

Residents eye grocery co-op for downtown Hudson

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Living near Hudson's downtown has its conveniences, but there's one thing the area is sorely lacking, a group of residents say.

A grocery store.

"We walk to the library, we walk to get ice cream, we walk to go out to eat, but you can't walk to get milk and veggies," said Bridget O'Meara, whose daughter is a first-grader at Willow River Elementary School in Hudson.

She and other Willow River parents have been meeting recently to talk about establishing a cooperative grocery store downtown that would focus on local, sustainable and organic foods.

They're committed to making it happen, O'Meara said, and are working with students at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls this semester to create a business plan.

"There's a lot of enthusiasm right now and people saying 'Yes, we're going to do this,' " O'Meara said. "It would be a tremendous value."

The group has yet to decide where and how big the co-op would be or what services and products it would provide. O'Meara said there is talk about including a commercial kitchen, a deli and space to teach classes. There's also interest in partnering with a coffee shop or bakery.

She said it's unlikely a co-op in Hudson could do all those things, so the group is surveying residents to see what they want most.

One of the focuses of the community-owned business would be to offer foods people can't buy at any of the city's three grocery stores, which are all about two miles from downtown.

"A lot of times, I'll say 'I wish they had this organic' or 'I wish they had this (locally sourced),' " said Alexandra Stoehr, a member of the co-op planning group.

Stoehr said she hopes the co-op will partner with local farmers.

"There's definitely a farm-to-consumer market out there, where people are willing to pay the money to know where their food comes from," she said. "There are plenty of farms around, too, to keep our shelves stocked."

And local restaurants could also be brought into the project, Stoehr said.

"One of our hopes...is that we forge partnerships with our local and independent eateries so that we have greater buying power for the organic, fresh, natural, local products," she said. "And it helps the farmer, too, because we'd be able to give them a bigger order rather than a few things here and there."

OTHER CO-OPS THRIVING

In nearby River Falls, sales have been growing as people learn more about local and sustainably grown foods, said Erynn Delahousaye, general manager at the Whole Earth Grocery co-op.

Many customers there are adding another factor when choosing food, she said.

"I have to say that over the past seven or eight years, 'organic' has become highly publicized and a bit commoditized," she said. "I think people are looking beyond that for a really authentic product that also makes environmental sense."

The River Falls store has about 1,400 members, Delahousaye said, and about 75 percent of its shoppers live in River Falls.

"But we have people coming from Baldwin, Ellsworth, Hudson," she said. "Those percentages are small, but they are still a presence."

Mead Stone, general manager at River Market Community Co-op in Stillwater, said people come from "deep into Wisconsin" to shop at his store.

A big part of what draws people to the Stillwater co-op, which started in 1978, is its focus on locally produced products, Stone said.

"They would much prefer a nonorganic local produce item, for example, than an organic item that was shipped a thousand miles to get here," he said, adding that people are also attracted to the alternative business model of a co-op.

Co-op stores traditionally work by selling memberships to customers, who then own a share of the business. Members may then receive discounts as well as potential profits if the co-op makes money.

Membership in the River Falls and Stillwater co-ops is \$80.

SURGE IN CO-OPS

When a Hudson co-op could open is unknown.

"This process can be somewhat time-consuming," said Stuart Reid, executive director of the Food Co-op Initiative, which helps groups establish co-ops around the country. "It is unusual for co-ops to put it together in less than two years. It's not unusual for it to go more than five (years)."

Reid, of Dennison, Minn., said his group has been in contact with hundreds of communities interested in starting co-ops.

Co-ops surged in the 1970s and '80s, and another surge is happening now, he said. About 50 have opened since his group started six years ago, and there are about 350 retail co-ops around the country, Reid said.

"Support for the local economy as well as access to locally produced foods from people you know and trust - I think that's really driving a lot of it," he said.

"Co-ops are surprisingly strong economic development opportunities for communities," he said. "I think more and more communities are starting to realize that as they see how successful some of the earlier co-ops are becoming."

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ONLINE

People interested in a Hudson co-op can fill out an [online survey](#). To get involved in the planning, email Bridget O'Meara at bridget_o_meara@hotmail.com.