

# Co-ops at a Crossroads: A Co-op Security Case Study

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**R**etail grocery co-ops are as quintessential Vermont as the brilliant colors of our fall foliage, the hallmark herd of Holsteins on the pasture, or the one-room schoolhouse at the crossroads of two backcountry roads. In fact, it's said that Vermont boasts the most food co-ops per capita in the country—somewhere in the neighborhood of 17, give or take, in a state of only 625,000 people.

Vermont also boasts at least two local food co-ops housed in a one-room schoolhouse! The Adamant Co-op in Adamant traces its diminutive roots back to 1935, when a local pastor and a group of neighbors came together to start the cooperative to buy groceries and create a market for local produce. The Adamant Co-op has been operating out of the one-room schoolhouse, circa 1895, ever since.

A couple years later and some thirty miles south, another one-room schoolhouse was built in 1897 in East Warren. It may have taken just a little while longer for the school to house a co-op, but the 600-sq. ft. market and its 370 members take great pride in its comparatively short 9-year history—as well they should. Founded in 2009, the East Warren Community Market cleared \$1 million in sales in 2016, only its eighth year in operation. The co-op occupies a one-room schoolhouse that is literally on a rural crossroads surrounded by stunning fall foliage and, yes, with a herd of black-and-white dairy cows right across the street.

## Even in the middle of nowhere

The East Warren Schoolhouse hasn't had students tread its weathered, wide-plank wood floors in nearly forty years. The building has juggled a number of occupants, endeavors, and periods of vacancy since that time, until the community came together in 2008 to start discussing the idea of a local food co-op.

Vermont communities are small, predominantly rural, and we tend to consider ourselves pretty tight-knit and removed from the fray. Our crime rates are lower than most, both violent and non-violent, and Vermonters generally feel pretty safe and trusting, all things being what they are. It's not at all surprising around here to hear of neighbors leaving their doors unlocked or their keys in their cars. Wouldn't you if you could?

Both at home and in business, Vermonters commonly assume their neighbors, staff, and customers are honest and trustworthy overall. The reality, unfortunately, is not quite as placid as the picturesque setting makes it seem. The truth is, anything can happen anywhere, even in the proverbial "middle of nowhere," where everyone typically knows everyone else and where we take satisfaction in our relative sense of safety and security.

In its short but prosperous 9-year history, the East Warren

Community Market has been broken into and burglarized four times.

## Third time's the charm

If your co-op is downtown in any medium-size to large city across the country, you've probably already considered the possibility that your store could be the target of a burglary at some point. Maybe you've had the locks on your back door messed with, the roll-up door on your loading dock mangled with a pry bar, or come in some otherwise quiet morning only to find a window broken in. Maybe after each of these disheartening but ultimately anodyne incidents, you've chalked it up to be an isolated incident, figured it's unlikely to happen again, and how much could you possibly lose anyway...

After that first break-in in its fourth for fifth year of operation, the board and management of the market in East Warren simply replaced the broken window and called it a day. The valley, we all know, doesn't see a lot of this kind of thing, so it's fairly doubtful it'll happen again. We only lost a couple hundred dollars' worth of product anyway, so it's not really that big a deal.

Fast forward to 2016, and the "unlikely" suddenly transcends possible to become undeniable. In March and July of 2016, respectively, the East Warren Community Market was targeted again, twice. In each instance, the perpetrator gained entry by breaking a window—a different window in each case—forcibly entering the office and sales floor, where they proceeded to ransack the humble market, looking specifically for caches of cash among the local dairy and woolen hats.

As was the practice, the single register drawer at the counter was left open, revealing maybe \$10 in mixed change, and a \$250 stash of petty cash, change for the register, was left in the office.

In the burglary that March, the \$250 in petty cash was stolen. Combined with the damage to the building and product, the total damage was less than \$1,000. The market had no alarm or camera system in place. Aside from the truly unlikely possibility of 120-year-old ghosts looking after the place, you could hang out inside the store all night and no one would be the wiser.

In the ensuing few months between March and July, and in no hurry to make any hasty decisions, the co-op board and management merely took to repairing the broken window on the historic building, a nearly herculean task in a small town with select boards, concerned community members, and historical societies all chiming in. Come July and the "undeniable" was bordering on inevitable as the co-op was broken into for a third time in eight years.

Three times in eight years may not seem like many times, and as each incident amounted to less than \$1,000 worth of total loss, it may be easy to identify with the inclination towards

not making too big a fuss. The market manager in July of 2016, however, didn't see "inevitable" as reasonable at all; she saw it as untenable.

### Tools of the trade

After each of the three break-ins at the East Warren Market, management and the board contacted the State Police, who, as these things often go, had a lead on who the perpetrator might be, since this wasn't the only burglary reported of late—not even the only burglary reported that night. As it turned out, the incidents of that March and July were both perpetrated by the same individual, a person the police were already aware of, and whose photo had been caught on the camera footage of another targeted establishment.

In smaller communities like ours where these crimes are often attributed to a handful of known offenders, photo evidence (if there is any) not only helps law enforcement establish and secure a case against an individual once they are apprehended, it also helps police conduct their search for the offender directly. The fact that this person was out committing the same crime only three months after having been caught for a spate of earlier burglaries, and this on top of their already colorful history, is a conversation for another day. Suffice it to say, by July of 2016 the manager of the East Warren Market had had enough.

The board of directors and the manager together decided to invest in a very modest but capable camera system for the one-room schoolhouse store. The system employs a single wide-angle lens, motion-activated camera that captures the entirety of the 600-sq. ft. sales floor and adjacent office. The system is "armed" from 8 pm–8 am every night, and aside from immediately recording any activity upon motion-activation, it also sends alerts to both the manager and a board member who both live within three miles of the co-op.

This is a one-room schoolhouse market on a quiet country crossroads in the middle of Vermont; the \$100 capital investment to install this unsophisticated but totally effective system, and the \$11 monthly subscription to retain 10 days' worth of footage, exemplifies a very reasonable solution for a very unique situation. Co-ops across the country that could fit the East Warren Community Market in their produce walk-in cooler would obviously consider scaling up this solution.

### Say cheese!

In May of 2017, the East Warren Community Market was targeted a fourth time. The perpetrator in this case broke in through two fairly antiquated back doors and upon finding themselves unmolested, and there being no alarm sounding, proceeded to remove their jacket and face mask, thus providing the not-so-covert



PHOTO COURTESY OF EAST WARREN MARKET

camera a clear and unobstructed image of the culprit's face by the light of their own flashlight.

The market was able for the first time to provide police with an unmistakable photo and incontrovertible footage of the incident in question. The perpetrator was once again known to the police and apprehended within 24 hours. The eight cases of beer he stole were still cold.

### What's good for the goose

The East Warren Community Market is a bit of an outlier in most respects, and it has become an in-

valuable treasure in our rural community. It is not, however, immune to every peril of the big city, nor should its management and board of directors be naïve in their commitment to their members and their responsibility to provide for the safety and security of the co-op's assets.

What works in a 600-sq. ft. market is not going to work in a much larger space in communities of hundreds of thousands of people. The investment any co-op makes in its security infrastructure, policies, procedures, and protocols will be proportionate to its size, scale, sales, and location, among other factors. While no investment is a panacea, no investment at all is borderline irresponsible.

Every market across the country has room to improve its existing security measures to better serve its community. The East Warren Market has more upgrades, ideas, and improvements in the works. The conversations have started and are still ongoing.

### Fifth time's the charm?

Co-ops of every shape and size should consider taking stock and making moderate but marked steps to account for and increase their current objective security posture. Management and boards should be actively having these conversations, engaging with staff, membership, community stakeholders, and law enforcement to take steps to improve their ability to respond to security incidents of all kinds, and work with law enforcement to reduce security related incidents overall.

It's pretty likely that the co-ops of 80 years ago, in one-room schoolhouses flanked by quarries, churches, and boisterous boarding houses, also saw their fair share of break-ins and bawdy behavior. You could bet a modest camera system might have been a nice adjunct to the honorific "WANTED" poster nailed to the wall. We've come a long way since then, and we should be thankful for that at least. But, unfortunately, we still see incidents of all kinds taking their toll on our cooperatives and communities, in small towns and big cities alike. Now that we have a few more tools at our disposal to deal with these incidents, we just have to decide to make the investment. •