

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

# Just Damned If We Don't



We have continuing opportunities to cultivate cooperative enterprise. In the present issue are reports on how, and how not, to grow cooperative ownership.

Cooperatives globally have garnered added attention since the United Nations' declaration of 2012 as the International Year of Cooperatives. Leslie Dreifus and Sam Koprak, board members of Flatbush Food Co-op in Brooklyn, report on a UN panel on cooperatives in New York City and a global credit union.

Food cooperatives are among the best examples of cooperatives rooted in community. Make that multiple communities since the positive impact of these businesses extends to the co-op's employees, its suppliers and local economy, and the environment. The "Healthy Foods, Healthy Communities" study recently released by the National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA) has excellent talking points on these impacts.

In the U.S., approximately 10 new co-op stores are opening each year, and the leading organization for startup support, Food Co-op Initiative, reports its annual grants. In addition, development lessons have emerged, and executive director Stuart Reid summarizes why some new co-ops fail. It turns out that the success rate is actually pretty high, and both successes and failures reinforce an analysis of essential development components. For successful startups, of special importance is avoiding starting too small, either in the co-op's financing or its facility.

With growth in member-owner numbers and sales totals and a pattern of ongoing expansions, most of today's established food co-ops continue to thrive. The NCGA membership of 128 co-ops now operates 165 stores, pointing to more multistore cooperatives.

In "Navigating the Growth Road," Art Sherwood and Mark Goehring focus on how the co-op's board of directors and top management team together can address the challenges of meeting growth opportunities and fulfilling cooperative Ends. With clarity and good communications, the board can both provide visionary leadership and ensure accountability.

Concluding the cultivating co-ops section is my discussion of E.G. Nadeau's *The Cooperative Solution*, a short book that makes a needed contribution.

The strongest argument for launching more cooperatives, it seems, is still found among living examples of thriving cooperative enterprise. This magazine and companion website, Cooperative Grocer Network, will continue to highlight practices among food co-ops that are on the growth road, meeting challenges while expanding their impact both inside the store and in their communities.

The International Year of Cooperatives has rightly emphasized democratic prospects, while the overall economic and political environment offers dilemmas and decline. As I write in October, many cooperative leaders are gathering for strategic discussions in Seattle and in Quebec. Also, many food co-ops have been contributing to campaigns for upcoming votes on GMO labeling—Proposition 37 in California and Initiative 522 in Washington state. Next time, we'll have reports on these initiatives, discussions, and summit conferences.

In an era of declining public services, greater collaboration with other partners will be necessary to promote and advance cooperative enterprise—along with the monumental political task of reclaiming primacy for shared services and the commonwealth. Where will momentum be generated for such a movement?

For one approach, here is David Bollier, "The Commons as a Transformative Vision," in the introduction to his book, co-authored with Silke Helfrich, *The Wealth of the Commons: A world beyond market & state* ([www.bollier.org/blog/commons-transformative-vision](http://www.bollier.org/blog/commons-transformative-vision)):

"The commons provides us with the ability to name and then help constitute a new order. We need a new language that does not insidiously replicate the misleading fictions of the old order—for example, that market growth will eventually solve our social ills or that regulation will curb the world's proliferating ecological harms. We need a new discourse and new social practices that assert a new grand narrative, a different constellation of operating principles, and a more effective order of governance. Seeking a discourse of this sort is not a fanciful whim. It is an absolute necessity. And, in fact, there is no other way to bring about a new order. Words actually shape the world. By using a new language, the language of the commons, we immediately begin to create a new culture. We can assert a new order of resource stewardship, right livelihood, social priorities, and collective enterprise." ■

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