

# Looking Forward To A Local Food Co-op

## Green Monadnock

with Richard Popovic



When I am asked why I chose to settle in the Monadnock Region, the answers are plentiful: the small towns, the local farms, and the natural beauty are a good place to start. Add in friendly people, a sense of community, and a vibrant local culture and what more could a person want? We have it all. All, except for one glaring omission: a food co-op.

Food co-ops (short for cooperative) are stores that are collectively owned by members of the community. A membership fee gets you a discount on the products and a say in how the co-op is structured and run. Sometimes the fee can be supplemented or replaced by working a number of hours per month at the co-op. Co-ops tend to specialize in local, organic, and natural foods, as well as bulk items, but it was not always this way.

The origins of the modern food co-op can be traced back to Rochdale, England. In 1843, a group of textile workers pooled their resources to start a cooperatively owned food store as an alternative to the expensive and often exploitive company store. They developed the Seven Cooperative Principles to guide them on their venture. Instead of focusing solely on profit, these

principles stressed open membership, democratic control, education, community, and (of course) cooperation. These principles are the guiding force behind co-ops to this day.

So why hasn't a co-op emerged in our region? Probably because the world is full of people like me, who idly wonder why we are lacking something but don't do much to provide a solution. Luckily, there are a few Bonnie Hudspeths and Amanda Costellos in our midst. Bonnie and Amanda are members of Monadnock Farm and Community Connections, a group that falls under the umbrella of the Cheshire County Conservation District. Their goal is to increase public knowledge about the value of local agriculture while supporting the farmers of the region. An offshoot of MFCC has formed to get the co-op ball rolling and has made some serious progress. They have conducted a grant-funded feasibility study, interviewed five area food co-ops and are busy completing a business plan. The group meets once a month at the Hannah Grimes Center in Keene. I recently chatted with Bonnie via a dicey cell phone connection:

**Green Monadnock:** Why does the Monadnock Region need a food co-op?

**Bonnie Hudspeth:** We need a co-op to connect producers and consumers on a local level, and so we can become more self-sustaining as a community.

**GM:** Why do you think there isn't a co-op here already?

**BH:** There was a very informal co-op in Keene some time back, but it faded away. It's much tougher to start a business now than back in the 70s, which is when many of the food co-ops that exist today were formed. Now you need marketing studies and business plans...

**GM:** It's not just some neighbors splitting up big bags of brown rice in their garage deciding to create a food store.

**BH:** Exactly.

**GM:** How has the response been from the community?

**BH:** Overwhelmingly positive.

**GM:** What is the one distilled fact you want people to know about food co-ops?

**BH:** A co-op is designed to serve the community, is member and community owned and operated, and how it ultimately looks and works is decided by the members themselves.

**GM:** Who can someone talk to if they want more info?

**BH:** Me! Send me an e-mail at Bonnie\_Hudspeth@antiochne.edu.

*Richard Popovic is a musician and freelance writer who lives in Nelson in an efficient little house he built in 2007 where he spends most of his time attempting to convert run-on sentences into a viable source of clean energy.*

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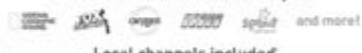
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