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**The Importance of Community Co-Ops**

Urban communities throughout the country struggle to provide the quantity, affordability and distance practically of local grocery stores to their residents. The sparse quantity of stores makes it difficult for locals to get their hands on fresh, nutrient balanced food. Where there are stores, the price of the items sold there are more expensive and are processed items such as chips, soda and junk food. Then distance becomes a challenge when public or paid transportation is the only way to get to stores that offer health and affordable groceries.

This is known today as a food desert, this happens when there aren’t enough stores suppling health conscious foods that are nutritious. Instead what is available is processed foods that contain high amounts sodium and sugar form local corner stores. Which, in turn, is contributed to malnutrition, childhood obesity and health problems in elderly. One way to combat food deserts is the installation of Cooperatives (co-op). This business was one that did not start in the united states and continues to be a staple worldwide.

The increase of co-ops is rapidly growing tangent to the severe need of underserved communities. The need is not only in the United States, but around the world and have been around for over a hundred years. Their business model is quite different from a corporate establishment. Instead, co-ops are owned and governed by the members that use the products and services of the business. The financial goal of a co-op is not to accumulate profit for investors but to attain the goals of their members, any surplus revenue is then distributed back into the company or returned to its members.

Not all co-ops are run precisely the same either, it merely depends on the values of the company and the wishes of its members. Most adhere to the same basic principles, for example open membership, member participation, education and training, and community concern. Therefore, all members of the co-op are allowed one vote when it comes to the matters pertaining the company.

The community of East St. Paul worked with the Gateway Initiate to provide the needs for their economic development in their area. Locals interested in the project became more aware, worked together and educated themselves in the process. They then reached out to the co-op, Mississippi Market (MM), and the plan for expansion started.

MM sits on what was polluted grounds and a vacant lot brings health conscious foods to a deserving community. They are conscious of the community’s financial situation and holds budget shopping classes and have created a membership for low-income shoppers that includes 10% discount. To MM, it is more than just about selling food but believe they are a representation of change. Having the MM apart of the East St. Paul’s community has meant more job opportunities and a way for the residents to become more than a customer, but a participant who has a voice within the community.

Added sales to the store improves the financial circulation back into the community and there for MM can buy more from local producers. An increase of members gives the added benefit of a more collective voice for the community. Currently there is a high level of deflation in the food market and local store are losing business. MM isn’t worried about bouncing back from this financial hard time but they want to advocate to buy local. In doing so more money back into the community’s circulation and many hard workers will stay employed. They advocate to support your community and not the big box superstores. With that goal in mind, they strive to create economically strong and sustained nutritional independence.