

Strengthening Co-op Elections: How Boards are Ensuring that Members Can Vote for Excellent Candidates

BY MICHAEL HEALY

In her book *Democracy's Edge*, Frances Moore Lappe makes a strong case that a healthy democracy is about much more than elections and voting. Even so, board elections are still a particularly important and visible part of cooperative governance.

A successful board election includes at least two critical elements: enough qualified candidates on the ballot and enough information so that members can make educated choices. One of the wonders of a democratic organization (or maybe one of the frustrations, depending on your perspective!) is the never-ending conversation about what “qualified” means, what educational information is necessary or useful, and what it means to have “enough” of either candidates or information.

You won't find definitive answers to these questions here. What you will find are stories from four co-op boards that have been thoughtful and intentional about their current approach to elections and that regularly assess how their co-op's election process is working, always with an eye toward continuous improvement.

First, what do the bylaws allow?

Co-op bylaws usually have something to say about how directors get on an election ballot. As long as you don't restrict members' rights beyond what the bylaws mandate, your board can and should make your nomination and election process as robust as possible.

Three of the four co-ops featured in this article—Monadnock Food Co-op, Outpost Natural Foods, and Ozark Natural Foods—have bylaws that specify that the board can nominate someone or that a member can gather enough signatures on a petition to put their own name on the ballot. The Ozark bylaws also allow for nomination from the floor at the annual meeting. At City Market/Onion River Co-op, the bylaws simply allow any member to nominate themselves (no petition is necessary); there is no provision for board-nominated candidates.

This article won't address self-nominations or nominations from the floor. Here we will focus instead on how these boards work within their authority to plan ahead and take initiative to ensure that the ballot includes enough qualified candidates, and what these boards do to help members make educated choices.

Enough candidates

What constitutes enough? For each of these four co-ops, enough implies at the very least that there are more candidates on the ballot than there are open seats. In a 2016 interview for the *Solutions* newsletter (library.cdsconsulting.coop), past president David Lee describes the Outpost board's very

specific commitment: six qualified candidates for three seats. Ozark's board has seven seats, with either two or three seats up for election each year. The Ozark board president, Joshua Youngblood, recognizes that some of what happens is outside of the board's control, but he goes on to emphasize that the board still puts considerable effort into recruiting candidates. Last year they had seven board-nominated candidates on the ballot, and this year they had four. Monadnock's board president, Kathy Burke, reported that last year ten people came to the board information session. Of those ten, six ended up on the ballot running for three open seats.

How do these boards recruit enough candidates? Each board begins by delegating primary responsibility for recruitment. Monadnock, Outpost, and Ozark delegate this responsibility to a board nominations committee. At Ozark, the co-op's marketing manager is always part of this committee, so that there is a seamless handoff from the committee to the staff who are responsible for co-op messaging. At City Market, the board relies heavily on good systems at the operational level. They have delegated to staff (through policy) almost all responsibility for running the election process, including publicizing the election and putting out the call for candidates.

Beyond this clear delegation, there is no single magic answer to the question of recruitment. Rather, each co-op uses a mix of tools including newsletters, in-store signage and tabling, social media, board meetings, and member meetings, all in concert with some sort of personal outreach.

Qualified candidates

Kathy Burke emphasized that the Monadnock board does not equate “qualified” with specific professional skills. Instead, they look for people who are willing to take on and are comfortable with a leadership role. They want candidates who are willing to learn and who are willing to work closely and cooperatively with fellow directors. The Ozark board takes a similar view; Joshua Youngblood states that they recruit people not for their expert skill sets, but for their enthusiasm for what the co-op does now and could do in the future.

Faye Conte, City Market's board president, notes that their board decided several years ago not to recommend candidates. Instead, they approach this question of “qualified” by offering educational sessions for potential candidates. Members interested in running for the board are invited to pre-election orientations at which they learn about the co-op's Ends and contributions to community wellbeing, the board's role, and

expectations of individual directors. These interested members are also invited to attend a board meeting, review a complete board meeting packet, speak directly with sitting directors, and read some educational material from the co-op's website. In this way, potential candidates are offered an opportunity to decide for themselves whether they believe they are qualified—as well as whether they actually want to serve on this board.

The Outpost nomination committee rates candidates on six criteria: personal and professional skill set, board (or similar) experience, prior community involvement, cultural competence, and teamwork ability. The six potential candidates who rate highest on these criteria are sent to the board for approval of the election slate.

Enough information for educated choices

All of these co-ops follow what is likely a standard process for any co-op with an elected board: they ask candidates to complete an application, and they share information from this application with members as part of the ballot. What else do these boards do beyond the typical application and candidate statement?

Even though the City Market board decided that they weren't willing to have the board recommend candidates, they did agree that individual directors can and should share their opinions with interested members. Remember the five activities that the City Market/Onion River board offers to interested members to help them decide for themselves if they are qualified and want to run? The ballot includes information about those pre-election activities along with information about which candidates completed which activities. In addition, the City Market/Onion River board has recently begun asking candidates to include a resume as part of their application. The resumes are part of the candidates' information that can be found on the co-op's election page online.

At Outpost, each candidate also sits for an interview with a consistent format and set of questions. These interviews are recorded, and the videos are posted on the co-op's website. At Ozark, members are invited to a "meet the candidate" forum one month before the election. At that event, candidates get to practice their stump speech, the same speech they are expected to present at the annual meeting itself.

Year-round process

Boards that are diligent about their election responsibilities recognize that this is a year-round process. The Ozark board's annual calendar follows a predictable cycle from year to year. After the election takes place in September, they immediately begin planning the next year's election, beginning with a debriefing

conversation during the October and November board meetings. The nomination committee then gets to work, and the first public call for candidates goes out in March.

Kathy Burke reports that every month of the Monadnock board's annual calendar includes something related to the nomination and election process. They start thinking about next year's election immediately following their October annual meeting by talking about who was at the annual meeting and who might be a good candidate next year. The nomination committee begins contacting potential candidates in February.

Continuous improvement

No nomination and election process is perfect. Each of the four boards highlighted in this article regularly evaluates its process and makes improvements along the way. David Lee, Kathy Burke, and Joshua Youngblood mentioned that their boards had made big changes in recent memory based on their evaluation of the co-op's and board's needs.

Faye Conte described City Market/Onion River's incremental changes over the past several years. Soon after the election, the board formally evaluates each election by monitoring their executive limitations policy about elections. Periodically the board

also engages in a broader strategic conversation about elections. A recent conversation led to a current project researching other co-op's practices to learn what others are doing to create and maintain robust elections. This focus at both the policy and strategic levels helps the board recognize what is working and what could be better.

The second cooperative principle, democratic member control, highlights the importance of having elected representatives who are accountable to the membership. Your co-op's board of directors is a manifestation of this principle brought to life, and anything you can do to ensure that members choose good representatives will help strengthen your co-op and help your co-op continue to serve your community well into the future. Consider the ideas in this article as a starting point, not the end of the conversation about what it takes to nurture this one aspect of your healthy democracy.

As Marilyn Scholl reminded us in her recent Cooperative Hall of Fame acceptance speech, the best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago—and the second-best time is today. What seed might you and your board plant today that will strengthen and improve your co-op's elections? •

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