

Caledonia Food Coop Lands Another Grant; Membership Grows

Fledgling Food Coop Seeing Strong Support, Praise For Effort To Date

Amy Ash Nixon nixona@caledonian-record.com Staff Writer Nov 19, 2021

ST. JOHNSBURY — With a growing local membership and corps of volunteers, a new food cooperative in St. Johnsbury is getting closer to becoming a reality.

The Caledonia Food Co-op effort recently was the recipient of its third grant through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the group announced.

The \$70,000 Rural Business Development Grant grant opportunity comes with a matching requirement of \$31,450 in Co-op funds along with in-kind contributions, the volunteer board of directors said.

In an interview this week, members of the board, including local farmer Eric Skovsted, who operates Joe's Brook Farm in Barnet with his wife, Mary, said the most recent grant will be used to assist the nonprofit organization with site development, financing and member recruitment costs.

The Caledonia Food Co-op is received support from the Town of St. Johnsbury, the Northern Community Investment Corporation (NCIC), and the Northeastern Vermont Development Association (NVDA) Skovsted said. "It doesn't feel like we're trying to do this by ourselves, local development organizations, the Town of St. Johnsbury, the St. Johnsbury Development Fund,

NCIC, NVDA, the national partnerships for food co-ops ... neighboring food co-ops, we have regional partnerships with other co-ops ... we're not doing it alone, that's for sure."

To date, the co-op has 618 members. Those founding members have paid membership dues of \$100 per family/household, which is a lifetime membership. Founding memberships of \$100 also come with one vote at the annual meeting to choose Co-op Board members, the group said.

Growing the membership is critical for the group to get off the ground, the members said this week.

Memberships A Priority

"Every member is an owner, every owner has a voice," said Margaret Healey, Board Treasurer "That's 618 voices, which is truly incredible."

The timeline the group is following is typical for creating a community food co-op, the volunteers said this week. Four to six years is a common period of time said Skovsted, during which time "a lot of heavy lifting by volunteers and community leaders" takes place, as it is with the effort in St. Johnsbury.



“A lot of the goal is really determined by what sort of capital we end up needing to build the store,” Skovsted said. “Different co-ops have set different membership goals based on what they think they need in terms of a membership base to execute a member loan campaign as a leg of the stool of a financing package that will lead to construction. Some co-ops have put that number at 2,000; we’ve always had a goal of getting close to 1,000 members ... somewhere about that number feels about right for this community and for this project.”

Skovsted in the first few years of the co-op, it’s expected that number would

double, then triple, and quadruple “that would be a pretty common trajectory for a new co-op,” he explained.

Skovsted said this week the Co-op has been the recipient of three grants over its 2 1/2 year history.

Part of the grant dollars invested in recent months to get the message of the soon-to-be-coop heard by a wider audience included Caledonia Food Co-op swag, including T-shirts and even dog bandanas, distributed at a membership drive at one of the summertime concerts at Dog Mountain. Recruiting new member-owners is a major thrust of the group’s focus.