



Food Front, the co-op grocery store, has brought in a national team of advisors to help bolster business. (Photo courtesy of Yelp)

Local grocery co-op seeks national advice to bolster business

By Janet Goetze
The Southwest Portland Post

Food Front, the co-op grocery store facing financial declines and employee complaints, has called in national consultants to help bolster its business in both Northwest Portland and the Hillsdale Town Center.

Managers asked the National Co-op Grocers, formed more than 15 years ago by cooperatives, to send in a development advisor and an assessment team that has spent more than three weeks in Portland.

Peg Nolan will be in Portland for four to six months as a development advisor from a subsidiary of the national grocers' group. The subsidiary expects to continue advising Food Front over the next two years, said C.E. Pugh, chief operating officer of National Co-op Grocers.

"What you are experiencing, most of the country is experiencing right now," Pugh told a co-op members' meeting Jan. 22 at Friendly House, a community service center about four blocks from Food Front at 2375 NW Thurman Street. The Hillsdale store is at 8344 SW Capitol Highway.

When Food Front started in 1972, it joined other cooperatives in offering local produce, meats and other products generally unavailable in other outlets, Pugh said. By the time the Hillsdale store opened in 2008, several non-member grocers, such as Wild Oats and New Seasons, were offering organic and locally grown foods.

The big chains, including Costco and Kroger, which is Fred Meyer in this region, now have well-managed organic sections and local foods, Pugh said.

"This is where the real challenge is for us," he said, noting the big stores have about a 40 percent share of the natural and organic foods market.

Co-op members have led the way for growing numbers of people across the country to seek fresh, seasonal, organic foods, Pugh said, and other stores are following that demand.

"We live in a wellness culture," he said.

By spring, New Seasons plans to open a 28,000-square-foot grocery at Northwest 21st Avenue and Raleigh Street, only a few blocks from Food Front. Pugh and Holly Jarvis, Food Front's general manager, said they expect the new store to dampen the co-op's business but they believe it can bounce back with careful planning.

Pugh said a survey revealed employee complaints about poor communication, lack of accountability, and fear of reprisal, but those issues can be solved with improved leadership and a clear outline of goals and expectations.

Employee turnover can be reduced at the Hillsdale store, he said, but other problems remain.

"People want to shop there, but we make it too hard for them," Pugh said. For instance, hamburger recently was on sale, but the store didn't have any buns in stock. That means shoppers will go to another store for buns, he said, and they may decide that's more convenient than being disappointed at Food Front.

Other steps the outside team is advising: a hiring freeze to minimize layoffs after New Seasons opens; reduced administrative costs; pulling back on benefits that are higher than industry average and working toward higher pay, instead.

Tryon-Stephens Headwaters

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street improvements for residential streets in combination with stormwater plans.

"These have all been identified in the Stephens Creek Stormwater System Plan," Igarta said. "It's all on the city's Web site."

Introducing new street improvements in this part of the city requires addressing critical stormwater issues.

It will analyze a set of improvement options by integrating street improvements with stormwater solutions. Finally, the plan will identify primary active transportation networks within the study area.

"Portland's bureaus of transportation and environmental services will coordinate our investments," Igarta concluded.

The Community Involvement Plan is

the guiding document for conducting community outreach, soliciting citizen participation, and gathering input into the development of the Tryon-Stephens Headwaters Neighborhood Street Plan. The two bureaus will develop the plan by next June.

The project is partially funded by a grant from the Transportation and Growth Management program, a joint initiative of the Oregon Department of Transportation and the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development.

At press time, an open house soliciting community input was scheduled to be held Jan. 26 at the Stephen's Creek Crossing housing development. For the results of that gathering, as well as other information about this plan, please contact Denver Igarta at (503) 823-1088 or denver.igarta@portlandoregon.gov.

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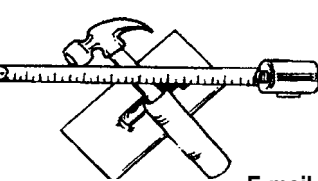
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