

# Engaging Our Community to Create Shared Vision

BY ALEX GYORI

Three and a half years ago, our co-op's board president, finance manager, and the general manager were walking excitedly down Main Street after having signed a mortgage for \$1,200,000 at our local bank. We had just bought our building and the four acres it sits on! As we got closer to the co-op, we saw one of our long-time shareholders walking up the street and we told her what we had just done.

"We own it, we really do!" we told her. The member was thrilled. Her response: "That's wonderful! What's the new building going to look like?"

That stopped us in our tracks. A renovation project was the furthest from our minds. But for many of our shareholders it was at the top of their list, just ahead of another concern: some anxiety that we were going to expand the store to an uncomfortable size. It was clear that creating a shared vision was our most important next task.

## Thinking outside the big box

The year before we took the giant step to purchase our building and property, we had invited a local community member to an annual meeting, to help us learn new ways in which to think about our business. He brought along several of his colleagues from a team called "Natural Logic," and they showed us how they had approached a number of projects. Their point was to urge us to develop a framework of thinking that would go beyond the "usual green design approach of doing less damage, to a more substantive one of regenerating the health of the larger network of interconnected systems in nature—forests, soil, habitat, water and more...." ("Preparing the Ground for a Regenerative Market and Marketplace," Natural Logic, Inc.)

## Engaging our community

Taking Natural Logic's suggestions to heart, we spent many months trying to construct a plan of action. It was really frustrating! Our early meetings we fondly remember as "train wrecks." But of course we kept at it, trying very hard not to revert to our old mindset, which would have resulted in a new floor plan for the store and not much more.

Over the next three years we succeeded in creating and carrying out a community engage-

ment process that has helped us form a vision which we now call our "100 Year Vision." We believe it has turned us in the direction that we want to go, towards a regenerative market and marketplace. Our engagement process provided opportunities for learning, discussion, and input from our shareholders and stakeholders, including staff, managers, board members, creative thinkers, and many other like-minded community organizations. All of this interaction has indeed resulted in a richer understanding of the co-op's place and role in our community, because it has helped us create signposts that will allow us to judge our activities in light of this very long-term vision.

## Setting up the engagement process

To start with, we identified the activities that we felt were indispensable components of our visioning process, then delegated the responsibility for carrying them out. Shareholders, board members, staff, managers, and other stakeholders in our community all had specific roles to play. Here's how we set it up:

The group coordinating everything was the Core Team, composed of senior managers and chaired by the general manager. Its role was to oversee the completion of all activities and present regular reports to the board of directors. The team analyzed the input gathered from all the various sources and prepared the conclusions.

The Board of Directors assured that shareholder interests would be appropriately met. The board provided the connections with shareholders and participated in the input process. The core team presented to the board the vision as it developed and incorporated the board's questions, comments, and viewpoints into it. The board presented the resulting concepts to the shareholders through newsletter articles and at subsequent annual meetings for comment and further discussion.

Our Marketing Department organized the specific activities of the input process, which included a member survey, a location analysis by a professional consultant, several different types of face-to-face meetings with co-op shareholders and other stakeholders, and newsletter communications.

Employee Services (HR) and Department Managers organized activities such as written surveys, open meetings, and departmental meetings, to

gather staff ideas and insights.

Collaboration with Neighbor Co-ops in our region, as stakeholders in Brattleboro Food Co-op, provided additional perspectives in our deliberations. We asked Shareholders to read the newsletters, attend meetings, and participate in discussions. We took the view that virtually everything we need to know to take our co-op boldly forward could be and must be learned from them.

## Planning

The Core Team assembled all the elements of our incipient community engagement into a Gantt chart, to help us keep the process on track. I have included a modified version of it here. It shows the principal activities, the responsible parties, and a column with comments on their effectiveness. In the full chart, each activity was broken into its progressive components over a 12-month period.

In the end, we felt that our community engagement was very successful. We don't yet know "what the new building is going to look like," but we have already seen tangible results. The board created a whole new set of ends policies, simply but elegantly stated, that reflects the principal, strongly held values of our shareholders and stakeholders. (See the sidebar.) These Ends will guide us towards the realization of our 100 Year Vision. The late Syd Pobihushchy, a co-op mentor from Atlantic Canada, used to say that if you don't know where you are going, any path will do. We have tried to take his warning to heart. ■

## ENDS

1. Reasonably priced food and products with an emphasis on healthy, locally grown, organic, and fairly traded goods
2. A welcoming community marketplace
3. A regenerative business that has a net positive environmental impact
4. A strong local economy
5. Relevant information about food and related products, the environment, and the Cooperative Values and Principles
6. Reasonable access to participation in the cooperative

National Cooperative Grocers Association  
and our members congratulate

**ROBYNN SHRADER**

for her recognition as one of *Progressive Grocer's*

## TOP WOMEN IN GROCERY

**We thank Robynn for her vision and leadership** on behalf of retail food co-ops and for her dedication and years of service to the natural, organic and cooperative communities.

*Congratulations on this well-deserved award!*



## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS: CREATING A COMPELLING SHARED VISION

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE	ACTIVITY	COMMENTS
MARKETING DEPARTMENT	Shareholder Survey	Possibly the most highly effective of all our input activities. We received a great number of thoughtful responses, from which we were able to distill the most important shared values.
CONSULTANT	Market Study/Site Analysis	An invaluable opinion about our site and location
MARKETING DEPARTMENT	Assemble lists of Stakeholders, Resources	Serve to connect us more closely to other initiatives and people in our community. The data gathered should be helpful over the life of our project.
MANAGEMENT	3-Year Plan	Updating this longer term strategic plan each year helps maintain forward momentum in our redevelopment process. A necessary exercise.
MANAGEMENT	Annual Business Plan	Useful in assuring that we set up planning activities and allocation of budget to support the long range planning
MARKETING DEPARTMENT	Open Forums Rural Small Groups Interest Groups	The open forums attracted small but very thoughtful groups of people. Rural small groups did not yield results that justified the work it took to organize them. Interest groups are like-minded organizations that shared mission statements and other documents with us. A useful exercise.
EMPLOYEE SERVICES	Staff Input	Written surveys, meetings helped to connect the staff to our planning work, but most staff did not delve into the full visioning process.
BOARD AND MANAGEMENT	Annual Meetings	Comments and questions that we have received from shareholders over these four years indicate that many shareholders are paying attention to our undertaking.
BOARD AND MANAGEMENT	Neighbor Co-op Linkage	Some helpful results, i.e. the adoption of common planning and financial condition policies, allowing for future collaboration.
BOARD AND MANAGEMENT	Newsletter Articles	A number of informative articles were written. Useful for shareholder linkage.
CORE TEAM (general manager, store manager, operations manager, finance, employee services, marketing)	Keepers of the Vision Liaison with Board Planning & Coordination	Through delegation and almost weekly meetings, this team has provided steady impetus to the project. Essential in the redevelopment work.