-grown food
- 2) Products grown and processed within the Chesapeake Bay Watershed
- 3) Products grown and processed within the mid-Atlantic states
- 4) Products grown and processed within a certain mileage radius (e.g., 100 miles, 250 miles, 400 miles)

Two complicating issues should also be addressed when attempting to define local food for the Co-op's purposes: (1) Complications presented by the wholesale distribution system. Fresh food that is grown very near to where it will be purchased, may still travel hundreds of miles out of the area before arriving back at a local store; and, (2) Many products are grown in one area and processed in another. Whether these locally processed products, the main components of which have been grown afar (e.g. corn and wheat tortillas), are considered local by the Co-op will also have to be decided upon by the General Manager.

### **d. Member Survey**

The committee decided that it would be useful to gather input from members/shoppers that was more specific than that solicited during the strategic planning process. We drafted a survey instrument, got approval from Interim General Manager Abdi Guled (see Appendix C) and tested it at the

Membership meeting in June 2009. Although the Local Foods Committee was not able to implement the survey due to time constraints, the instrument is available for the General Manager to implement if he sees fit.

#### **e. Metrics**

By adopting the local foods end statement, the Co-op has set a clear direction for local food. In order for the GM to report effectively to the board, and to have the board effectively evaluate the GM in progress toward that end statement, the Co-op needs a way to measure its involvement with local foods. The LFC considered three metrics for tracking progress toward the TPSS goals of increased stocking, promotion and sale of local food and products. Of the three possible metrics described below, we recommend the first, based on the Co-op's purchases from its providers. Whichever metric is used, it is important to keep track of per department numbers in addition to whole-store numbers:

##### **1. Option One: Number of local producers and processors and value of payment (\$) to them, also calculated as a percentage of total stock purchases, per department.**

Based on accounts payable: how much money goes to local producers and processors, and what does that represent as a percentage of dollars spent in each department? In addition to the dollar amount, track the *number* of local producers and processors on the payroll. This metric is far easier to track than the other metrics listed below, since it involves tracking merely dozens of transactions per month rather than thousands at the point of sale, for instance. Moreover, it directly and immediately measures the financial impact on the local community, one major benefit of local/regional food purchasing. Aiming to increase the quantity of vendors should directly increase the selection of local food products within the store (another direct aim of E-1). By aiming to increase the size of the checks cut to each vendor we will naturally increase the percentage of stock sold, and promote stronger and more reliable relations with our vendors. This metric requires keeping track of individual products, making it less flexible and able to adjust to the market and consumer desire, yet points the board and the GM in the direction of fulfilling E-1.

##### **2. Option Two: Number of local items and their percentage of all items for sale, per department**

This gives one a clear picture of the consumer's experience upon entering the store. As the percentage of items throughout the store goes up, a consumer will have a greater sense that the co-op is working towards increasing its stock of local products. This, of course, requires marketing and clear signage so that customers can see the number of signs on products increasing. This metric, however does not take consumer preference into account. There may be a large percentage of products on the shelves that are local, but no one buys! This metric is burdensome, not financially viable for the coop, and does not effectively measure the consumer's experience once they leave the coop with their groceries.

### **3. Option Three: Number and percentage of customer sales (dollars and item quantity) from POS, per department (note that this involves tracking both money and number of items)**

These metrics give one the best sense of the customer's contribution to the Co-op's local food activities. This is different from the first (and preferred) metric because it does not consider that the Co-op may choose to markup local products less than non-local products, as part of fulfilling the mission of promoting local food and products – there is a disincentive to reduce Co-op markup since that would make each item contribute less to the overall dollar metric. This metric also requires significant work with a POS system that is complicated and difficult to use and customize. For instance, if there were some local peaches for sale, and some peaches bought from a national distributor, it would be difficult to keep track of which peach was bought. Contrast this with the first, accounts payable method: in that case there is immediate information about the local food proportion. With each order the produce manager will aim to maximize the local purchases, depending upon season and farmers' products, and will fill the gap with purchases from distributors.

#### **f. Survey of Other Co-Ops**

To better understand the possibilities of incorporating more local food into stores like ours, members of the Local Foods Committee interviewed staff at 5 natural foods stores:

- [First Alternative Cooperative](#), Corvallis, Oregon
- [People's Food Cooperative](#), Portland, Oregon
- [Local Delish](#) (small business), Minneapolis, Minnesota,
- [Weaver's Way Cooperative](#), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- [The Common Market](#) (cooperative), Frederick, Maryland

An interview script was developed and individuals were interviewed by phone (See summaries Appendix D). These organizations are all committed to increasing the amount of local food in their stores, and many have sophisticated structures to make that happen. Significant staff leadership was an important component at all the stores we talked to. Staff at these stores had a strong vision and commitment to sustainable local food production. In addition all the stores had "local" as part of their training programs.

The general manager at Weaver's Way, Glenn Bergmann, could be a valuable resource to our general manager as he develops a plan to implement the revised E1. Glenn has guided his coop through 30 years of growth and Weaver's Way is committed to working with other co-ops. Glenn shared with us the results of a professionally developed members survey that covers a number of the questions we were researching.

Notes from the conversations and the Weaver's Way survey are available online.

#### **g. Map**

Committee members found a number of potentially useful on-line resources that might be used to the Co-op's list of suppliers. These include the So Maryland So

Good [Buy Local website](#), which lists farm producers by county, and an interactive Google map ["Van Arsdale Farms"](#)

#### **h. Co-op Local Foods Web Presence**

The World Wide Web provides myriad opportunities for outreach and networking related to the local foods initiative both for educational and operational purposes. The committee did not take steps to implement any internet activities but did discuss what a web presence might offer. Results of that discussion are available online.

In Addition, Committee member Liz Curtzeli developed a Google map of local producers and processors. That map can be viewed at:

<http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?ie=UTF8&hl=en&vps=5&jsv=207a&oe=UTF8&msa=0&msid=112255388613810588909.000468a262e079a5d96aa>

## Recommendations/Suggestions

While fully cognizant of our advisory role, the Committee felt it important to provide a list of recommendations on issues, approaches that we would like to see incorporated into the Co-op's local foods initiative. To come up with the list we reviewed member input to the strategic planning process, highlights from the interviews with other co-ops and contributions from the committee chair and Committee members' findings and evaluations.

### **1 Create a strong definition of "local", and/or "regional".**

- Consider using zip codes for an operational definition of "local producers"
- Local producers should be owned & operated within our local area
- Work with local farmers directly when possible, and work with distributors to promote their buying more local foods to supply the Co-op.
- Prioritize products grown using sustainable production methods and other Co-op values when buying local.
- Consider performing a member survey regarding members' definitions of local foods (draft available in Appendix D)

### **2 Track the extent of Local Food availability and sales**

- Determine appropriate metrics
- Consider starting to track local foods purchases and/or sales using the POS system and/or by accounts receivable.
- Make results available to the Board, members and shoppers

### **3 Provide equitable access to consistent volume of local products.**

#### Focus Services for Customers

- Set aside dedicated shelf-space for local produce, including space for "temporary" or seasonal items
- Provide timely information about local item availability (monthly feature by buyers; or daily/weekly facebook or twitters)
- Allow pre-ordering of local products which the Co-op cannot consistently stock due to availability limitations
- Price local products consistently with our organization's mission
- Use a lower markup for local products, and make use of seasonal price advantages

#### Develop a robust network of local suppliers

- Communicate with producers and distributors about what we need and when. Consider consulting with farmers in the winter, when they are deciding what to grow
- Provide staff time for buyers and department heads to cultivate relationships with local producers
- Consider local and regional conferences and expos as a source of local suppliers
- Consider making the LFC into a GM Committee if member technical or other skills could be useful

- Hire a “forager” tasked with locating sources, who helps develop local suppliers

#### **4 Do what it takes to recruit and retain staff committed to a local, sustainable economy.**

- Hire staff with a strong vision and commitment to sustainable local food production. Retain dedicated staff.
- Educate staff about our commitment to “local goods”
- Provide staff time to visit farms and distributors committed to local foods

#### **5 Educate members, shoppers and the community about local food products and the farms and farmers who produce them.**

##### In Store

- Use labeling & display as educational opportunities
- Perform store demonstrations on local, seasonal products
- Use the newsletter & website to educate customers about benefits of local and how to adapt to seasonal availability
- Create a logo that identifies local products and is general enough to be used by the larger community. (See Appendix E for Examples)

##### Enhance the link between farmers and consumers.

- Personalize the educational messages above with links to specific farms
- Inform consumers about the farm practices of individual farmers to empower consumer choice
- Invite local producers and processors to the stores to demonstrate products and generally educate and interact with customers.

##### Broader Community

- Utilize paid staff and or volunteers to educate the larger community about issues related to sustainability and a local economy. Most Co-ops we talked to perform outreach/education in schools, at CSA sign-up fairs, farmer’s markets, sponsoring community gardens, farm field trips, and collaborations with other local businesses. Paid staff are generally involved, but it’s also an opportunity to use member workers.
- Consider making education of larger Co-op community part of the job description for the GM editing an Ends or Means statement.
- Provide space (on site or nearby) for cooking demonstrations, lessons and community use.
- Organize a CSA Fair (see Seward Co-op, Minneapolis MN)  
Seward Co-op hosts a single-Saturday CSA Fair every spring. Approximately 30 farms participate, representing meat, dairy, and produce. They bring displays and brochures, explain their farming practices, and recruit new members. The co-op benefits by increasing its ties to local suppliers and by increasing its visibility in the community

#### **6 Be a leader in fostering a sustainable regional food network.**

- Develop space in or nearby the Co-op for for small scale commercial processing of value-added local products for sale at the Co-op or elsewhere. Low interest capital is available for this purpose through the Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) Healthy Foods Financing Initiative (HFFI). It could also be loaned or leased to community members for canning, "once a month cooking" (OAMC, see <http://frozenassets.wordpress.com/>),
- Consider the Co-op acting as a locus for local foods activity in the area (e.g. CSA and buying club drop-offs, farmers' markets, community gardening organizing and support, etc.).
- Adopt an intention to implement the "7 Steps to a Local Economy" (Appendix F).
- Collaborate with local partners to develop a network of community-based urban farms that provide truly local produce in season.
- Help to increase the sustainability of farming practices of local producers.
- Adopt a set of sustainability criteria to use in procurement and, over time use the criteria in selecting both products and suppliers to work with.
- Work with partners to proactively develop urban food production as part of procurement efforts (Ref: Weaver's Way Cooperative in Philadelphia).
- Recruit, train and mentor new farmers/entrepreneurs who seek to become local food producers. This could be done through partnering with one of several existing beginning farmer initiatives in Montgomery and Prince Georges counties (e.g. First Alternative Co-op in Corvallis, Oregon offers a winter season training program that prepares new producers for economic success. The Co-op works with established producers, the chamber of commerce, extension agents, local university and community college programs to offer an intensive series of workshops.)
- Acquire non-profit status, or partner with an existing nonprofit, to access federal, state, and private grant monies designer to spur development of local food systems in the area (e.g. value-added processing capacity development, local distribution network development, farm-to-school facilitation, etc.)

## Conclusions

The members of the Local Foods Committee believe that food from nearby can be fresher, more nutritious, and more energy efficient. Further, we believe that relationships between food producers and their communities allow for communication about values such as environmental stewardship and economic justice. Through our research, we have come to the following conclusions:

1. There is strong support among members, shoppers, staff and board for a robust local foods initiative.
2. There is a reservoir of support, knowledge and expertise available to the Board and GM among the membership to support this initiative as appropriate.
3. The level of interest in this particular issue offers the possibility of increasing the overall engagement of the membership in the life of the Co-op.
4. The interest and the growing visibility of the issue in the larger society provides the Co-op with an opportunity to gain many kinds of support for its internal goals and to plug into a vibrant network for accomplishing broader ones as well.