

Kitsap = Community

Annual fair boosts co-op startup and farmland preservation

BY KRISTINA KRUZAN

One of the issues that faces startup co-ops is how best to use their oftentimes limited resources to get the most impact in equity, publicity, and community support. The Kitsap Community Food Co-op approached this same puzzle in our first year of organizing with a small, local fair, held at an historic farm and staffed by people who cared about our cause. Subsequently, we've developed an annual fair that brings in repeat attendees and new member-owners every year.

The Kitsap Community Food Co-op launched its first fall fair in October 2008 at Rodstol Lane Farm in Southworth, Wash. Cynthia Mora, one of our board members at the time, owns a beautiful farm that can accommodate a small event. Not only did we enjoy a beautiful location, Mora had event planning experience and had held public events at her property with some regularity and could help us navigate the planning maze.

With very little in the way of funds or resources, our co-op volunteers delivered a magical event: pumpkins for children to paint or carve; cider press and free samples of fresh, warm cider; bluegrass music; an auction; and hot food. People fell in love with Mora's farm, and we heard every year about how much people looked forward to coming back.

The first fall fair drew in over 200 people who were excited about the idea of a co-op in Kitsap County. This turnout helped to raise funds for the coming year and deliver the message to many people who hadn't heard of the co-op. In our first year of organizing, when things were busy, hectic, and sometimes isolating, this was the first time the co-op felt real to us. We could see before us the wonderful community being hatched from a common vision. An increase in attendees peaked at 700 in 2009—the community was hearing about our event and returning with friends and family to enjoy what we had created.

As we evaluated our accomplishments at the fall fair, we were inspired by the success we'd realized both in reaching out to the community in a fun way and, as a side effect, replenishing our coffers. Each year we managed to do this with grassroots organizing efforts and few resources. We'd



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never had paid advertising or sponsorships, only hard-working people who hit the pavement to hang posters and deliver postcards, made the phone calls, and organized bulk mailings to get our message out. Posters were printed on home computers, printing for postcards was donated by local print shops. By using our mailing lists to ask for the help we needed, we were often gifted or given for reduced rates things we needed in order to make the fall fair a success.

As the board and events committee began early planning for 2011, our 4th Annual Fall Fair, we quickly realized that we needed a bigger location in order to grow our event. The search began for a site that would meet our logistic needs and be synergistic with our mission.

We learned that Great Peninsula Conservancy was holding a capital campaign event to conserve the Petersen Farm in Silverdale, Wash.,

PHOTOS BY KATHY MAHAN



PHOTO BY DON PAULSON

around the same time that the fall fair was tentatively scheduled. One of the oldest homesteads in Kitsap County, Petersen Farm is a 100-year-old dairy that has gone into probate and needs protection from developers. With its mix of beautiful pasture land, old-growth trees, vintage silos and equipment, and the nearby salmon-spawning beds, Petersen Farm offered an idyllic location for families to have a little fun and learn a whole lot about their local history.

The board was excited about the opportunity to bring light to the important issue of saving local farmland and the chance to grow our own event at the same time. In this partnership, we had definitely found the synergy we were looking for. The boards of the Kitsap Community Food Co-op and Great Peninsula Conservancy came to agreement, and the Petersen Farm Fall Fair was conceived.

Working in collaboration with Great Peninsula Conservancy, our marketing was much stronger than it had been in the past, with banners across major streets, mailings to the contact lists of both organizations, posters, and press releases. For the first time, a website was developed just for the fair, which gave equal billing to both organizations. We shared expenses and income and gained exposure for not only the co-op but for the Petersen Farm and its plight, and for Great Peninsula Conservancy as well. This partnership forged a strong relationship between two like-minded organizations, which allowed for greater strength in outreach, organization, and resources.

On Sept. 18, almost a thousand people braved a finicky weather forecast and ventured to the beautiful farm. Under pregnant skies that, thankfully, never released their bounty, over 40 vendors awaited them, along with guided farm tours, an apple sling-shot, hay rides, carnival games, hot food, and live acoustic music. Kitsap Community Food Co-op gained new members and added over \$2,500 to our operating budget for 2012, while Great Peninsula Conservancy celebrated unmatched exposure for the Petersen Farm. Families came early and stayed late, enjoying hot food and the arresting views of the valley and the farm itself. It was a unique opportunity for families to be a part of local history and the future of Kitsap County all in one special event.

Both Great Peninsula Conservancy and Kitsap Community Food Co-op staffed the event, including volunteers from the Washington Youth Academy, a military school in Bremerton, Wash. Donations helped to make the event possible, and a local credit union sponsored a large music tent for the musicians who played all day. The community truly came together, collaborating to make a magical event that we hope will continue year after year.

As we strive each year to bring a sense of community and belonging to a membership with no store, the fair drives us closer to our goals—membership, financial, building community, cooperation and collaboration. Our current timelines project our opening date sometime in 2014, and we believe the fair will be a tradition that sticks. ■

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