

Cooperative Grocer



**Improving Access and Service
Willy Steet Co-op
Cultures of Cooperative Service
Education at Saint Mary's University**

Fresh Opportunities to Nourish Our Community: Willy Street Co-op Improves Access

BY KIRSTEN MOORE

In 2016, Willy Street Co-op invited our owners and broader community to consider our opening Willy North, Willy Street Co-op’s third location in the Madison, Wisconsin area. This planned new location would open three months after a family-owned grocery closed its doors and would keep Madison’s north side from becoming underserved.

Our second store, Willy West, was thriving, as was the co-op’s production kitchen; and our original store, Willy East, had benefited from a complete remodel. Opening North was one of several fresh opportunities to meet our co-op’s ends: to “be at the forefront of a cooperative and just society that has a robust economy built around equitable relationships; nourishes and enriches our community and environment; and has a culture of respect, generosity, and authenticity.”

Community connections

Our community spoke, sending us over 400 emails and letters about opening Willy North. About 90 percent of them provided positive feedback, telling us what our owners and other potential customers wanted in their new neighborhood store. A real excitement and energy buzzed throughout the community about our coming to the north side, and that excitement propelled our work throughout the winter, spring, and summer of 2016.

Willy Street Co-op owners had strongly backed this direction through a prior referendum that showed strong support for expansion, and they helped finance Willy North through \$1.5 million in owner bonds, making up about 54 percent of our total \$2.8 million project budget.

Within the voices in our community, themes emerged. Many north side customers wanted more than local, organic, and natural foods; if we were to open this store successfully and provide an inclusive and one-stop shopping experience that met our new neighbor’s needs, more lower-cost, conventional products were a necessity. These local residents wanted us to continue to accept the U.S. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) payments, and to start participating in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. They also strongly

Willy Street Co-op • Madison, Wisconsin

Fiscal year 2017 figures

Total active owners	34,753
Total new owners	4,543
Total sales	\$49,011,383
North opening	Aug 15, 2016
Cost to open North	\$2.8M
Owner bonds to finance North	\$1.5M
East retail square feet	9,400
West retail square feet	9,600
North retail square feet	19,500
Off-site kitchen square feet	4,000



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WILLY STREET CO-OP

encouraged us to promote our Access Discount Program (which offers 10 percent off grocery prices to owners with low income), to expand opportunities for shoppers with low income, and develop a way for owners with more economic means to contribute to resources for shoppers experiencing food insecurity. As an established grocery co-op with a strong brand focused on local, natural, and organic foods, our work was cut out for us, and our resolve to deliver a store for the entire community was strong.

Supplemental nutrition programming

Even before Willy North was on the radar, expanding food security programs was a co-op priority. In late 2015, Second Harvest Food Bank of Southern Wisconsin started providing in-store SNAP information and registration sessions at our Willy East and Willy West stores. Once per month, a SNAP specialist is on site to take interested customers through SNAP eligibility requirements and registration if deemed eligible.

In the first year at the co-op, Second Harvest completed 35 SNAP applications and renewals, and it received 10 referrals connecting clients to their services through their SNAP helpline. Second Harvest claims that these 35 applications will generate \$93,860 in local economic activity, which translates to more than 20,240 meals helping feed our neighbors. We extended this program to Willy North as soon as we opened that store.

We were also launching our pilot participation in the City of Madison's Double Dollars Program, a SNAP benefit-incentive program encouraging the purchase of more fresh foods. The program already operated from late spring to early fall at participating local farmers markets, and we introduced it in the retail setting for the first time in Wisconsin. Thanks to a U.S.D.A. Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive grant and a partnership with the City of Madison, Public Health Madison and Dane County, and the local nonprofit Community Action Coalition, we now offer Double Dollars from late fall to early spring annually at all three co-op locations.

On Tuesdays, any shopper using their SNAP card to purchase groceries can receive up to \$20 worth of Double Dollars vouchers to purchase fresh produce. The pilot had



terrific outcomes, with 93 percent voucher redemption, and a SNAP benefits year-over-year usage increase of 22 percent. Year one was so successful that we started funding the program on our own with the help of our customers either making cash donations or reusing bags at the registers. In 2017, customers have been contributing to Double Dollars for about seven months and during that time have raised almost \$43,000 for the program.

Both in-store SNAP registration and Double Dollars primed our co-op for expanding our offerings to the wider customer base we serve at Willy North.

Getting to know our new neighbors

Sharing what we were ready to provide, and asking for community input about new or different products and services, helped ensure our store would be welcomed by many customers. The 14 Northside neighborhoods and nearby suburb of Maple Bluff are very economically diverse, with lakefront property, low-income apartments, luxury condos, and middle-class subdivisions within walking, driving, biking, or busing distance to Willy North. Over the spring and summer of 2016, we met with 16 neighborhood associations, food pantries, nonprofits, and businesses. We attended their picnics, festivals, school activities, sporting events, meetings, and more to tell people who we were, offer samples, and ask what products and services they would like to see.

The nearby Northside Farmers Market allowed us to sell staple products to complement their farm fresh of-

Nancy's[®] ORGANIC PROBIOTIC WHOLE MILK KEFIR



11 strains of probiotics, including clinically documented strains that *support immune and digestive health*

Made with local, *organic*, whole milk from *pasture-raised* cows on Northwest farms

New!

Available July 2017

Featuring 4 flavors, 32oz size:



LACTOSE FREE



Plain



Vanilla



Blueberry



Ginger Peach



BANKING SOLUTIONS FOR COOPERATIVE GROCERS

WEST COAST

MIKE NOVAK
(510) 496-2232
mnovak@ncb.coop

MID WEST

BRIAN MISENHEIMER
(336) 298-7231
bmisenheimer@ncb.coop

EAST COAST

DAMI ODETOLA
(703) 302-1939
dodetola@ncb.coop

Lexington
Cooperative Market
Buffalo, NY

\$3,405,511

Real Estate Loan

\$200,000

Line of Credit



Green Top
Grocery

Bloomington, IL

\$800,000

Real Estate Loan



- ▶ Term Loans
- ▶ Lines of Credit
- ▶ Real Estate Loans
- ▶ Competitive Deposit Rates
- ▶ Cash Management

ferings during the three months the community was without a grocery store—a great way to meet our future customers and provide a few groceries where, for a time, there were no other options. We also held a sneak peek event, giving 500 community members a chance to see construction, meet local producers and staff, and provide feedback. With any chance we had to engage, we did our best to be there, and that went a long way in deciding how to shape our new store.

At the same time, we held a “receipt campaign.” We wanted to know what people were actually buying elsewhere and what they paid for those products. We asked customers to send receipts via drop-boxes at Willy East and Willy West, by mail, and via email snapshots. From that campaign, we obtained data on 4,284 products that helped us stock the shelves. At opening, we had a broad mix of natural, local, organic, and conventional foods all together under one roof to meet our shoppers’ needs. Thanks to tips from Seward Community Co-op’s Friendship store, we only stocked Willy North at 80 percent capacity to start, leaving space to add new products and encouraging customers to continue requesting items to complete their shopping experience. Over this past year, we added an additional 6,372 new products (from about 1,340 brands).

Healthy Retail Access Program

Thanks to the City of Madison’s Food Policy Council, we received funds from their Healthy Retail Access Program (HRAP) to help us open the new store. First, they funded a shuttle bus for the summer of 2016. The Northside Planning Council (a neighborhood nonprofit instrumental in securing our location), obtained a \$6,600 grant for special bus service several days a week stopping at Willy East, at another national grocery chain, and the Sunday Northside Farmers Market. This shuttle provided options for shoppers reliant on alternative transportation to shop while we were under construction at Willy North.

We also received a \$68,330 HRAP grant to install our salad bar and bulk department, implement the

WIC program (we were the first co-op in Wisconsin to become a WIC Certified Vendor), and to purchase extra carts. We heard early on that the previous grocer had experienced “cart theft.” After learning more, we felt these carts disappeared for a reason: people who use the nearby bus or walk to the store were taking carts to get their groceries home.

To remedy this, we say to our customers that if they need a cart, they just need to ask and to bring it back the next day. When we hear that there are carts left out nearby, we simply pick them up. The ability to purchase extra carts allows for enough carts for shoppers and enough carts for them to borrow or occasionally lose one. These funds have helped us bring more nutritious “buy-what-you-need” options to Willy North and also allowed us to be more responsive to community needs.

Fruit and vegetable prescriptions

Opening North also provided an opportunity to participate in another City initiative: a pilot Fruit and Vegetable Prescription Program (FVRx) funded with \$25,000 from Wholesome Wave. Partners in this program include the City of Madison, Public Health Madison, Dane County, Second Harvest Food Bank of Southern Wisconsin’s HungerCare Coalition, Dane County Extension, and UW Health Northeast Family Medical Center. The Fruit and Vegetable Prescription Program is designed to give UW



Health patients who express food insecurity to their healthcare practitioner an immediate opportunity to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at Willy Street Co-op.

The partner healthcare clinic is across the street from Willy North, and the protocol for providing vouchers is simple: Health care providers use an algorithm to screen patients for food security, and if the patient screens positive, they are provided information about food resources, six months of Willy Street Co-op produce department vouchers, and one co-op equity payment voucher. Becoming an owner using the equity voucher also qualifies the patient to participate in our Access Discount Program and receive 10% off all groceries. To date, UW Health has provided vouchers to 420 patients, and funding is now sought to expand the program to other HungerCare Coalition clinics.

Our work is not done

Willy North has now been open for just over a year, and we just completed our second busy Thanksgiving season with sales up 12.4 percent year-over-year, surpassing our financial projections. Price perception at our co-op is not ideal but is improving, and our customers are starting to get used to seeing a wide variety of products to meet a wider variety of tastes. We continue to engage the community by working with local educators, officials, and nonprofits to host focus groups and store tours that can help us find out more about what people want, how to meet needs, and how to create stores that continue to serve. We are forever grateful for our community's openness and support.

Whether first moving into a community, or continuing to provide for an ever-changing population, grocery co-ops are primed to find new and creative ways to meet people's needs, because people are what make us possible, and what we are all about. The past 24 months at Willy Street Co-op—from implementing new ways to support shoppers with low incomes to opening a grocery store in a community looking for more than local, organic, and natural foods—has been all about listening to our cus-



tomers, and continuing to foster community and understanding with our almost 35,000 owners. We want to say “yes” to any and every opportunity that makes all three of our locations the respectful, authentic, generous, and equitable spaces our customers have come to expect over the past 44 years.

As we look back to celebrate successes we continue to look forward to find ways that we can still do better. Things are changing for both retailers and the general population all the time, and we are committed to continuing to navigate the landscape with our community in mind. •