

Dear members and neighbors,

On behalf of the Board of Directors for the Riverwest Co-Op Grocery & Café, I am writing to give a vital update on the state of our beloved cooperative. 2020 has been a wild, and precarious, ride for businesses throughout our city and beyond. Finances have been difficult for many of us, but there are also immense stressors and tensions with COVID, as well as the necessary response to systemic racial and social injustices.

### **Our History**

In early 2001, the Co-op was all hope and a dream. People came together to start a new food cooperative in Riverwest. “Coming Together” would be an apt theme for the time. With much hard work and funds from members and friends, the store began to make a profit; we were able to hire employees, and later open the café – in good years affording us to share profits with our workers. We continued to maintain a strong and passionate base of volunteers who kept us in touch with the community. 2020 is a lot different than 2001; coming together is much more difficult now with social distancing, masks, Zoom meetings, and a halt to our in-person volunteers.

### **A Look Back at 2019**

Before we get too far ahead, I want to back-track a bit to 2019 and the challenges we were beginning to overcome. With an ever-changing market, coupled with staff turnover and some dated internal practices, 2019 was our 3<sup>rd</sup> year with a loss and our financial position was increasingly jeopardized. The Workers’ Collective and Board put an immense amount of time and energy into thinking of creative solutions to help us meet our bottom line. With the additional help of a consultant, we gathered data and thought critically about what improvements we could invest in to make our business model sustainable. We planned to roll out our REFRESH during the second week of March, 2020, which would create more seating and a better layout of the store space, expand our bulk offerings to cut back on single-use plastic, and update our selection and pricing of products. We all know what happened next.

### **Actions Taken and Challenges Ahead**

With the help of some government and grant funding, we have been able to keep our operations pretty consistent in the store. With those funds exhausted, we are hoping for another grant to come through, along with increased sales. We are absolutely committed to the health and safety of our community and staff, so we have had to really dial back our café offerings. Even in the face of economic hardships, we have chosen to continue to provide hazard pay to all of our employees; this decision was both to incentivize productivity in the face of a potentially dangerous and stressful work environment, and also to uphold our values- striving for wages that are sustainable for survival. We have also continued to invest in equipment to keep operations running smoothly and avoid any safety hazards.

In light of recent turnover in management and on the board, we are looking closely at our internal structure and striving to be as transparent and communicative as possible. We also acknowledge that our strength comes from our connection with membership, and we don’t want you to feel left in the dark. We will be seeking out questions about everything that went on in 2019 (please see our 2019 Annual Report), as well as our current state of affairs. We will be recording a video to address these questions, and releasing it before

the end of the year. Stay tuned! Furthermore, we are still looking for dedicated members to fill two positions on the Board. If you have any interest in hearing more about these roles, please contact me at [dspowers266@gmail.com](mailto:dspowers266@gmail.com).

**In Sum, We Need Your Support!**

Finally, I want to be clear: we could use all the support we can get at this time, but we are not looking for a bail out. We are in a position where we can continue to provide service to the community for a period, but in determining to what extent, we will need to make tough decisions as the state of our country continues to unfold. Next time you are planning a shopping trip, have a hunger for some delicious vegan/vegetarian grab-and-go grub, or a hankering for a little treat while you process the insanity around us, please keep us in mind. Your Co-op needs you!

Sincerest wishes for health and sanity. Let us come together in love.

On behalf of the board,

Debbie Powers

Riverwest Co-Op Grocery & Café Board President