



Starting a Food Co-op?

What Do I Do First?

Congratulations on beginning your journey towards organizing a new co-op! It's an exhilarating process, one you will find both challenging and transformative, for you and for your community.

You've already made an excellent first step by visiting the Food Co-op Initiative website. The best first step in starting a co-op is getting a broad view of the landscape ahead of you. You do this by learning as much as you can. Learn about co-ops, learn about your community's needs and vision, and learn about the organizing process. Start with the free e-book, *The FCI Guide to Starting a Food Co-op*, and our video, *A Food Co-op for Your Community*. Sign up for our email newsletter to keep abreast of educational opportunities, and drop us a line by phone or email as early in the process as you can. Our Facebook pages are updated steadily with great info about peer startups. We have helped hundreds of food co-ops get started, and we're excited to share practices and learn how we can best support you.

Learn About Co-ops

Co-ops rock! Did you know there are over 1,400,000 co-op members in the US alone? Co-ops exist to serve their members. In the case of food co-ops, that means grocery shoppers and producers—your community. People are drawn to co-ops by a diverse array of factors, including community building, economic justice, and access to healthy foods, to name just a few. It's a good idea to be well versed in many aspects of cooperatives so you can speak articulately about the benefits and address your community's interests. A collection of concise articles explaining the many aspects of cooperatives can be found on the Co-op: Stronger Together site, www.strongertogether.coop.

Now is a good time to visit a food co-op (or two). We can help you set up a meeting with the General Manager or a staff person and begin to develop a relationship with your fellow cooperators.

Outcome: You are prepared to talk with others about food co-ops and how they can benefit your community.

Listen

It's time to test your idea in your community. One common mistake you can make at this stage is to talk to only a few people and then swing into action. Don't come up with an idea, write a grant to fund it or throw all your money into it at this point. Test your idea among many people in your community. Building a co-op that can be sustained over time is going to take broad support. Without that support, or if there is opposition, your organization is not likely to succeed. During this period, you should try to have informal conversations with at least 50 people. Ask everyone roughly the same questions. Who should you talk to? Start with those closest to the problem or situation your co-op will address and with people you eventually want in your co-op. If you want to bring more local food to your community, start with those it affects: shoppers, those who care about local, healthy foods; and farmers, those who would like to scale up their vegetable growing but don't have a viable market. If you are interested in building a co-op with diversity (for example with shoppers from many different neighborhoods) listen to people from all the neighborhoods at the beginning. Trying to "diversify" later is much harder. People like to be part of co-ops where they are involved in the planning and decision-making from the start.

These one-on-ones will help you better understand your community's interests, discuss and test your vision, and scout for future leaders. Conversations might include sharing your vision so far and discussion of opportunities and challenges in your community. Do as much listening as possible and take notes. Always ask, "Who else should I talk to?" And then follow up with those people! By the time your team has met with a couple dozen people, you'll have a great list of potential steering committee members and can choose your "dream team" from there.

Outcomes: You have made connections on many levels of your community and learned a great deal about what kind of responses you can expect as you spread the word. You have a list of potential future steering committee members.

Write Your Vision Down

Now that you've learned more about co-ops, it's time to articulate your vision. Write it on a single piece of paper. As your vision evolves, continue to maintain a single, concise point of reference. Search our website for VISION to learn more.

Form a Small Group

You've got a great idea: Now you need help. Start by finding a few people who share your excitement to form an initial exploratory group. For this small group, tasks will include researching the process, making valuable connections with the food co-op community, and talking to a wide array of community leaders.

It can be tempting to form a steering committee or board of directors right away to legitimize your project. However, we recommend that you wait. Since you're asking the initial exploratory group for a small, limited duration commitment, hopefully it will be easy for them say

yes. Then, in that initial time period, you'll get a better sense for the qualities they might bring to future leadership roles.

Outcome: You have a small group that understands the project goal and can help you begin to spread the word.

Learn More About Your Community's Needs and Vision

What gaps could a cooperative grocery store fill? As mentioned above, one-on-one meetings with community leaders will lay the appropriate foundation, and during this time you should also be discussing your vision with those closest to you. By now you've likely stirred a grassroots buzz. Now is a good time to hold a public meeting to gauge broader community interest in the idea of a food co-op. For this meeting to be successful effective outreach and follow up are critical. See our website for the Guide to the Best Community Meeting Ever.

Outcomes: Your community is thinking and talking about the idea of a food co-op. You are building a fuller picture of the vision you will carry forward as you continue your work. You have an email list and a list of potential helpers for the many tasks to come.

Create Broader Linkages with Your Community (while staying in touch with the relationships you made along the way)

As mentioned above, "targeting" (through one-on-one conversations) is one of the most effective ways to create linkages and build relationships at the start. But it's equally important that we follow up and stay in touch with those whom we built important relationships with during the one-on-one period.

To supplement your live discussions and stay connected, you can "broadcast" and engage people by creating a Facebook page. It's free (costing only time) easy, and a great way to share information and build community online. Be sure to show your town and state on your About Page on Facebook. Equally important is regular email contact with your newly forming list. Use a free service like Mail Chimp to manage sign up forms and create professional looking emails. Be sure to send an email inviting everyone to "Like" your Facebook page, and plan to send emails at least once a month updating your list on the co-op's progress. You may also want to create a generic email to both send Mailchimp emails from and to receive co-op inquiries from outside of your peer network. e.g. foodcoopfordavis@gmail.com. (A branded email is not necessary at this point.)

Outcomes: You have created an online presence where the wider community can keep up with the co-op's progress and learn more about the vision.

Form a Steering Committee

Ideally, you will want 8-12 members, but you may start out with fewer. Be careful in whom you select. Read Tips for Forming Your First Steering Committee on our blog. We caution you against the "community meeting" approach, where you make a pitch and ask for volunteers. That typically creates "random leadership" (where you take whoever shows up) and rarely, if ever, works out well for startups. Desirable board members may not be immediately apparent as they are usually in-demand and tend to be busy. They may take some cultivation before accepting new major responsibilities. However, don't be afraid to ask!

Outcome: You have a diverse array of talented people committed to making the community vision a reality. You're ready for your adventure to begin!

Begin Organizing Your Co-op

Now is the time for the entire steering committee to begin learning about and following the Four Cornerstones in Three Stages Development Model, building your timeline of tasks, developing group norms, and doing the serious (but fun!) work of starting a co-op. It's sure to be a rewarding experience. Food Co-op Initiative is here to help you along your journey, so stay in touch! Our services are available at no charge.

Pitfalls to avoid

Contact us anytime – we are here to help!

Putting the cart before the horse. The number one mistake startups make is selecting a site first, then beginning to organize the co-op around it. The store site you end up with is often not the site you initially have in mind. When we start out we don't realize all of the many components that contribute to a successful grocery store, one that will grow to serve our community best. In the beginning, it's important to start with your vision about why your community needs a food co-op and what the co-op will do for your community. What impact will it have? The best potential store sites will be determined by your vision and your market study. This comes during Stage 2.

Promoting an unrealistic vision. Examples include promising a store with rock bottom prices, in a specific neighborhood, with a community kitchen, new farmers market, food hub, trading post, and urban garden, all at the same time. Wait until you've made a bit more progress before you make any promises beyond community ownership and input! Focusing on building your food co-op first will allow your community to build a robust economic engine (the store) first, that can then support the many other food-related opportunities to grow your local foodshed.

Holding a public meeting first (before you've talked with community stakeholders). Before you hold a public meeting, it's important to know what concerns your community might have with a co-op storefront. Will the farmers market think the co-op be competition? Is there fear that you'll put the small natural foods retailer out of business? Does your community associate food co-op with a political agenda? You should know all points of contention before opening up your vision to a larger audience. One-on-one meetings with important food and community stakeholders will help you test your vision, ensure that you're addressing potential points of contention early, and create community buy in from those close to you and other influential people. The co-op should be the answer to a problem not a problem in and of itself.

Inviting anyone interested to be on the steering committee or board of directors. Pulling together the right skills, community connections, and cooperative way of teamwork is no easy feat and should be taken seriously. Successful co-ops often take their time ensuring each person is the right fit for the co-op.



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