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# City's first food co-op in the works

By Kelly Wood and Julie L. Rhodes

**W**HAT BRINGS NEIGHBORS looking for an alternative to the chain grocers and convenience stores together with neighbors concerned about food safety? It is their desire to establish a food cooperative (or co-op) in Indianapolis.

The idea of a local co-op began with informal conversations between friends frustrated with the scarcity of neighborhood grocery options in Downtown and the near Eastside. Now those discussions have evolved into a group of dedicated individuals making up the Indy Co-op Committee. Residents from eight Downtown and Eastside neighborhoods have met on a monthly basis since June to begin the process of establishing a food co-operative.

“Our thoughts from the beginning have been to establish a storefront that would offer fresh, affordable wholesome, organic, and (when possible) local, grocery options to people of all income levels,” said Kyle Hendrix, chairperson of the Indy Co-op Committee. “We believe that the non-profit co-operative model offers the best opportunity to meet all these objectives,”

While many on this ad-hoc committee are interested in the local, natural, organic grocery, other issues are of interest as well – including food security and the lack of availability of fresh foods for low-income neighbors. Recent headlines about botulism in canned foods, growth hor-



▲ Matthew Jose (left) and Charles Penny work in the Peoples' Peace Garden in Springdale, the type of organic community garden which could be a source of produce for a food co-operative.

mones, chemicals, and food additives have led to growing concern about food safety.

“Salmonella poisoning in spinach scared a lot of people this year,” said Darren Allumier, founder of ReImagine Neighbors, a group that helps to rebuild the community through projects such as organic community gardening with local youth. “People like convenience, but many people don’t realize how many hands touch their food before it hits their lips. Each mechanical process, each hand that touches a fresh product gives another opportunity for exposure.”

Organizers believe a food co-op with a mission driven towards natural and whole-food (unprocessed) products can provide a greater peace of mind stemming from building relationships with growers and suppliers.

The co-operative model offers an opportunity to establish a reliable and democratically run alternative. In the simplest terms, a food co-op purchases food and household items and redistributes them to its members. The co-op provides that link between farmers and other suppliers to the member-

customer. Typically that link results in access to high quality food at the best possible price.

Food co-ops typically offer consumers a retail environment free of coercive sales influences and with full disclosure of product qualities and value. Most co-ops also offer special services, prices, or benefits to its members. Almost all existing co-ops are open to the general public as well, at a higher price per item.

In addition to those motivated by health concerns, some residents working to establish a food co-op are concerned with their impact on the environment.

“I’m a guy that rarely makes the time to cook, but I care about my impact on the environment and the sustainability of my community,” said committee member Chris Harrell. “I believe a co-op offers the best opportunity to know where my food comes from and what methods are used for growing and processing what I eat.”

Another consideration for Harrell in his food purchases includes the carbon emissions created by transporting produce from other parts of the country and the world.

For others, a desire for a location to which they could walk and bike is an important component of Indianapolis co-op; others are concerned by the lack of affordable, fresh food available to economically challenged families and other vulnerable populations in and around downtown. The recent closing of a 10th Street grocer on the city’s near Eastside has resulted in some families shopping for their daily food needs at nearby convenience stores as their only option. A local co-op could fill an important gap for the residents as well.

The next step for this dedicated group is to determine the amount of community interest in a food co-op.

“As we are beginning to develop our business plan for a food co-op, it is now time to gauge community interest in joining and supporting such an effort,” Hendrix said. “We want to encourage those interested in learning more to contact us now so their thoughts and ideas can be incorporated into the plan.”

Short-term plans include undertaking a market study and holding an open meeting for potential members.

All interested community members are encouraged to contact the group with any questions at [indyfoodcoop@yahoo.com](mailto:indyfoodcoop@yahoo.com). Neighbors are also invited to attend the next co-op meeting: 7:30 p.m. Thursday, August 30, at Englewood Christian Church, 57 N. Rural St. (parking is in the back).

Food Co-op Committee members include Laura and Tyler Henderson, Martin Coleman, Sarah Blackman, Kelly Wood, Chris Harrell, Darren Allumier, Dawn Charbonneau, Joan Hamilton Morris, Mary Bowling, Josh Bowling, John Sterr, Kay Grimm, Nancy Meyer, Rob Hoverman, Zach Adamson, Tim Harmon, Veronica Vela, Mary Jane Moriarty, Tobie Smith Knies, Will Pritchard, Julie L. Rhodes, Jenny Elkins-Angleton, Aimee Zoeller, Andrew Teipen, Jess Teipen, Jenni

## What is a co-op?

A co-operative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.

### Co-op Values

Co-operatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.

### Co-op Principles

The co-operative principles are guidelines by which co-operatives put their values into practice.

☐ Voluntary and Open Membership – Co-operatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.

☐ Democratic Member Control – Co-operatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and co-operatives at other levels are also organized in a democratic manner.

☐ Member Economic Participation. Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the co-operative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their co-operative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their

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Smith, Joe Bowling, Kate Newbold, Melissa Boyle Hehmann, Rebecca Seifert, Samantha Weinbrecht, Shelley Blakely, Susan Elpers, Terri Collins, and Kyle Hendrix, chair. ■

☐ More information on food co-operatives can be found on the website for Cooperative Grocers’ Information Networks ([www.cgin.coop](http://www.cgin.coop)). For general information regarding the co-operative business model, visit the web site of the International Co-operative Alliance ([www.ica.coop](http://www.ica.coop)).

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transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

☐ **Autonomy and Independence** – Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter to agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.

☐ **Education, Training and Information** – Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public - particularly young people and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of co-operation.

☐ **Co-operation among Co-operatives** – Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.

☐ **Concern for Community** – Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.

Source: International Co-operative Alliance web site  
(<http://www.ica.coop/>)