

# Startup Co-op Conference Shares Resources

BY GEORGE HUNTINGTON AND DEBBIE TROCHA

Indiana Cooperative Development Center (ICDC), a nonprofit agency supported by funding from the USDA, and Bloomingfoods Market and Deli recently partnered to host “Up and Coming, Up and Running 2010,” a food co-op startup conference designed to provide strong support for those trying to get a food co-op started, and to assist those who anticipate opening soon or have recently opened their doors.

The genesis of the conference was simple: A large number of future cooperators were contacting ICDC and Bloomingfoods for help and advice in advancing their vision of the cooperative business model. At the annual co-op summit hosted by ICDC, a conversation began among Executive Director Debbie Trocha and Bloomingfoods General Manager George Huntington, Marketing and Outreach Manager Ellen Michel, and Prepared Foods Manager Alan Simmerman (who was catering the event on site). That led to the concept of consolidating the energy of helping future cooperators into an intensive (and affordable) two-day conference in Bloomington, Ind.

The conference sessions were designed with two primary educational tracks. The first, entitled “Laying the Foundation,” would answer that often heard refrain, “How do you start a food co-op?” It dealt with feasibility planning, member recruitment and loan drives, etc. The second track, “After the Paint Dries,” was designed to answer the question, “We got the doors open, now how do we run a grocery store?” Topics such as financial basics, inventory control, key indicators and systems, marketing on a budget, and managing fresh food departments (produce, deli) were covered. Both tracks are essential for establishing an effective retail food co-op. Both tracks were well attended.

Consultants from CDS Consulting Co-op as well as Bloomingfoods staff provided the expertise for the workshops. Bill Gessner assisted in the education of startups concerning feasibility planning, project budgets and timelines. Mel Braverman shared his knowledge of operational needs, from business planning to budgeting to developing effective systems. Art Sherwood shared knowledge with steering committee attendees on the art of cooperative governance. Sherwood discussed the changing roles for startup board members, who often must shift from a very hands-on development approach to one of creating policy and delegating to others, and then monitoring progress



A panel at the co-op startup conference included Stuart Reid, Bill Gessner, Debbie Turner, Mel Braverman, Francis Murphy and Brad Alstrom.

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while envisioning a “world we’d like to see.”

Others providing information to conference attendees included Bloomingfoods staff members. Ellen Michel collaborated with her counterpart Lisa Smith from Neighborhood Food Co-op in Carbondale, Ill., to lead a double-session workshop covering marketing on a budget and building your brand/delivering your message. Marketing and member services team members Jean Kautt and Steve Stroup led workshops on cultivating community partners and conducting member loan drives, respectively. Systems and Planning Coordinator Jenn Hileman reviewed project management. Sessions on managing fresh food departments were led by Food Service Coordinator Alan Simmerman and Produce Managers Jerome Gust and Ruth Ferree.

Others who practiced the principle of “cooperation among cooperatives” were Stuart Reid from Food Co-op 500, Francis Murphy (general manager of Neighborhood Food Co-op, Carbondale, Ill.), Brad Alstrom (general manager of Lost River

Market and Deli, Paoli, Ind.), and Debbie Turner, a Lost River board member—all of whom were participants in panel discussions on both days. Special thanks also go to the Howard Bowers Fund and the Cooperative Development Foundation for helping to underwrite the conference. Access to these funds allowed us to offer much-needed scholarship assistance, and is one of the reasons for the excellent attendance. And a Friday evening reception at a local eatery (FARM Bloomington) was sponsored and underwritten by regional produce distributor Indianapolis Fruit.

Attendees at the conference came from a four-state area: Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky and Ohio. Thirteen future or recently opened food co-ops were represented by almost 50 individuals. From Indiana the cities of Lafayette, Richmond, New Albany, Indianapolis, Terre Haute, Columbus, Paoli and South Bend were represented. From Kentucky, representatives from Smith’s Grove and Glasgow (as well as Professor Tim Woods from the University



Art Sherwood from CDS Consulting Co-op.



Ellen Michel, marketing and outreach manager of Bloomingfoods

of Kentucky in Lexington, working on a study identifying the strong link between food co-ops and vibrant local food networks). Illinois was represented by attendees from Chicago. From Ohio, the municipalities of Oxford and Troy had representatives in attendance. Lastly, a representative from the Mid-Atlantic Food Co-op Network was on hand to observe and potentially replicate the conference in an Eastern location.

The level of commitment and engagement was

strong at the conference. A common theme that emerged was the desire of many in attendance to bring the cooperative business model to their communities, while at the same time addressing the “food desert” scenario that has developed in many urban environments.

Attendees gave the conference high marks in evaluation. We hope that the model can be duplicated regionally, helping to support and grow our cooperative movement. Anyone interested? ■

## Food Co-op 500 Becomes Food Co-op Initiative

On March 25, 2010, the founding partners of Food Co-op 500 announced that the organization will move beyond its pilot phase and become a new nonprofit corporation. Food Co-op Initiative will receive principal support through a five-year grant totaling \$1 million from the Blooming Prairie Foundation and additional support through grants from other co-op businesses and foundations.

Food Co-op Initiative will use the new financial support and nonprofit status to provide broader services to the hundreds of volunteer groups working to bring improved access to food and other economic and social benefits to their communities. The Food Co-op 500 project was envisioned and brought to reality by the National Co-op Bank (NCB), Cooperative Development Services, CDS Consulting Co-op, and the National Cooperative Grocers Association, in response to the surging wave of interest in establishing new retail food co-ops. Over the last five years, the organization has built a reputation for its specialized technical resources, training and personal support to groups trying to form new food co-ops.

The founding partners of Food Co-op 500 will continue to provide resources and support to Food Co-op Initiative. “NCGA has a vital interest in the growth and development of the food co-op sector. We have a long history with Food Co-op 500, and we look forward to supporting the success of Food Co-op Initiative,” said Robynn Shrader, NCGA’s chief executive officer.

The Blooming Prairie Foundation supported these initial efforts with grants that were awarded to startup co-ops for organizing activities and feasibility research. According to Anya Firszt, chair of the Blooming Prairie Foundation, “We see this commitment to supporting new co-ops as an important legacy that the pioneers of the food co-op movement are leaving to the future generation. Our foundation was established through the financial success of Midwestern co-ops, and we believe Food Co-op Initiative will ensure that more communities can share that success well into the future.”

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