



the chronicle

october/november 2005



expansion debate
president's report
gm's report
food issues
committed or consumer?
fall squash and how to squish it
food co-op movements
organic farms
letters to the editor



Store Hours

Monday 11am – 7pm
Tuesday 11am – 9pm
Wednesday 11am – 9pm
Thursday 11am – 9pm
Friday 10am – 9pm
Saturday 10am – 6pm
Sunday 11am – 5pm

Mission Statement

Our aim is to:

- create a community of actively participating members;
- foster a healthy connection to the food we eat, the people who grow it, and the other organizations who share our beliefs;
- co-operatively educate ourselves on environmental issues; and
- exercise political and economic control over our food by operating a viable co-operative food store.

Contact Your Co-op – and Get Involved!

Food Issues Working Group: foodissues@karmacoop.org
Events and Promotions Committee: promotions@karmacoop.org
Member Labour Committee: memberlabour@karmacoop.org
Web Team: web@karmacoop.org
Chronicle Committee: chronicle@karmacoop.org
Board of Directors: board@karmacoop.org
Member labour coordinator: Sara Pulins416-534-1240 or mlc@karmacoop.org

Staff List

General Manager: Graeme Hussey
Grocery Manager: James van Bolhuis
Produce Manager: Michael Armstrong
Health & Beauty Manager: Sara Pulins
Shift Managers: Paul Dixon, Lisa McLean
Bookkeeper: Denise Stapleton
Membership Secretary: Marilou Lawrence
Member Labour Coordinator: Sara Pulins
Clerks: Christine Delay, Mike Haliechuk, Greg Miller





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The Chronicle

**The Members' Newsletter of Karma Food Co-op
October/November 2005**

The Chronicle is published by members of Karma Co-op
739 Palmerston Avenue, Toronto, ON M6G 2R3
416-534-1470, fax 416-534-3697, www.karmacoop.org

The Chronicle is a link between members of this and other cooperative communities; the only viewpoints herein endorsed by Karma Co-op Inc. are those published as reports of the board of directors and its committees.

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Submissions

Submissions may be sent by e-mail, to chronicle@karmacoop.org. Send your submission within the main body of the message. Please do not send attachments. Upcoming editorial deadlines are posted on the bulletin board. *The Chronicle* will publish any Karma-related material, subject to editorial policy guidelines. Letters to the editor must contain the writer's full name and telephone number, although names will be withheld at time of publication upon request. All published articles are eligible for work credits (letters to the editor and announcements are not).

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Letters to the Editor

'Qualifying' for the Board

In July 1989, I received a phone call from the nominating committee, asking me if I would consider running for the board of directors at Karma Co-op, which I had joined in February 1988. I was teaching only half time, and I could find no good reason to refuse.

I couldn't figure out why they chose me. My job had been in set-up in our recently established produce section, and it seemed that the produce manager, Brian Searson, had put my name forward — based, no doubt, upon the few conversations we had had as we worked. I had no previous board experience and no particular skills to offer, nor were any such skills asked for. I thought I would do my time, take my turn, offer what I could, and learn a lot.

I certainly possessed none of the sort of experience or training that the current board has called for via the announcement in the most recent Chronicle, which invites members to run for Karma's board at this year's AGM.

The announcement reads, in part, "Karma members with experience in management, other boards of directors, business planning, strategic planning, marketing, human resources, financial planning, accounting, and law are particularly encouraged to get involved." Faced with such an intimidating list, I doubt that I would have considered myself eligible!

Notwithstanding the obvious need for some board members to possess these skills in order to take on the responsibilities of running the co-op, I find that this invitation goes explicitly against all the rhetoric about democratic participation to which we have lately been subjected, ad nauseam, by some members of the current board.

The message implicit in this call for new board members is that those who do not possess the experience and skills in question need not apply. As such, I find this invitation discriminatory.

I would encourage anyone who is a member and who feels the desire to serve to "just do it." Your service will be valued, whether you are experienced or not. Serving as a member of the board, I experienced — and learned — a great deal. And I believe that I was also able to contribute a great deal. That is the whole point of Karma.

Deborah Cherry

The board responds:

You make an excellent point. Thank you for raising the issue. We need board members and it was certainly not my intention to scare anyone off.

I've been asked by the AGM committee to spread the word about the elections, and I intend to put another notice in The Chronicle, as well

as some posters in the store sometime soon. I will change the text for sure.

I'm thinking of leaving what's there but adding "or simply enthusiasm and a willingness to learn." But feel free to make a suggestion if you can think of better wording.

Your letter is great for drawing attention to the qualifications issue and hopefully increasing awareness of the elections themselves. Debate always gets people talking!

Christie Stephenson, Board Secretary

Problematic Plastics

I have been shopping, doing my work shifts, and loving Karma for about five years now. I recently began to wonder if, in the busy world that is Karma, there's any way Karma could help me with what I consider to be my worst recycling problem — old, non-reusable plastic. I try not to purchase too much plastic, carry my cotton shopping bags everywhere, refuse bags, and recycle all I can, but I still feel horrible about the number of plastic items I put in the garbage.

I know Karma has plastic recycling but I also know we have to pay for it. I would be willing to pay for the plastic I need to recycle in order to lessen Karma's costs. Is there any way Karma could take on the measurement of how much plastic each member brings in and accept payment from the membership to put toward recycling costs? Or is there another solution I don't know of for recycling my plastic?

Katherine-Anne Skinner

Designer Foods No Diversity

Food has never been so corporatized. From seed to harvest, feedlot to butcher counter, corporations have industrialized and commodified food at every stage of production. After the Second World War, an agricultural model swept across the globe — the Green Revolution. It consisted of modern agricultural practices such as monocultures, chemical inputs, and genetic engineering. Overall, the corporate reorganization of agriculture has concentrated power into a small number of agrochemical conglomerates that control the production and distribution of much of the world's food, that remove food from the local landscape, and that are responsible for the ascendancy of industrially processed food products. I would like to discuss this final result.

A basic operating principle of modern capitalism is the generation of shareholder profits. In the food sector, this is best achieved by transforming inexpensive raw food into expensive processed products, for example, replacing natural sugars such as cane sugar or maple syrup with refined sugars, fructose, or Nutrasweet. Just compare the price of an apple with that of an apple toaster pastry or an apple-fig-yogurt bar. Row upon row of designer snack foods illustrates the success of this model.

I raise this issue because of the increasing importance that Karma members, staff, and the board are giving to the availability of “a greater range of products” at Karma. Not only do we already carry a very wide selection of natural foods — produce, grains, nuts, meat, breads, and beverages — but we also offer a number of luxury processed items as well, including specialty desserts, 16 varieties of salad dressing, and an overwhelming array of soy-based meat substitutes, all of which act to strengthen corporate power in the food industry and class divisions in society at large. The question we must ask ourselves is whether Karma — no pauper when it comes to food selection — truly needs more?

When members, staff, or the board call for “a greater range of products,” they’re often (although not always) referring to prepared foodstuffs. Indeed, rarely have I heard anyone say that they wished we had a greater variety of apples. The expectation that we should carry a range of products similar to that of our corporate grocer counterparts is short-sighted, for it ignores the interconnectedness of food, culture, and power. Indeed, processed foodstuffs are part and parcel of a now hegemonic industrial food culture. Not only does our enjoyment of such products give greater muscle to large-scale industrial operations, but it also legitimizes the involvement of food processors, manufacturers, and technicians, increasing the physical and social distance between farmers and consumers.

Despite claims to greater food selection, the designer foods that stock our shelves have in fact not encouraged any real diversity. Indeed, food industrialists use false variegation (low-fat, no-fat, sea-salt, Himalayan-salt, sugar-free, fruit-juice-sweetened, etc.) and scale (a plethora of items in industrial-sized stores) to create the illusion of variety. Much of this illusion is based on branding and not genuine variety. In fact, the ingredients have been standardized in large monocultural farms and vast chemical laboratories. These processed products thus conflict with many of Karma’s stated aims, including the fostering of “a healthy connection to the food we eat [and] the people who grow it,” and of environmental sustainability and social equity.

We know that economic globalization is changing the world, more often than not for the worse. Part of our power in a market-driven economy, then, is to choose whether or not to support farmers or transnational corporations. Karma is a genuine, viable, and inspiring counter-movement to the shame that is corporate food culture. Next time you hear someone call for more products at Karma ask them if they’ve really thought through their intent. Indeed, imagining and building a better world — a more sustainable, safe, and just world for all — necessarily implies personal sacrifice, that is, giving up the expectations that form the basis of our self-indulgent lifestyles. We can do this by lowering our dependence on corporate power, which, to the dismay of many, including myself, may mean giving up that oh-so-tasty triple fudge brownie soy ice cream.

Mohsen Al Attar Ahmed

Survey Too Personal

I’ve just completed the annual survey. I found a number of its questions, particularly the ones about household income, age, and ethnicity, to be invasive, especially in light of the fact that the survey results are not anonymous (household numbers are asked for). I understand that answering any of the questions is optional, but if a number of people choose not to answer, then the reliability of the survey is thrown into doubt. In any case, I can’t help wondering what purposes the designer of the survey had in mind by including such sensitive questions.

Elaine Smookler

Leave of Absence

It has come to my attention that one of our board members is spending a full year living in another province. The fact that our community co-op would allow itself to be directed by someone who isn’t even here surprises me. The fact that the board saw fit to keep him in place concerns me. Surely there are other qualified, willing members to fill in during his extended absence. What’s going on here?

Perry Gladstone

Current Concerns

I’m writing about four specific issues surrounding the current expansion and governance discussion at Karma Co-op. To date, these issues have not been sufficiently debated by the membership, and have certainly not been addressed by the board. Some member owners may not even be aware of them.

The first issue is member labour. Member labour is being devalued in multiple ways by the current board at both the operations (store) level and the governance (board) level. This devaluation of member labour has led to a lack of member input into decision-making. Karma’s member owners are being reduced to mere shoppers, and operating procedures that once allowed member owners dignity and autonomy are being changed without membership input, sacrificed to a market-driven “bottom line.” The institutional memory that allowed for flexibility in matters such as membership fees and shopping lists — allowing member owners to pay them at their convenience when necessary — has been replaced by rigid policies that treat member owners as visitors in their own store.

The second issue is the undemocratic governance model that has been proposed, and in part imposed, by the current board at Karma. Our tradition holds that major policy changes occur after membership consultation, debate, and democratic voting. This has not happened in regard to the Participatory Policy Governance model. Instead, “debate” via Dotmocracy has been imposed — and Dotmocracy is undemocratic. In Dotmocracy, people can vote twice, some people don’t get to vote at all, there is no debate, and the results are controlled and interpreted by the board. At last year’s AGM, one Dotmocracy proposal gathered 10 favourable dots out of an attendance of 88. The proposal was nonetheless

reported as having “Strong Majority Approval.” (The proposal? “Karma Should Consider Opening Additional Stores.”) In this case, Dotmocracy replaced democratic voting.

Participatory Policy Governance, which has not been adopted by the membership, is the template by which the current board is operating. The board is implementing efficiency models that override Karma’s standard operating procedures. These corporate models — which influenced the recent decision by the board to change several committees into so-called “working groups” reporting to the general manager — have led to hierarchy and a concentration of power at the general manager and board levels. The fact is, Policy Governance and actual participation are antithetical, because Policy Governance is based upon the relationship between a board and a CEO. It does not allow for member participation. “Participatory” Policy Governance is a term created by the board to legitimize the use of Policy Governance at Karma.

The third issue is the current board’s communication style. The board says its surveys, Dotmocracy, and Web binder are part of a strategy for “open communication.” But these devices are not truly participatory, and as we saw at last year’s AGM, they are easily manipulated to serve the interests of those who set them up.

The fourth issue is perhaps the most unsettling: the board seems to have a hidden agenda. It has created a new brochure that downplays working membership, it has proposed corporate governance models, and it is concentrating power at the board and general manager levels. These changes have never been explained to the membership, and Karma’s member owners have never approved them.

The board and general manager say we must increase our revenues, because (as the general manager wrote in the April/May 2005 Chronicle) this is a “basic concept in business and one that is even more relevant in the retail food industry.” But Karma Co-op is not part of the retail food industry — it’s an alternative to it.

The current board is trying to shift members’ perceptions of Karma Co-op. But Karma has its own ethos. It’s rare in the world, and it should not be abandoned in favour of “efficiency” or a growth in profits.

The above issues must be part of the debate over governance and expansion if Karma’s member owners are to keep control of their store. Only then can we decide, collectively and democratically, how we might choose to grow.

Geoff Webb

Report from the President of the Board

Contribute to Our Common Vision

Jason Diceman

October 2005 will be an important month in the history of Toronto. Beyond whatever items top the news, a story about the future will play out in a little food co-op on Palmerston Avenue.

Fears of impending climate change, an energy crisis, and economic depression ripple through our society. Meanwhile, hundreds of active Torontonians who care about community, the environment, sustainability, and healthful foods work to find a common vision of their ideal co-op food store.

Karma’s activities will be a positive story in the history of our grandchildren. Will we decide to grow our membership? Offer new services? Increase our positive impact by selling more ethical groceries? Or refine our services for the membership?

Speaking for Karma

Will we move to a bigger store? Risk opening another store? Or maybe just fix the cracks in our building? Will we be a quiet example of an alternative groceries model? Or will we be the recognized champion of ethical groceries and an experienced leader in a revitalized co-op movement?

We all have opinions and ideas, but independently none of us can speak for Karma. Through responses to the special Business Planning Bulletin, comments posted on our Web binder (<http://karma.1coop.ca/Expansion+Debate>), the results of our annual survey, and the outcomes of the Visioning Session at the Annual General Meeting, we aim to aggregate as many opinions as possible so as to find the popular vision.

Break from Traditional Debate

From these collected opinions and further research, the Business Planning Committee will assemble a formal proposal to be voted on by the membership at another general meeting within the following months. The Visioning Session at this year’s AGM will be a pivotal element in this process. It will



allow members to discuss their ideas face-to-face in small groups, write short proposals, and use dotmocracy to recognize levels of approval for the various ideas. It will be an exciting break from the traditional debate from the floor and promises to be fun and constructive.

Please take the time to read the Business Planning Bulletin, write letters, fill in the annual survey (www.karmacoop.org and in print in the store), and attend the AGM at Friends House on October 24. Or take a step further and run for the board, so you can help our vision become a reality. Send your letter of interest to board@karmacoop.org.

We are making history every day. Take the time to shape it.

See you at the AGM!

Karma's Annual General Meeting

Monday, October 24, 2005
Friends House
60 Lowther

Doors open at 5 pm, food is available at 5:30 pm, meeting starts at 6 pm, and we aim to end by 9 pm.

The meeting will include a 2010 Visioning Session where members can discuss in small groups their ideas of what Karma will be like in 2010.

Healthy snacks will be served and child care will be available.

For more info visit KarmaCoop.org/agm.

Report from the General Manager

Capital Investment

Graeme Hussey

You may have noticed several new pieces of equipment arrive at Karma in September. A small grocery store in Kensington Market closed, which meant that several pieces of equipment were available for a good price. Karma purchased a new deli cooler, two stand-up fridges, and some new shelving.

I want to thank member Ryan Penn, who helped us to identify this opportunity. I also want to extend thanks to the staff and the many members who helped deliver and install the equipment. Lots of co-operation made this transition go smoothly. If you would like to help with this type of project in the future, let me know.

The new equipment was needed to replace several older coolers and shelves, which had come to their much-used end. It will help us reduce both our maintenance costs and our energy costs, while allowing us to improve and increase the products we sell at Karma.

In the remainder of the fiscal year, we hope to continue the capital reinvestment project by improving our freezers; that is, by switching from chest freezers to stand-up freezers wherever possible. We also intend to replace some of our grocery carts with smaller carts and improve the bicycle parking outside. These projects were identified by members as important tasks to take on.

At the beginning of October, Karma started its third annual membership survey. The survey helps identify the membership's common values. This year, the survey will focus on certain business planning considerations. I encourage all members to complete the survey and let their voices be heard.

Meanwhile, if you have suggestions for capital investment or other operational ideas, please share them with me in person, by phone, or by e-mail (manager@karmacoop.org).



Alternative Views on Expanding Karma

Before putting together the Special Bulletin on business planning, the Business Planning Committee solicited opinions from Karma members on Karma's Web binder (<http://karma.1coop.ca/Expansion+Debate>). Below are two full letters followed by a selection of opinions from that page in the binder. Much could not be included, so readers are encouraged to look in the virtual binder for themselves.

Terry Fowler, Chronicle Committee

Although I am not as involved with Karma now as I was in years past, I am aware that there has been a debate recently around expanding Karma. Part of what I have heard and seen in the last couple of months has been mistrust and accusations rather than debate, and they have extended well beyond the scope of your committee and the issue of whether or not, and how, Karma should expand. It feels to me like the atmosphere has become somewhat poisoned, and that, among other things, has been clouding some important matters. Perhaps your e-mail to Karma members outlining the pros and cons of expansion and asking for consultation and direction will help clear the air a little. I certainly hope so.

From the time I joined Karma Food Co-op in 1973, I have been in favour of doing whatever we can to have more people shop co-operatively and to strengthen the co-operative movement. To that end, I volunteered full-time for two years at the Ontario Federation of Food Clubs and Cooperatives [OFFCC, now the Ontario Natural Food Co-op] doing development work — giving whatever help and advice I could to people wanting to start food co-operatives around Ontario. In the years both preceding and following, I have attempted to be as supportive as possible to any and all development attempts. Unhappily, there was little growth in the retail food co-op sector in Ontario during that time, nor has there been much since.

During all of Karma's existence, there have been many members who have argued to keep Karma small, who believe that we are not a retail business, and who are happy for the store to carry a narrow range of products. In my view, people of that mentality have always resisted change at Karma, whether it has been opposing the decision to carry meat, allowing members to become non-working, establishing a variable markup, buying a produce cooler, creating a general manager position, hiring a produce manager, launching a membership drive, and many more positive advances. I believe that viewing Karma with that sort of thinking is a recipe for the co-op's failure, and it has been victories over that kind of mentality that have allowed us to survive.

I have long believed that Karma should expand, and I most definitely continue to feel that way now. I would welcome a move to a storefront, either on a main street or side street, as long as we took every conceivable precaution to ensure that it was a financially sound move. Failing that, I would support expanding at the property we now own, and perhaps acquiring more property nearby. I personally would be delighted if we had more space in which to shop, a greater range and mix of products, an office that gives the staff a bit more elbow room, more storage space, a member's area, a deli, and a larger parking lot to serve both delivery people and members. I have to confess that I am quite skeptical of the idea to leave Karma as is while trying to start another, larger Karma elsewhere in the city. I think that that would be very difficult to pull off.

Your list of arguments, pro and con expansion, is quite exhaustive, and I'm not sure what I could add. The anti-expansion folks may not be aware of the many food co-ops in the U.S. that have moved and/or grown in recent years and could serve as models for Karma. I think that the same Karma folks are mistaken if they believe that we are a small community of people who shop in a store where most people know many of the other members. That may have been true at one time, but we have long since outgrown that. They may also be unaware or have chosen to ignore the ongoing series of crises that have brought Karma close to collapse over the years. It is hard for me to imagine that things will be any different in that regard if we maintain the status quo — we have not been nearly so successful during our 33 years as some might like to believe.

I hope you receive a lot of informed and thoughtful responses to your e-mail and that they lead to a stronger and more unified Karma.

Bob Biderman

Bob Biderman has written a public letter supporting the expansion of Karma, for which he gives no direct explanation. One might ask why. To uncover the reason, let's look closely at his letter.

Bob observes that for some months an atmosphere of "mistrust and accusations" has existed at Karma, beyond the limit of the recently initiated expansion discussion. He is quite correct. There are currently two issues at hand, and the expansion debate is only one of them, although they are related.

In early spring, a number of disturbing issues concerning the management of Karma emerged within the membership, and several attempts have been initiated to communicate on these. As of September, when expansion was indeed revealed as the objective of the board/GM/Business Planning Committee, none of these management issues had been clearly addressed. This is the dark cloud that hangs over the expansion discussion — the distrust generated by the tendency of our board/GM (I refer to them as one



entity because they have been functioning as one entity) toward secrecy and control.

The clue to Bob's preference for expansion lies in his comment that "[T]he anti-expansion folks may not be aware of the many food co-ops in the U.S. that have moved and/or grown in recent years and could serve as models for Karma."

Our board/GM has presented us with some examples of successful co-op expansions. A number have been glowingly reported in *Co-operative Grocer*, a magazine that appears to be tolerant of only one possibility in this matter: an American-style approach of strictly economic control of the agenda. That is the road to which we have been directed.

At Karma, the business and co-operative sides of the enterprise have long existed in a sometimes uneasy state of cohabitation. It is clear that the business cannot be allowed to fail, and that said, the co-operative also cannot be allowed to fail, or to survive only in a greatly diminished form. A study of "successful" American examples reveals a situation where the business succeeds magnificently and co-operative participation exists mainly in paying a fee and (perhaps) attending meetings. In this model, co-operative participation is purchased as a commodity. The co-operative tradition of members contributing labour to the store is diminished if not outright eliminated.

In its discussion of Karma's values, our board/GM — which has selected these values — does not question the direction in which Karma will be moving and what kind of co-operative its members want. I have done hours of independent research on the co-op movement and have discovered a few things in the process.

The People's Food Co-op in Portland, Oregon, is clearly a financial success in its ecologically sensitive new US\$930,000 expansion and renovation built on its property. However, only about 100 of its 3,000 members work in the store on a regular basis. The expansion exercise was a response to a perceived threat: the opening of several competing commercial "whole foods" supermarkets in the area of the co-op.

Sacramento (California) Natural Foods Co-op, which has recently opened a second store, has 10,000 members, with 100–150 of them working. The manager, Paul Cultrera, pointed out to me the inevitable connection between an expanding membership and a parallel decline in working members. It is worth noting that this expansion into a second store was a member-driven initiative, and not board/GM-driven as is the case at Karma.

The matter of member participation in the store is, I suggest, a key issue, and one that has not been addressed at Karma. The central issue is: what kind of co-operative do we want? Is it a business co-op because of its ownership structure? Or a more inclusive co-op in which a substantial percentage of members choose to work? By working in their co-operative, members gain the very real value that this form of participation creates in both human and financial terms.

These questions, and the debate they engender, must precede any expansion and/or relocation initiative. It would express who we are as a community and where, therefore, we wish to go.

What do we want as member owners? An earlier expansion committee at Karma looked at this issue. But unlike the current board/GM, the expansion committee of 1987 did not pre-select the option that they intended to succeed.

As to the benefits of working in our co-op, I would like to paraphrase the words of Joe Holtz, the longtime general manager of Park Slope Food Co-op in Brooklyn, New York, which has 11,000 members. Park Slope has fended off financial problems and succeeded both financially and as a co-operative by becoming *more* of a traditional co-op rather than less of one ("A Suggestion for Co-op Survival," from <http://cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/index.php?id=425>).

As Holtz says, working helps strengthen the connection one feels. The feeling of ownership one gets from working co-operatively far exceeds that felt from only a monetary equity investment. Working will usually put members much more in touch with co-operative values and principles. One-price/one-work-requirement/everyone-a-member fosters a feeling of equality and camaraderie. When members work in consistent groups, the amount of responsibility that the group can take on far exceeds what you could expect from individuals not in a consistent group. When people join for savings and years later no longer really need the savings, they tend to remain members because they feel connected. They realize that co-operative values and principles are important to them.

Charles Danzker

If we want to create a better world via food co-operatives, then we need to encourage others to create their own local food co-op communities. Rather than expand and open new stores, we should be creating information and support programs for others, to help them get started in their own areas. If we really care about the well-being of others, and opportunities to build the co-op movement, then Karma, its board, and its members should become a catalyst to help others create and sustain their own.

Perry Gladstone

I can't afford the time to work at Karma, so now I don't have the dough to shop at Karma, much as I'd like to. I'm all for lower prices. The whole point of my joining Karma, as for many other members, was not for personal gain through buying healthier foods (although it is a plus) but mostly for a chance to opt out of a food system that was not environmentally or socially responsible. Thus, the goal of Karma is to invite other members of the community to share in this. What better way than to expand? More community space only enhances this aspect.

David Banerjee

I think the greatest benefit of expansion would be the increase in the numbers of people buying eco-friendly products and organic and local food. The produce at Karma is especially great, and with more space and more members, the selection could be even better. Karma helps teach its members about living sustainably and in harmony with nature and neighbours. Why not enlighten more people?

Allison Mitchell

While it is perfectly reasonable to present an expansion proposal to the Karma membership (this was done in detail in 1990, when a proposal was defeated in a democratic vote at the AGM), one must question the intention of this board and the Business Planning Committee in doing so. Such an intention — the apparent agenda — was clearly outlined by the general manager (who was president of the board at the time) in an article he wrote in the April/May 2004 *Chronicle*. Here the need for expansion is explained: “To maintain our competitiveness, we must increase our revenues on a year-to-year basis. This is a basic concept in business and one that is even more relevant in the retail food industry.” The reasoning behind this assertion, which does not position Karma as a unique owner-operated co-operative, remains unexplained. No study or report that supports the viability of this statement is referenced. By constantly adapting to meet the challenges of its environment, Karma seems well positioned to go its own unique way into the future. There may be 2,500 supermarkets in Toronto and only one Karma, but one may well ask why 2,501 supermarkets and no Karma is a better solution.

Charles Danzker

Charles, you completely echo my thoughts and concerns about the lack of vision that seems to be present about the wonder that is Karma, [a place that] offers a rare opportunity to relate to something very basic — a humane way to source and distribute whole food and other things that make the human experience a little kinder and gentler. It feels important to continue to nurture our precious diamond, in all its seemingly imperfect glory. I feel the membership could benefit from some reinvigorating around the awareness that Karma is a unique and special place. Based on my experience as a member of the Orientation Committee, I think people are excited once they understand the possibilities that Karma offers.

Elaine Smookler

[I'd like to see] a larger store at a new location in the same neighbourhood. We can design it as an eco-community space (e.g., seating areas, cob structures, green roof, natural lighting, kids' area, living wall, etc.). It would not necessarily be that expensive, and we need to be an example. I think it is just the kind of project that would attract more members and [would] be very cosy and friendly. Straw-bale building is also very cost efficient, and is an approved building practice in the City of Toronto. We

don't want to be elitist; let's show Toronto what a truly innovative and environmentally sustainable store can be like.

Colette Murphy

I personally would like to see another branch of Karma, perhaps closer to where I live so that I could shop more often.

SR

Karma is a Toronto treasure and I just want to say how thankful I am it exists. I would join if there were a branch nearer me.

Ann Denny

We can't expand where we are. I know the neighbours, and they have enough trouble with Karma the size it is. They would not tolerate expansion. (Where? Upwards?) Starting a second store: fine. You want to start up another food co-op? Great! We'll help, and support you any way we can — [but with] a *separate* store. I'm not interested in expansion for the sake of expansion. Karma was started by people who wanted an alternative to the corporate model. I still want an alternative to the corporate model.

Elizabeth Block

I think we should expand to a single new site near our current location. I think it is important that people should know about Karma and be given the chance to join — the more people become interested in organic products, the better for the industry and our environment. Just because the store becomes a bit bigger, I don't see why that needs to affect the relaxed environment that currently exists.

S

The basic source of the pressure for expansion has not been articulated. Are we facing ruin if we continue as we are? Are we unable to accept new members due to lack of space in the store? Do we have a moral duty to expand and expose more people to the wonders of co-operation? We should always be open to consideration of possible improvements to the present situation, but for a co-op, unlike a capitalist enterprise, growth is not a measure of success.

Pierre Beeckmans

As others have already said, bigger is not always better. However the current [building] needs a lot of improving, and like it or not will eventually require some very costly repairs and upgrades. As a newcomer to Karma, I noticed that many of



my fellow shoppers weren't as friendly and welcoming as I had imagined them to be. I realized that for many longtime Karma members, this was their private little oasis in the city, their "culture" as I have read in previous postings. Although newcomers keep Karma alive, I suspect that many members would like to keep Karma as insular as possible. That attitude will kill Karma. The whole point of Karma Co-op is to bring people together and encourage responsible and healthy buying. I find it sad that so many people aren't seeing the bigger picture. I predict that the hardcore membership will oppose any change and that this may ultimately kill Karma. Perhaps an alternative to expanding the current [store] would be to encourage the formation of a second co-op, perhaps in the east end of the city. This could attract a new membership and might not take away too many from the existing membership.

Anonymous

I strongly support the suggestion that an expansion, additional branch, or relocation will include a cafe and community space. I joined Karma 10 months ago not just for shopping, but to get involved with a community. But it hasn't really worked out that way. If Karma had a cafe where members could meet each other and talk, I think it would promote democracy and a stronger personal commitment to the co-op.

Kristin Andrews

I am happy with [Karma] the way it is now and have no personal need for change, but maybe it's time for us to adapt to the current environment and to make our practices and ideas more visible and accommodating. I like the idea that people will learn about the co-op movement through our visibility. It's important, though, that there are people who are willing to do the work to see this good idea through and help make it happen.

Ruth Danziger

I'm not necessarily against expansion — there are several reasons why it might be a good idea to move to a bigger store. I just don't believe that getting bigger and attracting more people should be our main focus, [which should be] providing our current membership with better service. [The list of pros and cons states] "Too many members make [Karma] less democratic" and "There will be less member participation. [The list answers:] "If we offer new services that are driven by member labour, this would increase participation." What a load of rubbish. For years there has been a core of people committed to the original concepts of Karma. These are the eight or so people who show up to the meetings and talk. Then there is the ever-expanding mass of people who just want to shop. What new services are we going to offer that are going to be member-labour driven? Have you seen the stats on member labour? Member labour cannot be relied on. Ask any staff member. I'm concerned about how many of our original ideals will need to be compromised. We will

grow anyway, especially if we are to move into a bigger building. I strongly believe that this kind of growth is not our main priority.

Scott Maynard

I had many reservations about joining the co-op. I was more interested in global solutions, and felt that a local solution like the co-op would sap my energy and time for larger questions. I have since decided that my hatred of supermarkets outweighs my need to wait for a better future. I must still fight for a better future but I also need a local fix right now.

This dichotomy is also the dichotomy that faces Karma. There is a need to provide a comfortable and ethical shopping environment for members and the desire on the part of many members to provide a better world for all shoppers and suppliers. I think the two things are essentially separate. Karma can't do both.

Karma works because it is small scale, comfortable, and provides great produce at a reasonable price. If it expands, it may reach a larger segment of the buying public, but it will no longer provide the services that members joined for in the first place, and it will no longer be responsive to the needs of its members.

I am a member of two credit unions, and I would be hard put, beyond the fact that I paid a membership fee, to tell you how they differ from my local bank. I suppose the staff are treated a bit better, but I feel just as divorced from the process of banking as I did at the bank. The products are no better than at my local bank, and there are still huge lineups. Similarly, beyond my membership fee, I don't feel anything particularly special at Mountain Equipment Co-op. In fact, when a friend complained to MEC that they were buying socks from a factory that was on strike, they didn't seem to care, and certainly didn't stop getting socks from that supplier. They explained to my friend that they didn't get involved in labour disputes. How ethical is that?

I think the need to expand the co-op movement and to come up with better ways to support sustainable agriculture are both very important issues that must be dealt with on a political level. We, as part of the co-op movement, need to go after the government to give more seed money to co-ops. Similarly, we have to get the government to give more money to support sustainable agriculture. However, this doesn't mean that Karma itself needs to get bigger. I don't think that it could sustain its character if it got much bigger, and its character is what most members cherish.

Carol Schwartz

I'm surprised that some Karma members are so reluctant to change. Karma, food co-ops, and organic agriculture are all about change. With more people able to access a great place like Karma, we can nourish better ways of growing food, selling food, and buying food.



I would support a business plan that develops a larger membership and more easily accessible food aisles and shelves. A cafe and deli at Karma would be a terrific way of increasing the community feel of the place.

Erika O'Hara

I think that the idea of opening a new store is a good one. It would attract new members, increase consumer awareness, and expand the community.

Ashley Walters

I personally think that Karma should stay right where it is. I think that expanding will threaten the co-operative values that formed this dear place decades ago. More people is not a good thing, especially when many of these people come to the co-op for reasons other than the mandates of Karma. I agree that Karma is short on space. But I wonder, why do we need so many different types of jam, salad dressings, soy milks, and so on? Can we not eliminate some of them? Many of them are owned by huge food conglomerates and should not be given shelf space in our ethically minded store anyway. As the wholesale catalogues grow and grow, and more and more varieties of organic and natural products come onto the market, do we need to be stocking all of them? Do we need to become a second Big Carrot or Whole Foods in that regard?

Brandy Humes

I joined Karma as a working member this summer. Why? First of all, I can afford the prices. In fact, I could afford to be a non-working member: I make a lot more money at my job (computer consulting) in two hours than I save on 10 per cent of my groceries. So why join as a working member? In an ideal world, I would not pay anyone to serve me food, organize where it comes from, or produce it. Instead, I would be a part of all of that. Karma is part of my community, and it's been here longer than I have. It's unique and it represents an opportunity for me to learn something and contribute. I have found people at the store to be very friendly and welcoming, and supportive in every way. What causes members to want to work? Is it the economic incentive? Something tells me otherwise... a bigger store would not help.

[The only form of expansion I would support would be the creation of] information and support programs for others to help them get started in their own areas. This can begin with creating a history of Karma, something very important for new members such as myself. With a solid understanding of our goals and of the way we operate, an interested member could volunteer to speak on behalf of Karma at schools or community groups, or to present proposals to government to shape policy in a way that is friendly to our collective goals. I would be willing to take on that kind of work. Maybe the only kind of history I can get is an oral or piecemeal one. But these things strike me as being

the important projects, not a vague notion of expansion, where one is either "for" or "against" and where we must pick from a pre-compiled list of options.

Chris Wiseman

I have been following the debate, and while I also have "wish lists," I am frustrated by the lack of information. Has any market research been done? Do we know who our former, present, and potential members are? Where do most of our members come from geographically? Is there a potential for a larger store at the present site, or would it make more sense to open a smaller store in an area of potential growth? (Based on membership info, demographics, voting patterns, dog-walking stats, or just some freakin' info!) I am really hesitant to base the economic viability of Karma Co-op on what some people "want" without some solid information to go on.

Ken Mac

Report from the Food Issues Working Group

Why cloth napkins cleaned with Seventh Generation detergent are better...

Grant Kerr

You may have noticed that a couple of products have gone AWOL from Karma shelves these past few weeks. During the ongoing process of evaluating the products we sell at Karma and removing those products that aren't in line with our Product Policy, we've identified a few questionable items. We have recommended to the board and the general manager that we stop stocking these products, so that's why they are no longer available. Here's the what and why.

Kleenex Napkins

At the July board meeting, the board endorsed a new Boycott Policy developed by the Food Issues Working Group and based on Karma's Product Policy and previous Boycott Policy. The new policy can be viewed on Karma's Web binder (<http://karma.1coop.ca/tiki-index.php?page=Boycott+Policy>).

This policy set the path for Karma to participate in a boycott sponsored by Greenpeace, the Rainforest Action Network, and

several other environmental groups against Kimberly-Clark, the parent company of Kleenex. In North America, less than 19 per cent of the pulp that Kimberly-Clark uses for its disposable tissue products comes from recycled sources. The rest comes directly from virgin forests such as Canada's boreal forest. Despite the fact that it has the capacity to make a much higher percentage of its products from post-consumer recycled fibre, Kimberly-Clark chose, in 2004, to use 3 million metric tonnes (3.3 million tons) of virgin fibre to produce its tissue paper products globally. The Kimberly-Clark Corporation has been unwilling to improve its practices, continuing to rely on paper and pulp made from clear-cut ancient forests including Canada's boreal forest. These vital forests, essential in fighting climate change and providing home to wildlife like caribou, wolves, eagles, and bears, are made into products that are flushed down the toilet or thrown away.

Kimberly-Clark, the largest tissue product company in the world, produces 3.7 million tonnes of tissue products annually and generates net sales of \$14.3 billion US. The company has offices, factories, and mills in 38 countries, and its products are sold in 150 countries. Kimberly-Clark also produces a line of commercial toilet paper and paper towels that are sold to institutions like universities, high schools, governments, and businesses.

The organizers of the boycott have three issues that must be addressed by Kimberly-Clark before they will lift the boycott. Kimberly-Clark is to:

- *stop purchasing virgin fibre from endangered forests immediately;
- *increase drastically the amount of recycled fibre that it uses for all its tissue products including Kleenex brand toilet paper, facial tissue, and napkins;
- *buy virgin fibre only from Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) eco-certified forests (the FSC is the only guarantee that forests are managed with care).

November 3 has been called as an International Day of Action for the boreal forest, so keep your eyes and ears open for local events — and if you hear of any, please let us know! Also, please encourage your friends, families, co-workers, and perhaps even your place of business to stop using Kleenex products until Kimberly-Clark complies.

For more information on the boycott and the issues surrounding it, please call or write Greenpeace Canada, or check out their Web site on this issue at www.kleercut.net.

ABC Laundry Detergent

This one's a little fuzzier. The Food Issues Working Group and Karma staff have received a lot of questions in the past regarding this laundry detergent, and so, with our product research system taking shape, we finally undertook to research ABC. A primary concern about this product (as with most other detergents and soaps) is the presence of phosphates. In nature, the availability of phosphate governs the rate of growth of many organisms. The dumping of phosphates from dishwashing or laundry detergent into our water systems can increase the level of phosphates in streams, rivers, and lakes, causing ecological disequilibrium.

When we contacted Colgate-Palmolive, the manufacturers of ABC, to find out if its product contains phosphates, company representatives refused to disclose any ingredients, citing the need to protect their product formula. Based on our knowledge of most conventional detergents and soaps, we feel it is fair to assume that ABC does in fact contain phosphates; however, this is an unverified assumption at this point.

The other, more serious concern (with respect to our Product Policy) is that Colgate-Palmolive has been known to practice animal testing. In our talks with the company, officials were unwilling to confirm or deny whether they still conduct animal product testing.

Karma's Product Policy lists animal testing as a condemnable factor in purchasing decisions. This, in combination with our concern about possible phosphates in the product, has prompted us to remove it from our shelves. Karma offers excellent alternatives to this product, including Seventh Generation and Nature Clean detergents (offered in cost-effective bulk).

Please contact us at foodissues@karmacoop.org if you have any questions or concerns about the information contained here or our actions on them.

Sources: Greenpeace Canada (www.kleercut.net), Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), the Sierra Club (www.sierraclub.org).



Budgets, Bonuses, and Blackouts

An overview of the board's summer activities

Michael Boulger and Terry Fowler

Evaluations of Graeme Hussey's performance as general manager, the 2006 budget, and proposals for a possible expansion were among the items on the agenda of Karma's board of directors over the summer. The board has also spent considerable time formulating a new job description for the general manager and negotiating a new compensation package with Hussey, who took over in January of this year.

The board's priorities were discussed at the May meeting. There was general agreement that the five-year business plan should be the mandate of the Karma board. Communication with members was also slated as high-priority work. However, after discussing the recent Karma Caucus, which was called earlier in May for members to discuss Karma's policy and governing processes (see the June/July issue of *The Chronicle*), it was decided that another one would not be held.

Modest Surplus

The 2006 budget was approved, and members will be pleased to know that we ended our 2004–2005 fiscal year with a modest overall surplus (the exact amount will be confirmed at the AGM). At the August board meeting, treasurer Amy Stein reported that Karma is in a better financial position than last year at this time. The full auditor's report will be available at the AGM on October 24.

Christmas bonuses for the staff, although discretionary and variable in the past, are now being considered a regular budget item. The board agreed that bonuses needed to come out of each year-end budget. There was some disagreement on how closely such bonuses should be tied to the co-op's financial situation at the time. The point was also made that all bonuses could be tied to the performance of the employee. At the August board meeting, Stein, Todd Parsons, and Hussey were asked to prepare a proposal for a bonus system for the September meeting of the board.

Working off Labour Debt

The Member Labour Committee reported that its primary task in the near future was to find ways to encourage members to work off their debts in hours prior to the next annual reconciliation. Members who

fail to achieve a zero balance by the next annual reconciliation could lose their shopping privileges.

Concern was raised about households for which there is only one membership and in which more than one person is shopping. There was discussion about allowing a multi-member household to have a membership with reduced loan and labour obligations. It was decided to defer this dialogue for the 2005–2006 board to tackle.

Anti-oppression and anti-discrimination training for staff and board members was approved in principle at the May meeting, but by the July meeting, funds had been found only for training of the staff, some of whom have apparently already taken similar training outside of Karma. The budget and scale of the training has not yet been decided.

Kleenex Off the Shelves

The board supported a boycott of pulp and paper giant Kimberly-Clark (which uses unsustainable logging practices to make Kleenex), suggested by the Food Issues Working Group. The boycott was originally created by Greenpeace. Karma has now pulled Kleenex paper napkins from our shelves. The napkins never sold well, and in any case, do not comply with our Product Policy (see article in this issue for further details). There has been some rewording of Karma's Boycott Policy. It was decided that the general manager will publicize a list of Karma's current boycotts once a year.

A blackout backup plan was discussed. Hussey will look into costs for generators and fridges that run on battery power. The major loss during a blackout would be spoiled frozen meat. It was suggested that a huge Karma Blackout Barbecue be held the first night of such an occurrence!

The May, July, and August meetings ended with board members going *incamera* to finalize their evaluation of our general manager's performance. The evaluation was based on a framework prepared by Sarah Fairley, Karma's previous general manager. According to president of the board Jason Diceman, Hussey's evaluation was based on observations of the store by board members, praise or concerns from the members, and interviews with other staff. The assessment also relied on the GM's own monthly and year-end reports.

Diceman told *The Chronicle* that there has been positive feedback from both members and staff, and that Hussey "has shown finesse and dedication in his new role," although there is also still room for improvement. Diceman said that the board is in the final stages of negotiating the GM's new contract.



Opinion

Committed or Consumer?

Elaine Smookler

September 12, 2005: Listening to NBC Nightly News discussing the victims of Hurricane Katrina, I was astounded to hear a broadcaster say that "many customers would be without water and hydro." Not "citizens" — "customers." It made me wonder what happens when we see ourselves as mere customers.

Years ago, I joined Karma as a non-working member, happy to pay a surcharge that allowed me to shop without having to be involved as more than a customer.

Eventually, since I lived in the neighbourhood, I began coming to Karma almost every day. My attitude began to change, and when I was asked to join the Orientation Committee, much to my surprise I jumped at the chance. Karma had inspired a sense of community in me. I was no longer just a customer — by being involved, I was having a larger experience of much greater value to me.

Now, after many years of coming in once a month for two hours to do my working commitment, I really notice the pleasure I get from being an active contributor. There is something so humane about leaving your job, house, or garret to mop a floor, bag some rice, or be a cashier for two hours a month. As I say to the people in my orientation sessions, "It's not just a store, it's a sociological experiment that you have the privilege of experiencing!"

Where else in my life could I have such a safe, playful, and pretty wonderful connection to a group of otherwise unrelated people? It's not just politically correct, it's surprisingly fun.

Which is why I was particularly stunned to see a new brochure appear recently in the store. The brochure disregards one of Karma's core values: the worth and importance of being a working collective, which is spelled out in our Mission Statement ("To create a community of actively participating members"). The new brochure spins it differently: "Non-Working Members — avoid the commitment of a working member and receive all the regular member benefits." Avoid the commitment?

Commitment enlarges the benefits of being a member of Karma, because part of the benefit is experiencing the actual value of your

work. Before we begin actively encouraging people to join as non-working members, we should think about the benefits people miss when they are not personally involved. I think that this involvement is a big part of Karma's appeal and longevity.

Courting people who prefer to pay the surcharge contributes in a financial way to Karma, but as a former non-working member who switched to working membership, it is my heartfelt opinion that people who come in and put in their time as a measure of their involvement contribute to the ethos and feeling of a co-operative venture. I do not want to dilute these special values of Karma. Do you?

Join Karma's Board of Directors!

The Board of Directors is Karma's governing body. The board is composed of 10 directors who are elected for one- or two-year terms by the membership at the co-op's Annual General Meeting. In addition to other tasks, the board oversees the work of Karma's committees.

Interested? Elections for six positions on the board will take place at this year's AGM on Monday, October 24, 2005.

Serving on the board involves policy development, decision-making, and planning for the future of the co-op. Board members should expect to spend approximately 12 hours' member labour per month while serving on the board.

Members with experience in management, other boards of directors, business planning, strategic planning, marketing, human resources, financial planning, accounting, and law are encouraged, as are members with enthusiasm and a willingness to learn.

Want more details? Contact board secretary Christie Stephenson at board@karmacoop.org.

Product Spotlight

Fall squash and how to squish it

Karen Fliess

At harvest time, the season of Thanksgiving and Halloween, one of the mainstays in our kitchen is squash, of which the popular pumpkin is just one variety. Native to North America, pumpkin and many other varieties of squash were introduced to European settlers by the aboriginal peoples of the Americas. "If it were not for pumpkins, we'd be undone soon," said an early North American colonist in his 1693 diary, highlighting the importance of these native squash to early settlers. Catherine Parr Traill also describes planting squash near her homestead, close to what is now Lakefield, Ontario, in the mid-1800s.

The numerous varieties of squash can be divided into two main categories: summer squash, which has a soft skin and includes zucchini, crookneck, patty pan, and yellow squash; and winter squash, which has a harder rind and includes acorn, buttercup, butternut, hubbard, pumpkin, sweet dumpling, and spaghetti squash.

Both types of squash have a high nutritional value, providing us with carotenoids (an antioxidant) and vitamin C, as well as potassium, niacin, calcium, iron, and fibre. Winter squash and other deep-orange vegetables are especially high in beta-carotene, the source of vitamin A.

Cooking with Squash

Squash and pumpkin are among my favourite vegetables to cook with. Beyond all their nutritional goodness, they seem to contain the golden warmth of the sun in their beautiful green and autumnal orange shades, and all the sweetness of the earth in their bountiful pulp. They are a flavour sensation no matter how simply or extravagantly one prepares them, and their versatility is a bonus.

Many of the winter squashes can be used interchangeably, although each has its own particular strengths. Squash is



a tasty addition to a stir-fry, soup, stew, or as a side dish baked or sautéed in a little butter or olive oil, its sweetness offsetting some of the other autumn vegetables. Because of this sweetness, squash can be used in both savoury and dessert dishes such as the classic pumpkin pie. Other desserts include butternut pie, zucchini bread, and pumpkin loaf.



I recommend using organic squash in your recipes. Squash can be stored in a cool, dry place such as a garage or porch for up to six months. Ideal temperature is 5 to 10 Celsius.

Baked Squash

Cut squash in half, and scoop out seeds and stringy bits. Brush the surface of the flesh with melted butter or olive oil, and season to taste with salt and pepper. Arrange cut side down in a baking dish and add water to a depth of about a quarter-inch. Bake in a pre-heated oven at 375 degrees for 30 to 60 minutes depending on the size of the squash.

Variation: after 20 to 30 minutes, stand the squash upright and brush with more melted butter or olive oil, salt, and pepper. Brush with maple syrup and nutmeg and continue cooking.

Baked Spaghetti Squash

Bake squash as described above. When cooked (make sure it is tender and soft), scoop the flesh out of the skin and mix it together with a little extra butter, freshly grated cheese (parmesan, swiss, or cheddar), minced parsley, basil, coriander, or dill for garnish, and salt and pepper to taste. For those who do not eat cheese, it is just as tasty without it.

Stuffed Squash

Bake squash as described above. Scoop the flesh out and sauté it in a bit of butter and add diced vegetables such as onion, carrots, beans, peas, or broccoli. You can also add cubed apples or raisins, breadcrumbs, or grated cheese or quark if you like. Then fill the skin with the prepared squash mixture. Variation: pre-cook a grain such as rice, quinoa, or couscous, and when the vegetables are cooked, add the grain to the veggie mixture in a little butter (which adds a nice flavour to the grain). Fill the squash. You can also bake it again to brown the top.

Squash and Carrot Soup

1 large onion

3–5 medium to large carrots

1 medium-sized squash

2–3 c. water or soup stock

thyme, basil, marjoram, salt and pepper to taste

Optional: garlic, apple

Sauté onion in butter or olive oil. Peel and chop squash into large cubes. Cut carrots into large pieces and sauté for 5 to 10 minutes. Add enough water or stock to just barely cover the vegetables (don't put in too much liquid or the soup will be runny instead of thick). Add peeled and cored apple or peeled and mashed garlic if using. Reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes or until tender. Transfer to a blender and puree until smooth. Serve with a garnish of fresh herbs.

Organic farms 'best for wildlife' say Oxford scientists

Organic farms are better for wildlife than those run conventionally, according to a study covering 180 farms from Cornwall to Cumbria.

The organic farms were found to contain 85 per cent more plant species, 33 per cent more bats, 17 per cent more spiders, and 5 per cent more birds.

Scientists from Oxford University, the British Trust for Ornithology, and the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology spent five years on the research. Funded by the [British] government, it was the largest ever survey of organic farming.

"The exclusion of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers from organic farms is a fundamental difference between systems," the study says.

Other key differences found on the organic farms included smaller fields, more grasslands, and hedges that are taller, thicker, and on average 71 per cent longer.

Dr. Lisa Norton of the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology said, "Hedges are full of native, berry-producing shrubs, which are great for insects and the birds and bats that feed on them."

Increased biodiversity was a "happy byproduct" of sustainable farming practices and farmers working with "natural processes" to increase productivity, she added.

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To Expand or Not to Expand – That is (Unfortunately) the Question

Mohsen Al Attar Ahmed

The expansion debate has become a very divisive issue. In fact, it has taken the form of a modern political campaign. Proponents are presenting it as crucial to the survival of our co-op and opponents are likening it to the devil's kiss (or at least the capitalist's firm handshake). Many members are taking sides and vilifying those who do not subscribe to their position while many more are remaining on the sidelines waiting for a rational debate to take shape. Many are simply unengaged. As an undecided, I write this article to contribute to an ongoing discussion by providing a perspective, albeit a skewed one, on the roles and objectives of food cooperatives — including Karma's — in the larger Canadian (and global) food democracy movement.

Not unlike trade unions, credit unions, or child-care cooperatives, food co-ops are enjoyed and controlled by the people who use its products or services. Although they may vary in size, these various organizations are all formed to meet the specific objectives of members through democratic participation and collective empowerment, that is, members work together for their mutual benefit. For obvious reasons — most notably the axiom about strength in numbers — cooperatives are particularly useful in upholding the rights of the least powerful. Finally, it must be understood that the food

cooperative movement in particular is part of a larger global food democracy movement whose goals include the revival of rural areas, food sovereignty for all nations, popular access to wholesome foods, and an end to the commodification of nature. No small task indeed!

In addition to the macro-considerations outlined above, I believe that Karma, as a food co-op, serves a number of micro-purposes. First, it exemplifies a true open and democratic structure at the most local level. That is, Karma is a place where individuals are not differentiated according to the highly insidious divisions that dominate outside our walls. Whether they are working or not, poor or privileged, able-bodied or physically challenged, all Karma members have an equal say in how our co-op is run, point final. Second, Karma is an educational site where members can become more informed about a number of local food issues. Members learn about the importance of organic farming, heirloom varieties, limited packaging, non-toxic cleaning products, and much, much more. Third, Karma constitutes one of the few remaining sites where community development is actively promoted. The message board, the bike days, The Chronicle, the orientation sessions, the soon-to-be revived potlucks, and the many other initiatives at Karma combine to create an authentic sense of belonging and solidarity among members of our cooperative. In our individualist and consumer oriented society, such sites are few and far between, and should thus be cherished and extolled for the camaraderie they promote.

How does this (brief) overview relate to expansion? You will undoubtedly hear many opinions on expansion, some that exhibit only slight variations with others conflicting outright. Just so we're clear, diversity is a good thing. Why? Because pluralism transcends the fictitious borders of homogeneity and creates the conditions necessary for creativity and initiative. Stated otherwise, I would say that conflict — and not conformity — is the foundation of a healthy community. Karma is such a community. Although this discord means that achieving a consensus on any one issue — let alone something as grandiose as expansion — is challenging at a minimum and hopeless in the maximum, it also means that we have a wealth of knowledge and a dedicated pool of members at our disposal. The last thing we should do is squander these assets by restraining members in their efforts to communicate their views or maligning them for offering opinions that oppose our own.

Let us return to the original question: should Karma expand? Well, in all honesty, I think we're asking the wrong question. First of all, what kind of expansion do we have in mind? Expanding the membership? The physical size of the co-op? Or perhaps our visibility? Second, why are we discussing expansion? Is it to improve access for the disabled or those living in poverty? To promote community spirit on

a larger scale? Or to boost shelf space and open a deli? Third, how will expansion influence our role in the food democracy movement? Each of these ideas requires a different type of commitment. Some objectives could be satisfied by finding a new location, while others might be best achieved by forging new partnerships with other like-minded community organizations. Indeed, these are just a few examples of the many propositions that should be considered before we get to the should or shouldn't of expansion.

Let me conclude in another way. A viable challenge to the global food system requires three elements, all of which must be present if the initiative is to survive: public participation, partnerships, and principles. At Karma, public participation is promoted via our membership. Indeed, the fundamental resource for any community-based project is people. Second, partnerships are constituted when we collaborate with other members of our community food system, including FoodShare, the Toronto Food Policy Council, and Dufferin Grove. Alone, each initiative can only take us so far. However, in solidarity, the possibilities become endless. Finally, our principles. Though people may differ — just look at all the expansion talk — in the end, it is our commitment to social, economic, and ecological justice, democratic participation, and community wisdom that holds us together. If we lose sight of these principles, we at Karma lose our inspiration and become vulnerable to cooptation from within or beyond. Keeping these principles in focus will preserve the solidarity necessary to achieve the better world we've all imagined.

