

Dear Olympia Co-op Board:

September 29, 2010

With great frustration, I write you the Board of the Olympia Food Co-op. I have been a member of the Co-op since 1990. For over two decades, I have shopped at the west side store for a significant amount of my family's food needs. Food for people and not for profit is wonderful goal and aspiration. This aspect along with the healthy options, alternatives, and information you normally provide the consumers—your membership--are quite welcome.

Until last month, following the action the Board made without consulting your membership.

This emotionally –charged decision has divided and galvanized the community of Co-op consumers and has made what was once a very easy, efficient, and even fun food and shopping endeavor, more difficult. And sad. Shopping for food has turned into a heart-wrenching experience when I enter the Co-op. It should not be this difficult, and the economic damage to other segments of the community has yet to be fully realized. My almost daily personal forays are now limited by approximately 2/3. My exchanges with Co-op staff are strained. I feel tense.

The Board's decision to not stock products from Israel was made without the due process of querying your membership. Your decision was made without the consensus –derived support from your staff. This “writing on the wall” exhibited by your very qualified professional staff who maintain a high level of integrity and professionalism should have been a warning salvo. Your Board decision was not being made with a full understanding of the consequences.

While I appreciate the facilitated forum you held in order to attempt to address issue(s), even that process was somewhat tainted. This forum could have been made moot if the Board had followed the appropriate process defined to achieve true consensus. That process may have guided the Board to another decision and course correction.

The political backlash the Co-op is experiencing is coming at a very inopportune time, particularly when the Co-op had considered expansions. A new location downtown could have proven to have been a very healthy economic direction to go in. Serving the public need, and access to healthy food and locally produced products are part of your charter.

I fear that possibility is now a foregone opportunity due to the uncertainty from the Board decision coming so soon on the heels of an economic recession which has affected us all.

While I try to assume the Board's intentions were guided by social justice, I do feel there was not the adequate process necessary to fully investigate what the results could be. How best was this end truly justified by the means the Board used to get there? This sitting Board has seen the damage done, and the strife placed upon your members.

I believe this sitting Board can resolve this issue. Rescind and recall the decision. The Board risks a recall, or at least certainly a turnover at the coming election in the near future. You can take the right step now and not pass this on to your successors. If you so choose, you can take the initiative and make this pro-active and correct decision. It may be seen by some as a sign of weakness. However, I believe others will say that you listened to your members. However, you have chosen, according to the website, to allow a committee be formed following the fall election. I believe this is a weak response, but the only one the Board would consent to, because the Board could not--or would not--consent to rescinding the earlier decision. Where is the reasoning?

If there is an issue of “saving face” you can help embrace the angst and energy being poured over this issue and focus on the positive and pro-active opportunities that can come with such a decision. There can be creative social opportunities in soliciting your membership--albeit late—in their views of the next step(s) in the process. Invite your members to express their thoughts. A few ideas such as: offering to rescind if you get 100 people to sign up for peace and reconciliation trainings; provide your members a chance to “tax” themselves for social justice forums; dedicate a portion of Co-op proceeds—again, with member inquiry and approval--to specific causes of empathy and understanding. Community action may then be directed in positive ways. Other options brought forth may help bring some healthy closure to this issue.

The Board made fairly specific and stringent demands before the Co-op would once again offer Israeli-made products for sale. With the recent announcement of talks between Israel and Palestine working through their differences, what an irony it would be if the principle players were actually resolving their issues, but the Co-op demands were still not met. Ironic indeed.

Think globally but act locally. It is hard to put into practice on every front. I think in this case the Board attempted to do that very thing, and in the end stirred up more angst and heartache than expected. Again, IF you had solicited your membership for our opinion in this decision, you may have been guided on the path you chose.

Unfortunately, we'll never know. Regrettably, for some of your vendors, particularly local produce growers and suppliers, they are suffering as well. These local providers may suffer as “collateral damage” as people shop elsewhere. I do not use that term lightly.

I am curious what the recent monthly revenue statements show. Are they what some members fear? Is the Co-op showing a loss of revenue for these past months? What are your future revenue projections? How many members have left the Co-op, asked for a remittance of membership fees, or just have quietly shopped elsewhere?

I started this letter over the summer and waited for the Board to do the right thing. I have not observed any change or any--what I think would be—an appropriate response from the Board to the membership. I do not understand why you cannot address this in a forum that is open and transparent to all members and that you answer inquiries. It troubling you will not do this.

I appreciate your consideration in this matter. I am cautiously optimistic you will make the right decision. (However, I am sure the decision made earlier this summer was also perceived to be the right decision). I sincerely hope you listen to the people that have supported the Co-op for years--a generation-plus--and that you as a Board decide what makes good sense as a food provider to the subsequent generations. I believe the Olympia Food Co-op is more likely to maintain a presence and be a fixture in the community if the Board takes the right action.

You may consider this part of the “growing pains” of a place that is more part of a community than a store. The community is healthy when its constituents are healthy. The Olympia Co-op's first duty is providing healthy and affordable food. It feeds our bodies, minds, and spirits.

I thank you and wish you take care through this process. Listen to your hearts, as well as those of the members you serve. Try not to take comments personally. They are directed to the process.

Sincerely,

Keith Dublanica