

Mapping project will aid co-op development efforts

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AS YOU READ through the 2016 Cooperative Month edition of *Rural Cooperatives*, it is apparent that it is an exciting time to be involved in cooperative development. Cooperative developers are helping communities gain access to broadband, healthcare, groceries, transportation and markets for produce. Increased interest in the cooperative model as a tool to address economic inequalities and build community wealth has catalyzed cooperative development initiatives in urban and rural communities alike.

The Need

Across the country, cooperative developers are at the heart of these transformative initiatives. Starting a cooperative is no easy task, and supporting cooperative start-ups is a labor of love that requires intense effort on the long, often winding, path from an initial idea to the launch of a new business.

Cooperative developers have found that sharing projects and best practices from their specific region or sector through CooperationWorks! and other peer groups is helpful. However, it is impossible to stay on top of all of the initiatives happening across the cooperative development landscape.

Or is it?

The University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives (UWCC) staff started asking that very question. How can we capture what is happening across the various sectors and geographic areas in cooperative development? What can we learn from these activities and how can we use this information to increase the number and effectiveness of cooperative development initiatives around the country?

With limited time and resources, cooperative and economic developers need tools to help them identify the most promising cooperative development opportunities.

The Project

UWCC received a four-year research and extension

grant for the “Collective Action in Rural Communities: Mapping Opportunities for Cooperative Conversion and Start-up” project. The Agriculture Food Research Initiative (AFRI), funded by the National Institute for Agriculture, will identify and analyze clusters of cooperative activity and create a suite of tools to help cooperative and economic developers identify the most promising opportunities for developing new cooperatives in their communities.

“Cooperative business activity varies widely across regions. We want to find out why cooperatives have been more successful in some areas and use that information to improve cooperative development performance on a national level,” says Anne Reynolds, executive director at UWCC.

The project is participatory and will engage stakeholders to create new tools to analyze community-level data to better understand and enhance



The Art and Science of Cooperative Development participants show why they love co-ops! Photo courtesy University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives

opportunities for cooperative entrepreneurship. By combining existing data sources with newly collected data, UWCC will map and create portraits of regional cooperative clusters. These “portraits” will also include descriptions of the cooperative development assets available regionally.

The first project activity is underway. UWCC recently surveyed cooperative development centers to collect data on cooperative start-ups and conversions that have occurred over the past five years. This information is critical to identifying clusters of cooperative activity and determining the environment that is conducive for cooperative development.

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Nebraska

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financial information shared by other rural store owners.

The marketing subcommittee kept people informed about the progress being made and planned community information meetings. It also planned the kick-off celebration to begin the process of encouraging member investment in the co-op and developed a marketing plan that will be needed if, and when, the store opens.

Co-op incorporates

The Stapleton Cooperative Market and Deli was incorporated in July 2016, and a membership drive was

launched Aug. 12. The drive began with a community-wide meeting and supper at the Stapleton Community Center. Attendees were introduced to the full plan for the cooperative store and told how it would work.

The new co-op board of directors shared an overview of the work that had been done to date. Hundreds of hours of volunteer labor went into creating a viable business plan for the co-op store. This plan shows that, with a very attainable level of member investment in the co-op and patronage by the community, a cooperative store can succeed in Stapleton.

The future of the co-op store is now in the hands of the community. Organizers hope to have secured the needed financial commitment from community members by mid-September. If so, they then will put the business plan into action. After this, a new store could be opened within a matter of months. ■

Mapping Project

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Advisory group assisting effort

The project is fortunate to have an advisory group made up of regional cooperative developers who will advise and assess our research activities. The advisory group is comprised of: Thomas Beckett, co-executive director, Carolina Common Enterprise; E. Kim Coontz, executive

director, California Center for Cooperative Development; Kevin Edberg, executive director, Cooperative Development Services; Noemi Giszpenc, executive director, Cooperative Development Institute; Melissa Hoover, executive director, Democracy at Work Institute; Jim Johnson, co-founder and certified peer advisor, Democracy at Work Network; John McNamara, cooperative development specialist, Northwest Cooperative Development Institute; Roy Messing, director, Ohio Employee Ownership Center; and Stuart Reid, executive director, Food Cooperative Initiative.

For more information about the project, contact Anne Reynolds at: anne.reynolds@wisc.edu. ■

Colorado

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taxi drivers.

After a rigorous and contentious regulatory proceeding, in June 2016 the Colorado Public Utilities Commission granted Green Taxi authority to operate 800 taxicabs throughout the Denver/Boulder metro area. The entire fleet of vehicles is driver-owned.

Green Taxi obtained regulatory approval and has launched its business exclusively by capital contributions from its dedicated driver-owners. Backed by a state-of-the-art digital dispatch backbone and an attractive website and mobile app, Green Taxi plans to compete with the incumbent taxicab operators and the newfound transportation network companies, Uber and Lyft.

At 800 member-owners, Green Taxi Cooperative is the

second-largest worker cooperative in the country, the largest taxicab cooperative in the country and the largest taxicab operator in the state of Colorado.

Co-op pursues sustainable crop production

Poudre Valley Community Farms is a multi-stakeholder farmland cooperative that owns and operates working farmland in proximity to a consumer market that values local, organic, and fresh produce throughout the year. PVCF plans to buy prime farmland in close proximity to a populous semi-urban region to prevent it from being developed into a gravel mine, or suburban oasis.

PVCF will enter into long-term leases with member-farmers who will grow for household consumer and institutional wholesale members to create and operate a sustainable local and organic agriculture ecosystem.

The cooperative business model is being discovered by people from vastly different industries around the country. Organizations such as CCD are dedicated to helping this business model flourish. ■