

COMMENTS OF RUSTY SIVILS TO FBFC BOARD, April 18, 2019

I greatly appreciated Veronika's bringing up the idea of implementing some version of the proposal to set aside 1% of gross sales to be given to local non-profit groups. To review, it would work in this wise: Every customer would be aware that 1% of their purchase would be used to support local non-profit groups. This would provide a substantial incentive for people to shop here, and feel good about doing so. The recipient groups would be nominated by Co-op members and chosen by a vote of members, and the money would be divided up among the nominated groups according to what percentage of the votes they had received. Thus would strengthen the institution of democratic governance here at the Co-op, and would give our owners/members a greater sense of ownership of the Co-op and of participation in it. This is needed because, how do they participate now? They shop, and some vote in the Board elections and very few come to the annual membership meeting. We don't have a worker-member program anymore that is economically beneficial to the Co-op. We are no longer a community of people working together for our mutual benefit. We need some form of participation, however small, that will give our members a sense of ownership of the Co-op, a sense of being a part of a mutual endeavor. And it would make membership in the Co-op more meaningful to our owners. This program would be worth its weight in gold in terms of public relations, in terms of the Co-op's reputation in the community. Even if we didn't care about being "a transformative force in our community and in our world" as our vision statement says, this program would make sense as a marketing strategy alone.

It would be a mistake to water down this idea in any way, for instance by making it less than 1% of gross sales, or by making it some percentage of profit. The customers would need to know that the program was substantial and reliable, not just window dressing like Walmart's giving program.

Bobby has expressed support of the idea, and could adopt this program on his own, or the Board could adopt it, but I would far prefer that the decision be made by the owners themselves, through a ballot question. This would strengthen democratic governance at the Co-op by allowing the owners to make an actual decision (which has not happened in twelve years—The second of the International Cooperative Principles does say that a cooperative shall be governed by its members who will make its decisions and set its policies through a democratic process), and if they voted in favor of adopting the program it would then already have a lot of buy-in by our members from the beginning, rather than being something that was handed down to them out of nowhere. The Board could put such a ballot question on the ballot for this year's annual membership meeting.

How much would this program cost us? Less than our members pay each year to renew their shares. It has often been pointed out that we already give away about 1% of our gross sales, and that's good, especially for the staff who authorize these gifts, but the members are once again left out of the loop. If they decided which groups we supported, it would not be exercising democratic control of the Co-op, but it might be a step in that direction.

A few years ago the Board assigned one member the task of looking to see if any other co-ops were doing this. She found that none were, and that was the end of the discussion. The Board was not willing to consider something that no one else was doing. I hope we are in a different place now, and would see this as a way of implementing our vision statement, especially because no one else was doing it. I would love to see the complete program adopted by a vote of the members, but any steps in that direction would be good. Please call me with any comments or questions at 242-6073.

