

Ti Co-op Weathers the Coronavirus

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 08 September 2020 13:16 - Last Updated Tuesday, 08 September 2020 13:19

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TICONDEROGA | When the coronavirus pandemic created scarcities at the Wal Mart supermarket this spring, a woman walked into the Ticonderoga Natural Foods Co-op lamenting the shortages on the shelves of the town's local grocery store.

The co-op's manager, Megan Cunningham, bit her tongue, but she wanted to blurt out, "We're your local grocery store."

While 2020 has not been such a great year in many ways, it's been good to the Montcalm Street co-op, which more people have discovered is a viable alternative to big supermarkets.

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“When the food chain was disrupted at Wal Mart, we were flooded with people,” Cunningham said. “We broke every record for sales we’d ever had.”

Because the co-op is small and agile and depends on local suppliers instead of big distribution networks, its shelves remained filled when the crisis hit. Meat, for example, is supplied nationally by a relatively few number of processors. The coronavirus forced those plants to shut down at the same time demand was surging and the system crashed.

But meat, dairy and produce at the co-op is locally sourced, and its dry goods are provided by regional suppliers. For example, “Lilie Valley Farm in Putnam is the reason we didn’t run out of eggs,” Cunningham said. Word spread that the co-op was able to provide what big stores couldn’t.

And for many it’s been an eye-opener. The co-op has had to battle the assumption that it’s a niche health food store rather than a mainstream grocery.

“Some people thought that everything we had was vegan and gluten free,” Cunningham said. “They were surprised we had meat.”

Going into the year, the co-op had 630 members, and its goal was to reach 750 by September. Instead, it hit its mark in July. And while sales have plateaued as things return to something resembling normal, they are still outpacing those of a year ago.

They discovered that the co-op not only had meat, it had fresh-baked bread, craft beers, freshly delivered seafood from the Rhode Island coast and bags of what devotees believe is the best coffee going. Whatever speciality items the co-op doesn’t have can be ordered.

The cost is a little more, but the quality makes up for it, Cunningham said, particularly in foods that have been naturally raised without hormones or additives.

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Cunningham said the co-op has also been blessed with volunteers who came to the rescue and helped navigate the rapids caused by the pandemic.

“Prior to the outbreak, we were lucky to have people from Mountain Lake Services come and help us unpack, price, and shelve on our largest delivery day,” Cunningham said. “After the pandemic hit and Mountain Lake Services shut down that program, our member volunteers immediately stepped up and made it possible to get these orders processed — orders which were only increasing in size and coming in on what was to become our busiest day of the week.”

Volunteers also drive down to Argyle Cheese farm and Lucy Jo's Roastery in Salem and pick up orders, making it possible for Ticonderogians to have access to yogurt, cheeses and high-quality coffee, and they also meet a delivery truck whose route only extends to Crown Point.

It has all been a mutually beneficial experience for everyone in the community. “In uncertain times we offer a little bit of certainty,” Cunningham said. “It makes people comfortable to know they won't be caught in a food drought. And to know that we have the support of the community is a great thing.”