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PLANS FOR GRAND RAPIDS FOOD COOPERATIVE MOVE FORWARD

By Britta Arendt Herald-Review Updated May 11, 2016



Submitted

FRFC Outreach Committee includes (top, from left) Nancy Schlader, Kathy Cone, Rebecca Gramdorf, Sarah Verke, Jen Toewe (front, from left) Annaliesa McCartney, Corinn Tiwari and Co-op baby Ayla.

A shared desire for better access to local foods has sparked a push to establish a food cooperative in Grand Rapids.

Last fall, a group of local people came together around the common idea of creating a member-owned, member-driven grocery business that would work with Grand Rapids area growers and producers. And the concept for Free Range Food Co-op (FRFC) was born.

Food-cooperatives are member-owned stores that work to form relationships with growers to provide increased access to local foods and goods. Most food co-ops also promote environmental stewardship and serve as a hub for sustainability within the area of operation. Different than the buying club concept of CSAs (or Community Supported Agriculture), food co-ops are for-profit grocery stores, operated under the non-profit structure of a board of directors. Other, established food co-ops in northern Minnesota are currently located in Bemidji, Virginia and Duluth.

“In mid-October, we started meeting to talk about the idea and start the process,” explained Sarah Verke, a member of the FRFC Outreach Committee. “We’ve realized there are a lot of organizations and resources out there right now to help with the planning process - so we’re not reinventing the wheel.”

After their initial meeting, Verke explained that the group took a few months to establish a vision “for what we wanted to develop so we could approach the community.”

This January, more people joined the cause and started attending trainings to learn more. Working with the Food Co-op Initiative which assists communities throughout the country in establishing food cooperatives, the local group has been able to move forward quickly with their concept.

“They’ve really refined the process so, if you follow the recommendations, you will be successful,” explained Corinn Tiwari, FRFC Outreach Committee member.

Verke and Tiwari were very excited to share their most recent news for FRFC this Monday. The group has been awarded a grant through the Food Co-op Initiative to move ahead with the consultation phase focused on feasibility and market studies.

The grant is made possible through funding support from the Blooming Prairie Foundation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Growers Association.

“The grant will allow us to move forward a lot faster and, ultimately, help us determine where the store will be located and how big it will be,” explained Verke. “Once the study is done, we’ll be able to build more farmer and producer relationships.”

It's been just six months from conception to first funding. On March 29, FRFC started soliciting memberships and, in five weeks, tallies 76 already. The goal is to gain 300 members by July 31 but the Outreach Committee is not letting numbers cloud their confidence at this point.

The target open dates for the co-op will be dependant upon the membership. Founders expect funding sources to be a mix of grants, loans, and memberships.

"We're thinking it may be two to three years for us to get established," estimates Verke.

Although the thought of starting such a venture is daunting, the FRFC group is building on their energy.

"We're opening a multi-million dollar business with people we don't know and we're all volunteers," smiled Verke. "It's a huge project being driven by community."

"Because it's our passion, the only thing we gain out of this is a co-op," added Tiwari.

Both Verke and Tiwari stressed the fact that profits gained from the co-op will stay within the community. They have been pleasantly surprised by the impressive response they've received through facebook. Group members have also staffed information tables at recent events throughout town and they are starting to distribute flyers. The buzz words behind their mission include relationships (with growers and producers); local economy (providing job opportunities); education (through cultural activities to enhance health and community well-being); stewardship and sustainability.

For more information on Free Range Food Co-op, check out www.freerangefood.coop or email them at freerangefoodcoop@gmail.com.