

## How suburban food co-ops are 'bearing fruit' after years of organizing



**Katlyn Smith**

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Kathy Nash used to shop at a locally owned grocery store in downstate Urbana.

It wasn't your standard supermarket. The Common Ground Food Co-op offered an alternative to big-box grocery store chains.

"It really changed the way I thought about how I put food on the table for my family," Nash said. "I was a young mother. I had two small children, and shopping there gave me the exposure to the importance of supporting local agriculture and local farmers."

Nash, her husband, Jerry, and their family moved to Lombard in 2009, expecting to find dozens of Chicago-area co-op stores stocked with locally

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"We complained about it for a few years but eventually decided to stop complaining and start doing something about it," Jerry Nash said.

The Nashes rolled up their sleeves and began organizing Prairie Food Co-op. It's taken more than a decade of methodical, persistent work, a series of fundraising campaigns and stacks of market studies. But the Prairie Food co-founders are closer than ever to opening a full-service grocery store.

If all goes well, the store could be serving customers by the end of the year, best-case scenario, Kathy Nash said.

"It's the closing of one chapter and the opening of the next, perhaps, more important chapter," she said. "People have to shop at the store for us to remain financially viable."

The Nashes are hardly alone in moving to the next chapter.

"There's this wave of Chicago food co-ops that will be opening in the next couple of years, which is going to significantly impact the local food infrastructure," Kathy Nash said.

Wild Onion Market is taking root in Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood. Chicago Market is in the works in Uptown. The Food Shed Co-op plans to break ground next month in a grocery store along Route 14 in Woodstock -- the first of its kind in McHenry County. Prairie Food Co-op has secured a space in a Lombard shopping center just west of an Ace Hardware.

The pace of store openings is unprecedented for the region, said JQ Hannah, the assistant director of the Food Co-op Initiative (<https://fci.coop/staff-board/>), a resource for startups.

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Co-op development tends to come in waves. The 1960s and '70s saw a "massive, absolutely massive, wave" of food co-op organizing, Hannah said.

"That was really all about organic food," she said. "That was about 'back to the land' kind of concepts and wanting healthier food, access to food that is without pesticides."

Co-op organizing slowed in the 1980s, but after the Great Recession, the trend reversed.

"We saw an explosion of interest, which is why Food Co-op Initiative was formed, and it has not slowed down since," Hannah said.

She traces the growth of Chicago-area co-ops to regional cooperation.

The Illinois Cooperative Development Center at Western Illinois University hosted the first food co-op startup day in 2009 to bring the state's existing co-ops together, make them aware of each other and encourage them to share knowledge, Hannah said. Founded in 1974, Common Ground hosted annual learning days from 2010 through 2014 to help nurture startup food co-ops in Illinois.

"There was just a lot of regional support, really encouraging people to develop co-ops in Illinois, and I think it was a very concerted, thoughtful effort between those two organizations, and it planted a lot of seeds that are now bearing fruit," Hannah said.

Still, it's "extremely difficult" to get a co-op off the ground. Co-op organizers are contending with lingering supply chain issues, and they're becoming more

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gone up 40 to 50% almost overnight," Hannah said.

Suburban groups also have labored under the misperception that co-ops cater only to the granola crowd.

"I think we've had to battle the image of maybe well-meaning hippies who just want to open our little bohemian space because that's what co-ops used to be in the '60s and '70s," Jerry Nash said.

Prairie Food seems to be winning that battle. The Lombard co-op now counts more than 1,700 owners. Each ownership share costs \$200 per household.

"It's a community that came together to build something that none of us individually could have done," Jerry Nash said. "And to me, that's the most inspiring part of this story."

Prairie Food puts the overall cost of opening the store, including staffing and equipment, at \$4.3 million. The co-op has received state and federal grants to help move the project forward.

"We have a source for all the funds that we need to open," Kathy Nash said.

## **How the model works**

Co-op owners will enjoy discounts and other perks when the store is up and running. But anyone can shop at a food co-op.

The layout of the Prairie Food store will look a lot like a conventional grocer's. Produce will be displayed near the entrance. There will be a meat department, a deli and a spirits section. But that's where the similarities end.

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"quite a few dairy farms," Kathy Nash said.

"They don't really have a lot of avenues to reach consumers on a year-round basis," she said. "We have farmers markets in the summer. That's weather dependent, of course, and it's a lot of work for farmers to get their products to the farmers market. This model just makes so much more sense."

Co-op organizers say the model -- local control, local ownership -- has become especially relevant after the pandemic brought on food supply issues.

"There are very few companies that control the entire food system," Hannah said. "And the most effective way to make a profit off the food system is to narrow down ingredients, to narrow down what is used, to only work with mega farms."

Food co-ops clearly define what "local" means. The Food Shed's goal is to source 25% of all of the store products within a 100-mile radius. The McHenry County co-op (<https://www.foodshed.coop/>) purchased land on Route 14 and Lakeshore Drive to build from the ground up. The shopping space will cover around 7,000 square feet.

"One of the things I personally am looking forward to is being able to go and shop in the bulk section, bring my own container in and not have to bring all this plastic home," said Sue Jensen, the co-op's outreach director. "We're really focused also on being sustainable and environmentally friendly with our store."

The Food Shed started from a desire to connect with local farmers and "tap into the local economy," Jensen said. The co-op was officially incorporated in 2014.

## 'High hopes'

After a downtown Lombard location didn't work out, Prairie Food found a spot for a 7,500-square-foot store in the Eastgate Shopping Center.

"If you look at all the things that contribute to a successful grocery store, our new place at Eastgate actually checks off more of the boxes," Jerry Nash said.

The site has more parking and more room for outdoor seating and events. Prairie Food organizers have been hosting educational workshops for over 10 years, even without a physical space of their own.

"They've won national awards from our conference and have been recognized for their work," Hannah said. "They've put together something really powerful. And it's great to see such powerful organizing happening in the suburbs, and we have really high hopes for them."

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