

A Tale of Ten Co-ops

BY ROSIE WEAVER

On September 2, Food Co-op Initiative (FCI) announced Seed Grants totaling \$100,000 awarded to 10 communities across the U.S. that are organizing co-ops, to be matched in each case with equal amounts in local investments. These grants combine a \$10,000 cash award with in-kind services from FCI's experts, including technical assistance, on-site training, and continued mentoring. The Initiative received 38 applications—a record high—with requests totaling just under \$380,000.

Who were these 10 co-ops, and what made them stand out from the crowd?

“This year’s grantees have all of the essential elements we look for in a startup,” said Stuart Reid, FCI executive director. “They demonstrate community support, a balance of cooperative ideals with practical business requirements, commitment to best practices, and potential for retail success.”

Reid says that the caliber of applications has risen significantly over the three years FCI has offered Seed Grants, which suggests the program and the Initiative’s early support services are positively impacting food co-op development. “These co-ops epitomize what is possible with strong leadership and access to professional support and guidance,” he said.

It was particularly difficult to narrow the pool of applicants to 10 this year, reported FCI staff. “Almost universally, groups are using the Four Cornerstones in Three Stages model of development,” said Reid. (This model frames the elements of vision, talent, capital, and systems within the stages of organizing, planning, and implementation.) “They’re following tried-and-true best practices. We’re looking at a great crop of new co-ops opening in the next three to five years.”

Food Co-op Initiative congratulates our grant recipients! What follows is a very brief profile of each co-op.

Maynard, Mass., is an economically diverse community with a walkable downtown and a small-town feel. **Assabet Village Co-op** will be its only grocery store. The co-op has met with strong community interest since its first meeting in February 2012. As with most of our grantees, Seed funds will be used to finance a market and feasibility study, along with training for the board. They are about to kick off their membership drive to help attain their matching funds.



An inspiring sign of the times from Assabet Village Co-op in Maynard, Mass.

Baraboo Cooperative in Baraboo, Wis., combines the concept of a consumer co-op (owned by the shoppers) with a worker co-op (in which employees invest equity). Their vision is a 7,000-square-foot, full-service grocery located in the up-and-coming Baraboo Riverfront Redevelopment Area. This group wowed FCI with how far they’ve come in just a year of organizing.

BisMan Co-op aims to serve Bismarck and Mandan, N.D., with a 3,000-square-foot store. There is little to no retail access to local or organic foods in the area. The organizers plan to use funds to support their membership campaign. Education will be a key component, since surveys show there is little familiarity with co-ops in the area. They have adopted three guiding principles around food, community outreach, and economic fairness. Their goal is to open in 2014.

Before deciding to create **Eastwood Market & Café** in Louisville, Ky., organizers contacted over 275 commercial grocery chains, asking them to look at opening a store in the area. None panned out. However, a market study indicates significant potential for a 16,000-square-foot natural foods grocery and café. The Eastwood organizers have strongly engaged the co-op community as they have moved forward. They hope to open in fall of 2014.

Hudson, Wis., is a fast-growing community along the Wisconsin-Minnesota border, close

to the Twin Cities. **Hudson Grocery Cooperative** aims to bring back a grocery store to their historic downtown. They have excelled at connecting with local business and the co-op community. Mentor co-op River Market in nearby Stillwater has established member-benefit reciprocity to help them gain new owners.

Local Roots’ market study shows good potential for a 5,000-square-foot store in Buffalo, Minn. The store will be an outlet for the many organic farms in the area and will fit with the city’s planned revitalization projects. “Not only will Local Roots be a store,” they told FCI. “It will also be an education center, a community center, and an incubator for small businesses to get their start.”

The **Manchester Food Co-op** currently has 755 members. They hope to open a 15,000-square-foot store in populous Manchester, N.H. A recent awareness-building event included a parade of children, dressed in peapod outfits, handing out flyers. The co-op is preparing to launch a capital campaign and hire a project manager.

Paso Food Co-op in Paso Robles, Calif., is perhaps the “youngest” co-op ever to be awarded a Seed Grant. They began organizing in spring 2013. Careful focus on the Four Cornerstones in Three Stages development model has led them to build an exceptional foundation of leadership and community support in a short time. Their location on the central coast of California offers a tremendous opportunity to connect an abundance of food produced with the intense demand for a local food experience.

Richmond Food Co-op in Richmond, Va., hopes to open a 10,000-square-foot store. Their beautifully photographed campaign, “I Joined the Co-op Because...,” has attracted a lot of positive attention. They’ve led an effective membership campaign and will hire a project manager this fall.

The strong organizing team at **South Philly Food Co-op** in Philadelphia, Pa., currently has recruited nearly 500 members despite working in an area with mixed incomes and limited site options. South Philly’s membership strategy includes an excellent programs and events committee that organizes regular activities for member and community engagement. Their recent garden tour raised nearly \$10,000. They are working closely with existing Philadelphia co-ops. ■

PHOTO COURTESY OF ASSABET VILLAGE CO-OP