

I ran into Paul Gallimore recently who expressed his frustration at the Co-op's unconcern with effective recycling, composting, or other ways of being a model for addressing this society's dire predicaments, and his frustration at failing to find anyone on the Board who cared about these things. I felt similar frustrations during the seven years I was on the Board, and in all the years since. He complained that he was not able to discern the political orientation of any members of the Board—I responded that they had no political orientation—not in terms of saving the earth or defending the last remnants of democracy on our society, or in our cooperative. I have asked this board before, why are you here? To advance the cooperative movement? Apparently not. To uphold the principle of democratic governance at the Co-op? Apparently just the opposite, since the membership has not been given the opportunity to make any decisions other than electing board members or voting on bylaws changes since 2007, and the decisions made then were ignored by the Board. To foster a community of people working together to create a real alternative to the capitalist economy? Apparently not. Do you think that in your anxiety to expand the Co-op and make it succeed economically that you can, at some point in the future, address some of this society's real needs? I will suggest that if this Co-op does not set itself the task of addressing the ills of this society it may succeed economically, but will fail morally and will betray the ideals and principles of what the cooperative movement is supposed to be and once was. Co-ops are falling into being just pale, precious miniatures of their corporate big brothers, obsessed with the bottom line and too busy in pursuit of growth to be concerned with democracy or the empowerment of citizens of our society or of our cooperative.

But why are we in such fervent pursuit of growth? To have a bigger jobs program? A bigger building? It is not, evidently, to build the cooperative movement or the cooperative ideal, since this establishment is not any longer a cooperative in any meaningful sense—It is not calling up the higher natures of its members to address the crises facing this country or this city; it is not challenging the conscience of its membership on any issue or enlisting its support in any worthy cause. I will suggest that this co-op has devolved into being a jobs program and nothing more. Our existence as a cooperative is just as illusory as our democratic governance. Things look fine on the surface, if all we expect is a successful business, but this business is no more a cooperative and no more a nexus of democracy or community than Sam's Club is. And how have we come to this pass? Is it an inevitable result of Asheville having become the Sedona of the East, with a lot of affluent patrons who want to think themselves high minded and principled but who are too busy to be worker-members or even to come to an annual membership meeting? When this country becomes a blatant fascist state, will our members lament, "How could this have happened when I was shopping at the Co-op all this time?" And what can we do, even in some small way, to address this situation? I will suggest again that our members yearn for some avenue of responding in concrete, not symbolic, terms, to the real problems of this society, and that for us as a community to decide to set aside 1% of our gross sales to be awarded to local non-profit groups doing important work in the city, and for those groups to be chosen by our members through a democratic process, would do more than anything else to rally the enthusiastic support of our members and other customers and to distinguish us from all the other businesses in this city. Our members and customers want something meaningful to support. If we offer it to them they will support it and us. Such a program would not make us a genuine cooperative but it would be a step in that direction. Our members using a democratic process to select the recipient groups would not be real democratic governance of the co-op, but it would be a step in that direction. And it would be more effective public relations than a hundred full page newspaper ads. I welcome any comments or questions at 242-6073.