

## Cedar Falls Food Co-op needs members to open



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**CEDAR FALLS** | What's the difference between a regular grocery store and the grocery store a few hundred Cedar Valley residents want to open?

Nearly everything.

"We don't just have a Blue Zones section; our store is Blue Zones," said Tom Wickersham, president of the Cedar Falls

Food Co-op.

Blue Zones, the healthy-living initiative that has permeated many businesses in the Cedar Valley, is emblematic of the 10,000-square-foot grocery store Wickersham hopes his group will be able to open in a few years.

Organic, locally-sourced and fair-trade food and products will all be part of the store, he said.

On a blustery November night, Wickersham touted the benefits to the co-op's member-owners, a few of whom were gathered at the group's annual meeting at the Cedar Falls Community Center.

"Even if you never step foot in the co-op, the co-op is going to benefit you," Wickersham said. "That's what this is: Building community through food."

That's a message Wickersham's group is trying to get across as they work to gain members.

Co-ops grow in stages depending on membership, board member Melanie Drake explained. As of this month, the Cedar Falls Food Co-op had 258 members -- meaning it is still in the initial stage.

At 300 members, it moves into Phase 2 and can begin tasks like setting up a market analysis study, figuring out where to locate the store and developing a business plan. At 500 members, it can secure a location and start getting vendors, among other tasks.

"We're trying to hit that goal of 1,000 to have that store open," Drake said.

Older Cedar Valley residents may remember co-ops didn't used to operate that way. The Cotton Top started as a food-buying club in 1974 on the Main Street Parkade due to the lack of local options for organic and whole-food items. It closed in 1984 due to debt.

Those who have bought in early, like Sidecar Coffee owner Jed Vander Zanden, said they already know the benefits to a community-owned cooperative. It's convincing others of those benefits -- before they see a finished product -- that's difficult.

"It's a straight numbers game -- we have to get members before anything happens," Vander Zanden said. "People say, 'Oh, I'll join when you open.' It's kind of that challenge, to have people give you that faith."

With that goal in mind, the Cedar Falls Food Co-op is focusing on membership growth in a couple of ways.

The first is external: They've already got more than 1,000 "likes" to the Cedar Falls Food Co-op Facebook page, but haven't been able to translate those likes into actual \$200 memberships.

To encourage those "likers" to put their money where their clicks are, board members will hold giveaways. The first person to become a member after the giveaway is announced wins the prize.

The second is internal. Brenna Griffin, chair of the co-op's membership committee, told the 20 gathered at the member-owner meeting to write down "three bullet points of why you want a co-op, why you do not want to miss out on this historic opportunity."

"The food is going to be wonderful, but food is not the point," Griffin said. "Community is the point."

After that, each attendee was told to write down the names of five friends. Then they were asked to discuss their three bullet points with each of their five friends by the end of the year.

To sweeten the pot, all member-owners who host a "house party" in order to talk up the co-op are entered to win a queen-size bed set from Foster's Mattress, one of the co-op's many local business partners.

"If we all (258 members) recruited three members, we would have our 1,000 members," Griffin said.

It won't be quite that easy, the board members recognize. But they hope to kick-start an effort that will net them more than their current 20-members-per-month pace.

"We have 250 members in one year," Wickersham said at the meeting. "Four times that is four years, which is not what anyone wants. We want to speed up that transition."

Even though there's not necessarily a due date for the co-op, board members are still thinking optimistically.

"That's why I think, in large part, co-ops can take a few years to get off the ground," Drake said. "The payment is the reward of the community connections, and the fact that we're getting so many people on board."

Drake and others want to model the Cedar Falls Food Co-op on other successful co-ops in Iowa, including New Pioneer in Iowa City, Oneota in Decorah and the Dubuque Co-op.

"When we look at a co-op model, it's different from (the former) Roots (Market) or Hy-Vee -- it's about the gathering of people as well," Drake said. "It's a place where people will come and want to spend time."

"I always push the community aspect," said Jess Cruz, one of three people who was newly elected to the co-op board last week. "If you love Cedar Falls and you love the community, you will love the co-op."

That's also why the co-op board's membership goals are getting more ambitious, said Kristel McClenahan, the co-op's treasurer.

"Now that we see what we can do, our expectations are higher," she said.

For more information on the Cedar Falls Food Co-op, visit [cedarfallsfoodcoop.com](http://cedarfallsfoodcoop.com).

## **Join the co-op**

Membership into the Cedar Falls Food Co-op is a one-time investment of \$200. Membership includes voting rights and discounts at participating businesses.

There are three ways to join:

1) Pay in full by mail:

Visit this link: <http://cedarfallsfoodcoop.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CFFCmembershipApp.pdf>, print the form, sign and return.

2) Pay in full online:

Visit this link: <http://cedarfallsfoodcoop.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CFFCmembershipApp.pdf>, fill out the form online and submit payment

electronically.

3) Pay \$50 per month for four months:

Visit this link: <http://cedarfallsfoodcoop.com/payment-options/>, fill out the form online and submit installment payments electronically.