

Co-op campaign worth continuing

Members should shed lease, regroup and start smaller

November 02, 2007 6:00 AM

What a frustrating fall for the people pushing to open a Medford food co-op.

They were supposed to be shopping the aisles of a store filled with organic produce by now. Instead, organizers got to break the news to the 1,500 people who bought memberships in the Medford Market that it very likely is about to fall apart.

They announced last week that they were considering dissolution, and this week members voted to end the organization within weeks unless they can find a way to grasp enough straws to keep it going.

Some efforts like this have failure written all over them. But we think those straws are worth grasping in the co-op's case.

There's potential here, and it's not just that Medford could stop giving its co-op business to Ashland.

The big potential in this effort is in the community momentum that formed around it. Organizers raised \$200,000 in a relatively short period of time and with a fairly low-key fundraising campaign. They got 1,500 people interested enough that they paid at least \$100 each (and in some cases, much more) for memberships.

They got people so excited, in fact, that even as the group is failing, some members have launched an effort to hold it together.

We don't think the real issues here are that, as some say, Medford doesn't have the money or the demographics to support a co-op.

There are signs now that the group's leaders had enthusiasm but not the experience or support to take the group in the direction most likely to bring a co-op to Medford.

Most new co-ops start small, but this one began backing itself into a corner when the group signed a lease on and began an expensive renovation of the historic two-story Hubbard's Hardware structure downtown.

It looked likely this week that the group might be able to get out of the Hubbard's lease, a step that would allow it to continue as an organization.

If it does, board elections are set this month. At that point, there would be little reason co-op fans couldn't regroup and start over again, this time with a little cautionary experience and without the deadline created by the building lease.

There's frustration here, to be sure, but all sorts of potential, too. We hope co-op backers find a way to use it positively and eventually to bring a co-op market to Medford.