

A Turning Point?

Minnesota co-ops host CCMA

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

Under the theme, “Our North Star: Cooperate to Differentiate,” some 400 cooperators met in downtown Minneapolis on June 8–10 for the 61st annual Consumer Cooperative Management Association (CCMA) conference. Participants from across the country discussed critical strategic and operating issues, listened to engaging speakers, visited local producers and retail co-ops, and drew inspiration from shared stories.

The 2017 CCMA offered a diverse program for leaders of food co-ops and co-op allies during three days of conference activities bound by numerous intense conversations. Local tours and a reception on Thursday

Co-ops, culture, cuisine

The downtown location and the Minneapolis–St. Paul metro at large offer a wide array of cooperative, cultural, and outdoor attractions, and conference attendees were able to sample many of them. Cooperators from across the country filled the conference hotel, Radisson Blu, and a nearby backup set of rooms. Warm weather prevailed—but a dramatic storm front arrived the morning after it was over.

On the opening day, participants chose among six bus tour options that made stops among more than a dozen Twin Cities area cooperatives and local businesses—operating in grocery, finance and economic development, bicycles, coffee roasting and distribution, organic farming, urban food hubs, a Latino business market, organic produce distribution, and beer brewing and spirits distilling. Biking and walking tours also were offered.

Further highlighting diverse culture, the Saturday lunch was beautifully crafted and presented by Sean Sherman of The Sioux Chef, who described the menu and his mission of reviving traditional indigenous foods (natifs.org). His presence was sponsored by the Intertribal Agriculture Council, which displayed and offered food and other items throughout the conference.

A closing party took attendees to the nearby Mill City Museum, overlooking the Mississippi River and the St. Anthony Falls, where the city was



From left: At the podium, CCMA planner Anne Reynolds thanked her chief assistant, Megan Webster; Brian Munson of NCBA pointed to cooperatives' many impacts. Next page: Keynote speakers LaDonna Sanders-Redmond and Michael Sansolo.



were followed by two full days of presentations, speakers, exhibits, award presentations, and more. A new and excellent service available this year is a Dropbox cache allowing attendees post-conference access to slides, videos, and other resources submitted by CCMA conference presenters.

Originally a small gathering of co-op managers, the CCMA is a virtual organization with a major annual event that has in turn supported further development of co-op projects and associations. Over the years it evolved into a summit of food co-op directors, managers, and staff, along with an allied network of co-op developers, lenders, vendors, and trainers. Its roving location allows better access to the annual conference by first-time attendees, who typically comprise a third of those registered.

CCMA is a big-tent event that highlights both achievements and challenges of food co-ops and their allies. But the conference faces its own challenges for the future.

founded 150 years ago. Another great food and drink spread amid spectacular surroundings offered live music and a final opportunity for conversations with co-op friends from both near and far.

Planners, hosts, sponsors

The 2017 CCMA was planned and supported by the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives. The Center's director, Anne Reynolds, and assistants Megan Webster and Courtney Berner provided a tightly organized, diverse, and very valuable conference. In planning a very full program of topics, speakers, and special events, they were aided by a national committee of volunteer advisors as well as active support from these local co-ops: Eastside, Lakewinds, Linden Hills, Mississippi Market, River Market, Seward, Shared Capital, Valley Natural Foods, and Wedge.

The multi-page conference guide was itself a nice production and offered informative program descriptions plus images of some 80



presenters and 25 different sponsors, exhibitors, and other allies.

Historically, the conference sponsor is National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA-CLUSA), our national cross-sector organization and international co-op development leader, which just completed its 100th year. Across the globe, millions of people know CLUSA as a source of vital aid in forming credit

- CoBank (cobank.com)
 - National Cooperative Bank (ncb.coop)
 - National Cooperative Business Association (ncba.coop)
 - Organic Valley (organicvalley.coop)
 - CDS Consulting Co-op (cdsconsulting.coop)
 - Simply Voting (simplyvoting.com)
- Additionally, conference exhibitors included



unions, producer co-ops, and other democratic improvements—more at ncba.coop. For planning and carrying out this year's conference and the next, NCBA has given complete responsibility to the Center for Cooperatives in Madison.

Supplementing those cooperative backers, CCMA is made possible by a lengthy list of sponsors, their support illustrating the constellation of allies that makes up a diverse and resilient food co-op sector. Besides businesses already mentioned, the support of the following sponsors is critical not merely to the conference but also to the success of the participating food co-ops:

- National Co+op Grocers (ncg.coop)

Cabot Creamery Cooperative, Capital Impact Partners, Cooperative Grocer Network, Dorsey & Whitney LLP, Frontier Co-op, Local Enterprise Assistance Fund, Pachamama Coffee Cooperative, Shared Capital Cooperative, Sitka Salmon, Survey and Ballot Systems, Wegner CPAs, and The Cooperative Foundation. Lending further support and present throughout were representatives of Cooperative Fund of New England, Equal Exchange, Food Co-op Initiative, Peace Coffee, and the e-commerce provider Rosie.

Bowers Fund, milestones, award winners

At the Saturday awards luncheon, the mistress of ceremonies, Annie Hoy from Ashland Food

Food Co-op Milestones

Opened

- 1917: Settler's Grocery Co-op – Bruce Crossing, Michigan
- 1937: Swarthmore Consumers Cooperative – Swarthmore, Pennsylvania
- 1976: High Falls Food Co-op – High Falls, New York (skipped in 2016)
- 1977: East End Food Co-op – Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- Oceana Natural Foods Co-op – Newport, Oregon
- Olympia Food Co-op – Olympia, Washington
- Valley Natural Foods – Burnsville, Minnesota
- 1997: Sno-Isle Natural Foods Co-op – Everett, Washington
- 2007: Big Hollow Food Co-op – Laramie, Wyoming
- Great Basin Community Food Co-op – Reno, Nevada
- Homegrown Food Co-op – Orlando, Florida
- Lost River Market & Deli – Paoli, Indiana
- Missoula Community Co-op – Missoula, Montana
- Pocatello Food Co-op – Pocatello, Idaho
- River Valley Co-op – Northampton, Massachusetts
- San Juan Island Food Co-op – Friday Harbor, Washington
- Walsh Community Grocery Store – Walsh, Colorado
- Yahara River Food Cooperative – Stoughton, Wisconsin
- Yelm Food Co-op – Yelm, Washington
- 2016-17: Anacortes Food Co-op – Anacortes, Washington
- Renaissance Community Co-op – Greensboro, North Carolina
- Clifton Community Market – Cincinnati, Ohio
- Stapleton Co-op Market – North Platte, Nebraska
- Green Top Grocery – Bloomington, Illinois

Co-op, reminded everyone to contribute to the Bowers Fund, another important CCMA element—and fundraising continues through October Co-op Month activities. Scholarships from the Bowers Fund are awarded to food co-op applicants and make possible training and education for many co-op directors and staff—25 such scholarships were awarded in 2017.

We celebrated food co-op milestones—ranging, remarkably, from a century to ten years to one. There continue to be more 40-year-olds from the 1970s wave of food co-ops; 11 more co-ops have reached their first decade; and we celebrated another five new store openings over the past year in the continuing wave of new food co-op formation. See the “Milestones” sidebar for the full listing and the profiles in Stuart Reid’s report, “New Co-ops on the Scene.”

Annually, food co-ops are encouraged to nominate from among their peers outstanding co-op leaders and ventures deserving wider recognition. These annual CCMA awards are overseen by the Cooperative Development Foundation (cdf.coop) and were sponsored again this year by National Co+op Grocers. There were fewer awards announced than on

\$12 million in annual sales from 12,000 retail sq. ft., City Market will open a second store only 1.5 miles away in November 2017. The co-op’s general manager, John Tashiro, and board member Allison Searson were on hand to receive the award.

Randy Lee of PCC Natural Markets was honored for his **Cooperative Service**, with testimony led by the co-op’s CEO, Cate Hardy—but it took several friends and colleagues to suggest his impact. In a career dedicated to co-ops that began at PCC in 1970, Randy has served as the finance manager of a thriving cooperative in a highly competitive market—PCC now operates 11 stores and continues to expand its impact. Remarkably, over his 46-year career Lee has served four different times as interim CEO of the co-op! In 1990, he also became a founding director of PCC Farmland Trust, which is preserving organic farmland in perpetuity. His colleagues from National Co+op Grocers testified to his dedication to cooperatives and the influence of his quiet but passionate leadership. There were tears of gratitude all around.

Finally, Food Co-op Initiative (FCI) announced its award for **Startup of the Year** to the East Aurora Food Co-op in New York. The nomination came via a short video from Tim Bartlett, general manager of Lexington Co-op, a sister co-op in Buffalo, N.Y. From the podium Stuart Reid and Jacqueline Hannah of FCI presented the award to Sheila Conboy, who has been the driving force during the formation of East Aurora Food Co-op and is now its general manager. (Special thanks to CDS Consulting Co-op, which sponsored Conboy’s attendance.) For more, see Stuart Reid’s profiles of “New Co-ops on the Scene.”

Speakers and themes

In a very full program, breakout sessions with presentations and panel discussions were grouped under these tracks:

- markets, the economy, and strategies to compete
- community and communication
- cooperative governance: engaging stakeholders
- sharpening our edge: continuous improvement in operations and finance
- building a culture of inclusion and equity
- leadership development

In plenary sessions on the morning of the first day, contrasting presentations addressed the rapidly changing retail market, followed by discussion of understanding and attaining greater inclusion and diversity in our businesses.

Michael Sansolo, a well-known retail food industry consultant who has been well received at previous CCMA conferences, spoke about continuing rapid changes in retailing and urged his audience to keep abreast of trends. E-commerce is a small but rapidly growing factor and is undermining traditional retail foundations of location and niche. Presently, the leading grocery retailer concern is increased store competition—it continues to intensify on several fronts, including among chain stores the ongoing expansion of Aldi and the recent introduction of Lidl. While many co-ops are exploring online ordering (the focus of a CCMA workshop), cooperatives by their nature are able, or at least well-positioned, to offer the stronger engagement that many customers seek.

Liz Wozniak and LaDonna Sanders-Redmond, the Seward Co-op human resources manager and community engagement manager, respectively, presented the second half of the opening plenary. They discussed and detailed Seward’s work based on aims of diversity, equality, and equity—cautioning that this effort needs “curiosity, humility, and courage” from co-op leaders and staff—and emphasized attentive listening to the co-op’s surrounding community, and incorporating these organizational aims into hiring practices in particular.



John Tashiro, general manager of City Market, asks a question.

some past occasions, but they were richly deserved ones.

The 2017 award for **Cooperative Excellence** went to City Market in Burlington, Vermont. Presenting the award was Richard Johnson of Cabot Creamery Co-op, a neighboring business and a key supplier for the store. Originally named Onion River Co-op, City Market secured its prime downtown location in 1999 by winning strong local support and agreeing to carry at least 30 percent conventional groceries and to offer expanded store hours—now 7am–11pm. City Market’s community impact is deepened by its round-up program that generates thousands of dollars for local nonprofits through customer contributions. Currently achieving



NCBA and CDS Consulting Co-op displays were busy.

The themes of diversity and black cooperative history returned during the second day's keynote, by Dr. Monica White, assistant professor of environmental justice at UW–Madison and author of the forthcoming book, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*. Based in her research, White spoke with wit and insight on historic cooperative and collective activities in communities of color. She cited other key works on this history, such as *Collective Courage* (2015), by Jessica Gordon Nembhard; and especially W.E.B. Dubois and works dating to 1907—his brilliant scholarship and outspoken leadership included strong advocacy of cooperatives. In light of these continuing struggles, White urged an outlook characterized as “compost” rather than one of “autopsy.”

Cooperate to differentiate?

In the breakout sessions as well as in the corridors and during the many conference events, cooperators shared accomplishments but also stories of continuing market pressures and major organizational challenges. Food co-op leaders recognize that for our grocery businesses a new market era has arrived, and strong sales growth and profitability are much more difficult to achieve. For many co-ops, at least for now, those trends are in the past.

At the same time that market conditions demand tight operations, diverse constituencies and our democratic values demand that we reflect their diverse interests. People expect co-ops to lead on consumer health and support of local foods, community diversity and participation, labor protections and contributions, and of course they also want great fresh food and shopping convenience. However, while co-ops attempt to satisfy these interests, shopping loyalty among co-op member-owners—i.e., where their grocery dollars are spent—is commonly just as segmented or split with other grocery stores as it is among the public at large. There are a lot of consumer distractions and roadside attractions.

Nationally, economic distress and growing debt of all types are disguised by damn lies and statistics but certainly are increasing. Class divisions are growing, and the middle class is shrinking. Food access is an issue, but so is exploitation of agricultural labor. Food co-ops provide good jobs, but increasing numbers of the public are unemployed or underemployed.

Co-ops are challenged to uphold their values of equity, equality, and

solidarity. In the future we'll report on new co-op programs serving low-income customers.

CCMA itself is in danger of contraction, with co-ops' expense constraints at both operational and governance levels making attendance at these national events less feasible over time. Local/regional attendance at CCMA by co-op board members has been increasing, but attendance by co-op general managers, formerly the core of the conference, has steadily decreased. National Co-op Grocers, the strongest organizational player in the food co-op sector, draws the participation of managers to its essential purchasing and professional training services. Many NCG member co-op managers, and those in the national organization as well, do not attend CCMA. Nevertheless, every year three to four hundred food co-op leaders—managers, directors, trainers and close allies—meet for an inspiring reunion under a sector-wide learning and celebratory event. CCMA's ongoing attendance and its substantial content continue to give evidence of its value.

A unique, big-tent event for food co-ops, CCMA continues to have impact among its participating co-ops. There are legacies to honor and legacies to overcome, accomplishments to celebrate and aspirations to explore, leadership to honor and new leaders to encourage. I don't think we can maintain the excellence of CCMA content without continuing strong support from leading food co-op managers as well as their regional and national cooperative associations.

Since none of the several challenging trends is going away, I forecast that the 2018 CCMA conference, to be held next June in Portland, Oregon, will give evidence of whether this unique event has peaked or has found an enduring niche in the food co-op constellation. □



Sheila Conboy of East Aurora Food Co-op and Stuart Reid of Food Co-op Initiative.