

## A VIEW FROM THE BOARD

# Beyond a Hundred Bucks: The Case for Becoming a Co-op Volunteer

by Board Treasurer Leslie Watson

Old and new, the members of the Eastside Food Co-op possess a range of motives for having signed on to this venture. We want to shop locally for healthful, sustainably grown food. We want to park our cars or bikes just steps away from a store that's built to human scale. And fundamentally, we want to support an economic model that transcends the goal of profitability, and instead harnesses market power to achieve greater purposes, such as fair wages for employees, ethically sound business practices, and healthier local and global communities.

Provided that we invest adequate time and energy, our Co-op can be a particularly effective tool to achieve all these goals. Unlike traditional businesses, cooperatives exist for the benefit of their members rather than for investors of speculative capital, so when members consciously adopt certain values, the cooperative will naturally evolve to reflect them. A cooperative also embraces as a core principle the notion that the organization exists to serve and sustain its community. For these reasons, joining a co-op is about much more than securing a discount on purchases. Rather, it is a political and economic act that speaks volumes about each member's view of how the world should be shaped. By becoming members of the Eastside Food Co-op, we have made a commitment to do more than simply shop at a particular store; we also have signaled our intent to help build a community organization.

For Eastside Food Co-op in particular, our identity as a community organization is more than just a principle, it is a birthright. We are the child of our community's spirit in myriad ways. In order to open our store, we needed a critical mass of community residents to invest their money and volunteer their time; we needed support from the greater Twin Cities cooperative community; we needed generous financing from various neighborhood organizations; and we needed traditional financing from Northeast Bank, an institution with its roots in this community and a policy of supporting local start-up businesses. Without this magic combination of contributions from all these stakeholders, we likely would not be selling tofu on Central Avenue.

But sell it we do, and quite briskly. That is a great accomplishment, and we are deservedly proud of it. But we must not allow the satisfaction of our goals as consumers—to have our own co-op in Northeast Minneapolis—to lull us into the

complacent conclusion that our mission is now accomplished. Whatever the soybean might think, the tofu is not an end; rather, it is only the beginning.

Our Co-op is still very much a fledgling, and we must take care to parent it wisely. Obviously we must spend our money at the store, but, even more, we must be active and enthusiastic participants in the life of the organization that we have created. To that end, in the next few months, Eastside will launch a formal Member Volunteer Program. We are actively seeking a Member Volunteer Coordinator with the energy and talent to help design and implement the program. In fact, if you think you may have an interest in the job, see page 7 for a notice and contact Amy Fields at the store for a complete job description.

Our new Member Volunteer Coordinator will be asking all of us to help with a variety of strategic initiatives designed both to strengthen our store and to fulfill our cooperative mission. From building a Community Outreach program to creating a mural on the store's exterior north wall, there will be many opportunities to become involved with the Co-op outside the confines of its checkout lines. (Happily, for the nostalgic old-timers among us, there will always be envelopes to stamp and ears of corn to shuck.)

We all lead busy lives, with multiple obligations and demands on our time. But even at a whirlwind pace, life is better lived in a strong, vibrant community with institutions that are meaningful to us. So when the Co-op sounds its call for volunteers, do your best to answer affirmatively. If you think about it, your involvement in the Co-op is already woven into your daily life, because it is a source for the food that sustains you. Working alongside your fellow member-owners toward the Co-op's deeper goals can also fit naturally into your day, and provide you with an altogether different sort of sustenance. You can combine door-hanging with your daily constitutional walk around the neighborhood, or you can turn volunteering at a Co-op event into an opportunity to spend time with your family.

Whatever form it takes, throwing your shoulder behind the wheel of this great little enterprise is the best way to ensure its long-term success. We own it; we built it; let's keep it rolling!