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Borrower Profile: Littleton Food Co-op: A Strong Community Asset

Starting a food co-op from scratch is never easy. Building your own facility can make it even harder. So, it is all the more impressive that the Littleton Co-op has been so successful in a small town in rural New Hampshire. The Co-op opened its 13,500 square foot facility in May of 2009, and has been growing ever since. According to General Manager Ed King “in a town of 6,000 people, having 3,600 member owners demonstrates the unique power that comes from community ownership of the co-op”. He expects the Co-op to add another 400 or more members in the coming year.

Beyond the benefits of local ownership, King is also proud that “we’re paying a living wage to our employees and that checks are signed every Friday to people in New Hampshire and Vermont, to suppliers, distributors, and employees”. Unlike most supermarkets, which use a high percentage of part time workers, 30 of the Co-op’s 52 employees work full time. By building a successful business with living wage jobs, the Co-op has had a significant positive impact upon the economy of Littleton and the surrounding area.

The Co-op also plays a strong role in supporting a stronger healthy food system and a stronger community in the area. They’ve established a Partner of the Month Program, in which they collaborate with another local nonprofit group each month to help raise funding and awareness. The “Meet Your Farmer” program offers consumers the opportunity to meet and interact directly

with local growers. In addition, the Littleton Co-op works closely with food banks and will be starting a community garden in 2013. Last November they worked with a local food pantry to provide over 600 food baskets to underprivileged families for Thanksgiving.

The Cooperative Fund of New England (CFNE) has supported the Littleton Food Cooperative with technical assistance and financing for Littleton’s line of credit.

Operating a retail business with significant seasonality means that a line of credit from CFNE has been essential to the store’s ability to manage its cash flow needs during the slower months.

The support of CFNE, the Cooperative Development Institute (CDI), and the Hanover Cooperative were each essential to providing Littleton with the resources it needed to succeed. Having received so much support in starting their Cooperative, Littleton is now proud to be providing expertise and advice to others who are considering starting a food co-op. King himself works with the Neighboring Food Cooperative Association (NCFCA) as an advisor to new startups.

Coming from the corporate world earlier in his career, King says “the switch to working in the cooperative world is enlightening. It is great for morale, and I don’t think I could ever go back”

“If you’re ever in the area, please stop in and visit the Littleton Co-op”, says King.

-profile by Spirit Joseph

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