

Caledonia Food Co-op looking at sites in St. Johnsbury

By Justin Tremblay
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Eric Skovsted, board chair of the Caledonia Food Co-op, speaks about the effort to a crowd in late 2019. Provided photo.

ST. JOHNSBURY — A planned food co-operative is more than halfway toward signing on enough members to move toward opening.

The Caledonia Food Co-op has just over 415 members — co-owners of the proposed grocery store — and is looking for locations to build around downtown St. Johnsbury.

"We're really impressed with the enthusiasm and the support that we've seen from our membership to date," said Eric Skovsted, chair of the co-op's seven-member board.

The effort began two years ago, among a group of area residents wanting to emulate a model embedded in communities across Vermont. St. Johnsbury has no food co-op; the nearest in the state are in Hardwick and Plainfield.

That's left a niche to fill, the group believes.

"People want a store, a marketplace, that they own and that ... gives market access indiscriminately to producers, to artisans, to vendors who are generating quality products but who may not be able to access the marketplace that traditional grocery stores provide," said Skovsted, co-owner of an organic farm in St. Johnsbury.

He said there's a particular need in the area for prepared food — grab-and-go options — which will be a focus of the co-op once it opens.

In 2019, the co-op group received a \$22,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to work on a feasibility study. And last August, the group received another \$50,300 from the federal agency to help find a site and to boost its membership.

Skovsted said the group figures it needs about 800 founding members to have the best financial shot at opening as planned. Most food co-ops take between three and five years from conception to open, he said, and the one proposed for St. Johnsbury is on that track.

Each of the membership stakes runs for \$100.

"This year, a site needs to come together," the board chair said. "We're definitely at a point in terms of membership where we have enough members and enough equity to really go after a site."

He said the board is looking at several sites within a mile or two of downtown.

Jake Claro, director of the Farm to Plate program of the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, said food co-ops have solidified their place as "institutions for local food" around the state.

When local producers haven't been able to get their food on the shelves of large, traditional grocery stores, food co-ops have given them space to sell, Claro said.

"From that perspective, they've been really critical partners and institutions for developing the local food economy," he said.

According to 2017 data from his state-established nonprofit — the most recent figures available — sales at food co-ops totaled \$4.2 million out of the \$310 million spent on local food, or close to 15%. The organization collected that data from grocery stores, direct-to-consumer venues, restaurants, higher education, K-12 school, hospitals, bars and breweries.

Particularly in rural areas, he said, food co-ops offer the appeal of local ownership and a say in direct dollars back into a community.

Joe Kasprzak, assistant St. Johnsbury town manager, is especially enthused about the potential economic benefit a food co-op could bring to town.

"Not only will it be a healthy food stream for our residents, but it's a significant job creation project," Kasprzak said. "We're talking about 35 to 40 direct jobs, which is a big boost for our local economy."

He believes a food co-op would also bring in people from outside town to shop.

The town has been an active partner in the project, acting as the fiscal agent for the co-op's federal grants.

Skovsted, the board chair, said the group is looking for a building with about 12,000 square feet of space and 60 to 70 parking spots.

"That's the crux of the site search," he said.