Recipe for Recovery

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It's a strip of solid buildings carved hollow by industry that blew away: Main Street in Gloversville is gray. It is populated by stores selling things that need new lives, like used clothes and jewelry, old photos and rusty saws. But one large storefront contrasts with the rest, like fall colors exploding on the sidewalk. Mohawk Harvest Cooperative Market spills orange pumpkins and deep red mums onto the sidewalk, luring shoppers inside for coffee, art and groceries.

"This variety was developed for the soup-processing industry," Mohawk Harvest manager Chris Curro explains, patting the large butternut squash that cost $3 each. The seeds that grew these squash were bred to think and be big, which seems an apt theme for this food cooperative, which began in July 2009 in a small shop across the street. In less than two years, the coop outgrew its 800 square feet and moved to a large open space that is part grocery store, art gallery, and deli with café. The cooperative art gallery, Micropolis, rents a whole back corner of the new store, and a café rents part of the front.

The turkey Rueben with red sauerkraut is worth a trip, and, eating it, you get a sense of this place. The woman at the table beside you commends the sandwich, too, and orders a second to take home for dinner. The woman who makes the sandwiches makes sure that this is what the customer wants, and writes a ticket on a scrap of paper she hands to the coop's cashier.

The place's story is one of community and reinvention. Planning board members, drawn from a wide range of people in the community, first met in 2008 and thought hard about what kind of coop they wanted, and where it should be. They looked at coops in Albany, Little Falls, Fort Plain and Chatham. They saw what worked and what didn't work, and many coops

shared their experiences, bylaws and financial information. The group studied recommendations from the National Cooperative Grocers Association and other resources. They worked to make something that fit the scale of the community, and could belong to more people than those who already know and want this kind of food.

Through surveys, the store got to know its potential clientele before it opened its doors, and continues to seek and use feedback to inform what they stock and how they run.

“We needed to fill a vacuum,” Curro says of the ideas that started the store. “Food desert is a cliché, but there is a gap.” That gap is in getting foods, especially local and natural foods, downtown. Having a store serves farmers, producers and consumers by providing a place for local transactions to take place on a daily basis, not just during the weekly farmers market.

Another goal of the grocery is to be an alternative shopping place for EBT—the money formerly known as food stamps. Last holiday season, the store gave an extra 10-percent discount to all EBT purchases in November and December. This will happen this year, too.

The Department of Social Services is one place the coop does outreach for customers who use EBT. It is also where the coop has found three of its eight staff members, who initially came to Mohawk Harvest through the DSS work requirement. They were such a good fit that they became paid workers.

“One of the reasons we don’t require member hours is to create jobs,” Curro says, referring to the different ways coops use members. Some offer discounts to members based on work requirements. Another membership benefit can be a rebate at the end of the year, based on the coop profits.

Even without the work requirement, members log about 200 volunteer hours a month because they like to be involved in the store.

The economic mission of Mohawk Harvest is not focused on employment. The coop sees itself as part of a community agricultural network, something that can encourage sustainable farm practices by monetarily supporting them.

“I believe in giving a good price to producers,” says Curro. He buys the produce himself, in summer going twice weekly to the Mohawk Valley Produce Auction as part of a circuit that hits six farms. The investment is not just in fresh fruits and vegetables, however. “We wanted to give value-added producers an outlet for their talents, and boy did we tap into them.”

Touring the store, Curro points to local cheeses, meats, maple syrup, honey, North Creek chocolates, Buddhapesto, spices from Frontier, miso from Western Massachusetts, pancake mixes, Once Again nut butters. Curro roasts coffee onsite. Founding members make maple products and soap, and farmers have joined the coop, he says, after realizing the coop is part and parcel to their own missions. Shelves are filled with condiments and jams made very nearby, as well as flours milled and/or grown in New York state.

Curro, a native of Madison, Wis. (aka coop central), and a trained economist, knows that the store has a life and power beyond its front door. Hence the outreach efforts, and outreach to other potential markets for farmers.

At the end of September, the third Harvest Dinner paired local chefs with local produce, and raised money for local food pantries. Throughout the year, Curro works with restaurants to make them aware of the foods that are available locally. Mohawk Harvest is partnering now with the hospital

and other institutions on a project to help get local produce to these populations.

If farmers can sell more produce, says Curro, the coop can offer produce at a better price, too.

An ability to see the full circle of food eaters and makers has been a hallmark of this coop's growth. Crystal Stewart, vegetable specialist with Cornell Cooperative Extension, sat on the board as the coop formed and grew. Her knowledge was instrumental in making farmer connections, and continues to be relevant. Stewart and others put together a guide to starting a locally scaled, local foods cooperative. This manual is available online.