

# THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

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## **Co-op cares for community, and business**

JIM ASHBY - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

I've spent most of my working life in cooperatives. For more than 20 years I have managed the Community Food Co-op in Bellingham.

It's a uniquely satisfying career because cooperatives are such a different kind of business. Most of those differences revolve around the cooperative's relationship with its owners and the community. The most obvious is that the co-op is community-owned by thousands of area residents who've made small equity investments during the co-op's 40-year history. Another is the board of directors. Unlike most business boards, a cooperative's owners elect the board of directors.

These two factors, alone, tie cooperatives in general, and the Community Food Co-op in particular, into the community to a greater extent than most other businesses.



But for co-ops the impulse toward community support and involvement is more than just a byproduct of community ownership and a democratically elected board. Concern for community is embodied in the seven cooperative principles that define the cooperative business model. These principles, taken together, define a business model that balances the need for profit with the needs of the owners and the interests of the wider community.

For me, the cooperative business model adds a richness to managing a business that simply couldn't be found in other businesses. This model isn't new - cooperatives have been around just about as long as the modern corporation. The wave of food co-ops like ours that started in the early '70s may be the most visible face of cooperatives nowadays, but we've stood on the shoulders of previous generations.

The cooperative business model developed simultaneously in many places around the world in the mid-19th century. Among those was a group of factory workers who were trying to create a better life for themselves and their families. This group in Rochdale, England, is generally credited with creating the first modern cooperative business.

At the time, workers generally relied on company-owned stores that charged very high prices for food and household goods. These workers pooled their limited resources and opened a store where they could buy household staples at reasonable prices.

One key difference from traditional business that the cooperative pioneers incorporated is that cooperatives focus on providing a good or service to their owners, rather than a financial return on investment. When there is a financial return, it's paid to the owners based on how much business they've done with the co-op, not on their level of investment.

But they had a broader vision for how a business should serve its community. To ensure that the business they were creating stayed true to their vision, they developed the first set of guiding principles for cooperatives. These principles have undergone several revisions, but have remained essentially intact and are the core of cooperative values today.

Here at home, the Community Food Co-op board has echoed the cooperative principles through its commitment to promote a sustainable economy by supporting organic and sustainable food production, and other environmentally and socially responsible businesses locally, regionally and nationally. It's been both challenging and very fulfilling over the years to work with the great co-op staff to build a successful business that also serves the board's commitment to community.

As the social safety net unravels and various social and environmental problems are subjected to "market-based solutions" that simply boil down to the ethos of only doing the right thing if a profit can be made, it's refreshing to work in an organization that values the health of the community in equal measure with the health of the business.

Jim Ashby is the general manager of the Community Food Co-op, with stores at Holly and Forest streets downtown and at Cordata Parkway and Westerly Road. The co-op is hosting a community celebration from noon to 5 p.m. Sunday, July 31, at Boulevard Park. Window On My World is an occasional essay in Monday's Bellingham Herald that allows Whatcom County residents to share their passion for what they do, an idea or cause they support. Send your Window On My World, which must be no more than 700 words, to [Julie.shirley@bellinghamherald.com](mailto:Julie.shirley@bellinghamherald.com).

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