

*“Tasty Platypus 2008”:
Election Process and Voter Turnout
Strategies for WSM*

(Some Personal Thoughts)

What is our Co-operative?

A quote (slightly amended) from an article that was presented to us earlier in our process:

The premise that a Co-operative consists of a group of people coming together to solve common problems [associative definition of 'Co-operative'] has shifted to the concept that Co-ops can be organizations that simply supply goods and services to individual consumers to meet individual needs.

I think both viewpoints exist in Weaver Street Market Co-operative (WSM). I think the frustration that expresses itself in WSM from time to time is reflective of a clash between those two viewpoints.

Simply put (and bluntly so), the first viewpoint says that we are a social Co-operative first. We have decided to be a Grocery Store. The Store is subservient at all times to the Co-operative.

The second viewpoint says that we are a financial Co-operative first. Everything is subordinate to the financial bottom line. Once we get that right, then we can hand out checks to social causes. Over-simplified. But it will do.

I think both viewpoints can and should co-exist.

I believe that “long-run economic success and long-term democratic processes” can and do complement each other.

I believe that, as we move to be a larger, multi-unit organism that we need to re-discover the immediate intimacy we had when we first began 20 years ago, and that can only be done by formalizing the democratic processes, and by keeping decision-making as close as possible to all employees and owners.

Another quote:

As Co-ops grow larger, it becomes more and more challenging to maintain the “associative” side of the Co-operative. Many Co-ops are experimenting with ways to compensate for their larger size in order to remain more participatory and democratic.

Some of these include: wider sharing of responsibilities and skills, developing a member relations committee or team, providing Co-op education, rotating leadership tasks, discussing business imperatives and a variety of ways they can be met, and articulating and following a Co-operative vision.

If we are agreed that it would be in the best interests of our Co-op that we allow the “associative” or the democratic or the social side of the Co-op to ‘catch up’ with the financial or economic side, then it follows, as night follows day, that the economic or financial side will have to ‘give up’ some of its ‘power.’

No one likes to give away control. No one likes to be told they have to pause and consult before taking decisions. No one likes to be told that they may not be able to keep all the resources to themselves – that they may have to share. So, there will be tension. And there has been. Even during the time of this current Elections Task Force.

It will simply require that we all exercise those values which, frankly, we should want to be the hallmark of our new economically and democratically successful Co-op going forward, and which, conveniently, you can find listed as the values in which we want to find our new election processes grounded.

On this last note, let me just set out below two paragraphs I drafted for myself at the beginning of our deliberations on values.

It had been my intention to submit them. But then, you guys got the ball rolling, and the need never arose.

What we ended up with covered everything I wanted – and so much better! And that has pretty much been my experience with all of you throughout this process – I thank you:

I want a Board election process that is equitable, transparent and accessible; that is conducted according to the generally-accepted norms of election propriety, without inappropriate or irregular interference from any entity or individual inside or outside of our Co-op; that leads to a Board which is recognized as the pre-eminent decision-making authority within our Co-op, to which any and all entities and individuals within our Co-op are fully accountable, and which is itself democratically accountable to the ownership of our Co-op.

I want strategies for improving voter turnout which maximize the opportunity for owners fully to access and to be meaningfully involved in the primary decision-making processes of our Co-op.

Methodology – or ‘How does this Platypus walk?’

We have been asked to “present options to the Board of WSM for a clear set of election rules and strategies for increasing voter turnout.” We have been given a tight timeline.

I do not think we have enough time to draft a final set of Election Rules and a Manual to go with them. What I think we can do is to start the process, and then to offer some ways forward.

I’ve got a lot to say, and I don’t want to hog committee time. So, I’m putting these ideas down on paper. If you like them, use them. If not, no offense taken. I’ll just respectfully ask that they be appended to the Notes, so that I know I participated!

Of course, this doesn’t mean I will be silent! In particular, I will be talking to my points about a WSM Online Forum/Blog and Worker-Owner Elections.

The way I think we could approach formulating options is to slip them into one or other of the following categories:

1. For immediate implementation in 2008 – marked **(2008)**.
2. For ongoing discussion and implementation – marked **(Ongoing)**.
3. Requires a further Board Task Force – marked **(Task Force)**.

I would hope that our final ‘product’ will be a Report, to be presented to the Board. Together with the Notes of our meetings (and all of the Addendums that Christy has been gathering).

They could be posted to the website, where currently we have the announcement of our meetings.

The existence of both could be announced in the Market Messenger, the Beet, the Newsletter and the Board E-mail.

We have discussed having a Pre-Board Meeting of Owners, to allow Owners to comment on the Report, before the Board makes any decisions about approving any of the steps in the Report.

The Board could consider extending the invitation to the Pre-Board Meeting to all interested employees. Maybe even all interested consumers.

One of the ways we increase voter turnout is by making more people Owners. We do that by showing them we have an attractive, democratic and open process.

For the purposes of 2008, the two appointed Board Directors could be tasked with overseeing the Election Process. They could be assisted by the Owner Services' staff.

The Board could research the possible use of at least one independent adviser to help the two appointed Board Directors. It may require funds, which could be allocated by the Board, acting in concert with Operations Management.

The best starting point is the [State Bar](#), who will be able to advise on the location of such independent assistance. Or, perhaps, [Democracy North Carolina](#).

This existing Elections Task Force could be given a new remit – to document what happens in the Elections of 2008. Note what went right this time. What went wrong. What of our ideas worked. And what didn't.

The *New* Elections Task Force could then meet, after the Election of 2008, to put together a complete Election Policy and Manual, perhaps along the lines of the Sacramento Policy and Manual (to be found in Christy's E-mail to us, "Research," dated 02/08/08), for future Elections.

This Policy and Manual could be the subject of a wide-ranging consultation exercise within the Co-op, followed by Board recommendations for the appropriate changes to Board Policy and the By-laws.

Board Staff - or 'Who makes Platypus run?'

There is going to be a lot of work to be done flowing from this one Task Force. If the Board follows through on its promises and makes this only the first of a regular stream of governance task forces, then there will be even more work to be done by someone in the future.

The way our Co-operative is structured at the moment, almost all of the staff is, in fact, hired directly by and for the use of the Store.

The General Manager indicated (according to the Minutes of the Board Retreat in January 2008, and again during the Board Meeting in February 2008) that he would assign more Store staff to assist the Board in its functions. I wonder if we might want something a little more specific for this immediate Task Force.

What about the Task Force agreeing something like the following (2008):-

In order for the product of the Elections Task Force 2008 to have the fullest meaning and effect, the General Manager will ensure that sufficient resources will be made available to implement, in a timely fashion, any proposals made by the WSM Board as a consequence of the Task Force's deliberations, and to ensure that such proposals are implemented with reasonable expedition.

Moving forward (**Ongoing**), the Board and the General Manager could consider setting up an Owner Services Department, which would be directly accountable to the Board, through only the General Manager.

This new Department could expand on the work of the current Owner Services Coordinator, in helping to provide services for the Ownership. It could also serve as a 'secretariat' for the Board, providing administrative services directly to the Board and its committees, and implementing Board initiatives.

Of course, just how big the Department should be, and what should be its specific description depends in large part on how the Board and its committee structure now evolves. This could be the subject of a separate Task Force (**Board Task Force**).

This Board Task Force could be tasked with providing options on: Board structure; composition; geographical distribution; size; function; accountability; budget; communications; investment returns; staff; committee structure; appointed directors; term limits; remuneration; and evolution of John Carver Policy [Governance Model](#).

In turn, the remit of the Board Task Force might, in large part, depend on what view the Co-op takes about what should be the continuing balance in decision-making authority between the Owners, the Board and Operations/Store Management.

Perhaps we could have a preceding Task Force on Accountability and Decision-Making (**Accountability and Decision-Making Task Force**).

This Task Force could be given the responsibility of identifying every type of decision made in our Co-operative; who makes it; how; whether Owners and/or Employees are consulted; and to whom the decision-maker is accountable, and how.

It is my personal opinion that the balance in authority and accountability in our Co-operative is as follows:

The Store is accountable fully to the Board, which is then democratically accountable to the Owners. Committees of the Board, like their parent Board, represent the collective will of the Ownership, but may find executive expression of that will only through their parent Board.

It might be helpful if the balance of authority and accountability between the Owners, the Board and Operations/Store Management could be clarified and made more transparent. In pursuit of those goals, the Accountability and Decision-Making Task Force could consider the following:

- Designating a new Collective Executive Management of the Store, the senior member of which would be the General Manager.
- This Collective Executive Management to include: the General Manager; the Operations Manager; the Unit Managers; the Head of HR; and the new Owner Services Department Manager.
- The General Manager to sit permanently on the Board. The Owner Services Manager, as the supervisor of all Board staff support, to attend all Board meetings. The remaining members of the Collective Executive Management either to rotate a permanent seat on the Board, by meeting, or to report to the Board on their areas of responsibility, on a rotating basis.
- With regards to this last point, since we are now a \$20million turnover company and growing, I wonder if it seems a little inefficient to expect the General Manager to be the only source of information upon which the Board relies for executing its monitoring function. After all, the General Manager is already delegating many of his responsibilities to other senior managers. The Board might find it useful to hear from them too. This independent information-gathering concern is also one of the reasons for the Board having its own Owner Services Department.

- In any event, it might be helpful to have the Operations Manager, and appropriate Store financial staff, present at quarterly financial meetings of the Board, to answer questions on Store finances and operations.
- Aside from ensuring that our Board is as informed as it can be, I think it is important that we have a focused and channeled process for ensuring that the senior management of the Store is as accountable as it can be to Owners, by way of the Board, which represents the collective will of the Ownership. In a \$20million turnover company, I wonder if it is healthy, efficient or co-operative that the only Operations/Store Manager who is directly accountable to the Ownership is the General Manager.
- If WSM continues to have appointed Board directors, then the appointed Board directors, along with the Consumer-Owner directors, could form an Audit Committee. One of the appointed directors could chair this Audit Committee. The Audit Committee would have primary responsibility for: preparing the Annual Co-op Budget (with the initial draft provided by the Collective Executive Management); negotiating the compensation and benefits of the General Manager; and overseeing the Annual Audit. This is the norm in all companies I have dealt with that have turnovers as large as ours.
- With respect to the latter, the outside accountant, during his last visit to the Board, mentioned that it was less than efficient to have the same people counting the money as collecting it. We have operated a system until now where the main money collector (the General Manager) has overseen the main money counter (the outside accountant). In the interests simply of protecting the unquestionable integrity of the General Manager, I wonder if it is it unfair to continue to put him in that invidious position.

Election 2008 – or ‘Introducing Tasty Platypus’

The Elections for Consumer-Owner and Worker-Owner directors could be separate. If they are not separate, then much greater care must be taken to educate potential voters that each class of Owner may vote only once, and only for their own class of Candidate.

The order of Candidates on the ballot paper and in the Annual Report could be alphabetic.

Potential Candidates could be told in the Candidates’ package that their answers to the questions will be published verbatim. They could also be told if there is a limit to the number of words used, and that they may write an address in their own form, if they wish.

The Candidates’ package and the Annual Report could be re-designed to include an educative piece about the history of WSM as a Co-op; co-ops in general; a history of the evolution of WSM’s governance structure; its accomplishments; functions of the Board; how it interacts with Owners and the Store; and future goals of the current Board.

The section of the website dealing with Owners could be re-designed, using the equivalent sections on the [Willy Street](#) site and the [Sacramento](#) site as templates.

There is a sense with our site that involvement in the affairs of our Co-op begins and ends with simply “Becoming an Owner.”

I wonder if our website could be made as attractive and as inviting and – yes! – as tasty to Owners becoming involved in the governance of our Co-op as those of Willy Street and Sacramento.

The Board could specifically request that this Elections Task Force continue to exist, along the lines suggested earlier, and that one of its first tasks be to help Owner Services and the two appointed directors in the job of these re-designs.

There has been suggestion that there could be a permanent Nominating Committee that would search for potential Candidates for director; educate them; choose among them, to find the best; and present those chosen to the Ownership electorate. The usual caveat is that an Owner may nominate themselves, and bypass the Nominating Committee, if they can obtain a certain percentage support of their Ownership class.

Personally, I am opposed to censorship of any kind. It is my personal opinion that Elections should be free and open. However, if this sort of Committee were to recommend itself to the Task Force, it might well be that there is not enough time in 2008, and that consideration be left to the work of the *New* Elections Task Force – the one that is convened to redesign elections communication for 2008; document the 2008

Election; and then write a complete Election Policy and Manual after the 2008 Election (***New Elections Task Force***).

It is my personal opinion that there should not be any rules as to electioneering, on First Amendment grounds. If this Task Force believes there should be, I leave it to others to take the lead on this subject.

I do believe there should be some opportunity afforded to Candidates to address their electorate before voting commences. I also believe that the Annual Meeting is the appropriate place to announce the results, and that the Meeting could be made more attractive, as part of the process of encouraging more Owners to become involved in governance and in voting.

As to specifics, again I leave that to others. I stood for the Board once. As noisy as I am in between Elections, I do not believe that noise during a Co-op Election is commensurate with my approach to Co-operative affairs. It just doesn't sit well with me.

I stand; I write an election address; I leave the rest to the intelligence of those wishing to support me, and to the opinion they formed of me in the year before the Election, not during what I personally view as an artificial Election campaign.

The only thing I would stress is that, in future, if not for the 2008 Election, I would be happier if any Candidate Forum was organized by Owners themselves (perhaps the re-invigorated Owner Programs, which I come to later), rather than any individuals or entities associated with Operations/Store Management or the governance structure of WSM. I wonder if it would not be better for Owners to see that any Forum is totally and transparently independent of the appearance of manipulation or malfeasance.

For Consumer-Owner Elections (I come to Worker-Owner Elections later), ballots could only be in the Annual Report.

Voters could be given the option of either filling in a form as we had this past time, which is simple, but which has the Owner's number next to their vote and signature. Or there could be the option of an anonymous vote.

I believe that the Sacramento Election Manual has details on how to design an anonymous voting system. I leave it to the *New Elections Task Force* to consider the details of a design.

There could be better displays in the Stores with the ballot boxes. Oversight of the ballot boxes could be undertaken by the appointed directors only, together with any outside, independent assistance.

Personally, I would like to see total clarity and the fullest advertising of the voting period. Maybe, the voting period could end two days before the Annual Meeting. The boxes could then be collected, emptied and the votes counted by the two appointed

directors, assisted by any outside, independent assistance, with support from Owner Services.

All Candidates could be given the opportunity of observing the count, together with one assistant of their choosing, and the normal rules of election observation, vote challenge and recount could apply – these can probably be obtained from the State Bar or the NC Secretary of State.

Once all those legitimately present at the count are agreed upon a result, a final Election Return (result) could be prepared for the Annual Meeting.

One of the two appointed directors could hand the Election Return to the Facilitator of the Annual Meeting, who would announce the results as written.

The two appointed directors could nominate an independent location, where the votes would be secure and where they would be retained for a period of 6 months. The votes would only be destroyed by agreement of the then two appointed directors. If storage required funds, then the Board and Operations/Store Management could make such funds available.

It is my personal opinion that, in all other respects, the Election of 2008 could be conducted in the same manner as the Election of 2007.

The *New* Elections Task Force would then produce an Elections Policy and Manual to cover future Board Elections.

Connectivity – or ‘How does Platypus blog?’

It is my personal opinion that you will increase voter turnout, over time, if Owners are kept better informed and educated about governance in our Co-op.

Plus, when they do become interested, their involvement is better welcomed (by the governance structure and Operations/Store Management), more meaningful and more interactive.

It is not that the various structures and media do not already exist (with a few additions). It is the sense that the mindset is not there.

Look at the experiences of our own Task Force and the experiences that those who have spoken to us have related.

With respect to all concerned, there are still too many instances of people who have written to the Co-op or to the Store who have not been answered. Too many instances of Owners saying they do not know how to get a response or how to get interested.

I raised with the Board the fact that there is little in any of our Units about how Owners can become involved with their Co-op – there is more direction in Food Lion!

I'm sorry to press the issue, but try and understand the message we are sending to Owners, who might want to be come involved, when it proves this difficult to get a Task Forces' work advertised in advance in the Co-op's media; or when it is this difficult to get a senior manager to answer an e-mail from a Task Force member, who has already given up their time to be involved in the governance structure.

We make a great issue of our Customer Service. It is my personal opinion that it would be a positive step for the health of the whole Co-operative if the Board and Operations/Store Management would make just as big an issue – every day – of *Owner Service*.

Beginning with the immediate and moving forward, let's make the biggest effort that we can fully to publicize the product of this Task Force and the Pre-Board Meeting.

The single greatest message that can be sent to Owners that their involvement is welcomed and meaningful will be to approve and implement the recommendations of this Task Force with the greatest expedition and gratitude. That duty falls equally on the Board and on Operations/Store Management.

That step of itself will help to promote the Election of 2008, and therefore, increase voter turnout.

Another vehicle will be the celebrations of our 20th Anniversary. I understand that Operations/Store Management will be taking the lead there.

Let's ensure that the greatest opportunity is given to Owners, Employees and Consumers to help to organize those celebrations.

Let's hold them in a fashion that leads up to the Annual Meeting, and incorporates what we have been doing, the new approach to welcoming Owners in governance, and the specific Election of 2008, as living embodiments of how we have practiced co-operative principles in the past 20 years, and how we are still evolving, and therefore, why it should be of interest and worthwhile to any Owner to get involved in this continuing evolution.

Making the website and the Candidates' package more educative and attractive will fit into that same process.

I share later about how I believe that re-invigorating the Owner Programs could, in the longer term, allow Owner involvement to become more focused and interactive, which could, in turn, extend the work of increasing voter interest (**Ongoing**).

In the meantime, I believe that the single most important measure for increasing interactive communication within WSM, for making involvement more meaningful, for allowing Owners to be better informed and educated, and thus for increasing voter interest over the short, middle and long-term, would be to institute an Online Forum or Blog for all Employees and Owners.

I have, as you know, already designed a Trial Blog, which was intended for use by the Task Force. It is still in existence, and any reader of this document may have a look at it by contacting WSM Owner Services.

There is open source (free) software that can be used as a base for an Online Forum. It can be Googled – Board php.

The only caveat I would add is this: it is my personal opinion that any Forum will only work if those in authority are prepared to be 'co-operative' and to respond. It all comes back to the interpretation of those in authority of their accountability to Owners.

Let's have a Blog Task Force to provide options to the Board on establishing a WSM Online Forum or Blog, available for use by all valid Employees and Owners of WSM (**Blog Task Force**).

Owner Programs – or ‘Can Platypus interact?’

The Consumer-Owner and Worker-Owner Programs could be revitalized, and could then become the focus for channeling Owners’ desire to be involved in their Co-op in a more meaningful fashion.

We can begin now. Owner Services, along with Owner directors, could immediately commence holding Owner meetings for their respective class of Ownership every other month (staggered), with two Pre-Board Meetings per class of Owner a year.

There could be a Connectivity and Owner Program Task Force to brainstorm further possibilities (beyond the Online Forum/Blog) (**Connectivity and Owner Program Task Force**).

I’m not a Consumer-Owner. So, I leave the possibilities to them. But one thought that has occurred is that the Consumer-Owner Program could establish member groups which could monitor or ‘shadow’ the performance of various aspects of the Co-op and its Store (e.g. Food Policy), and then provide input on a regular basis.

As with the Forum, it is unlikely that this would lead to meaningful interaction unless the recipient in authority chose to respond. Which underlines my earlier point about mindset being more important than any specific proposal.

Worker-Owners come up next!

Worker-Owner Elections – or ‘Will Platypus work?’

I have experienced some dismay in our Co-operative, at all levels, that more Workers do not become Owners, and that more Worker-Owners do not vote.

To be honest, I have found few of those who demur to be gentle fence sitters. My experience has been that those who ‘demur,’ do so vehemently. And the way I write this section reflects that vehemence.

From my experience, more Workers do not become Worker-Owners because they do not trust Operations/Store Management with their money.

More Worker-Owners do not vote because they don’t trust Operations/Store Management with their votes. Plus, they don’t think it will make any difference. The events of 2007 merely underscored those two beliefs.

If our Co-operative wants more Worker-Owners, and wants more of them to vote, then it needs to get Operations/Store Management out of Workers’ pockets, and out of their Elections.

First, any Worker-Owner Election needs to be completely and transparently anonymous. To the point that this is clearly explained in original Orientation; in the Employees’ Handbook; in the Worker-Owner packet; in the invitation to Candidates; and with the Voting Papers **(2008)**.

Secondly, all Worker-Owner Elections need to be run, to be overseen and to be counted by people who are completely and transparently independent of Operations/Store Management. And again, this should be clearly explained **(2008)**.

In all other respects, the Worker-Owner Elections could be run as they were (separately to Consumer-Owner Elections) in 2006. The only stipulation I would add is that greater care should be taken to ensure that all Worker-Owners receive, in their mailbox (or at home if they are on Medical or Family Leave), Candidate packages and Voting Papers **(2008)**.

Thirdly, there needs to be an immediate and independent audit of all money ever collected by WSM from Worker-Owners. What happened to it. Where it went. Not just where the remainder is now. And by what happened to it, I mean that, for example, if it was or is being used as collateral for capital loans, then Worker-Owners need to be told.

This audit needs to be updated each year; to be available to anyone at any time; and to be provided to each Worker-Owner with their Dividend Statement. This same audit should also be available with the Employees’ Handbook and the Worker-Owner packet **(2008)**.

I have two further thoughts along these lines, but they may be too draconian (**Ongoing**):

1. Each Worker-Owner, each year, should be given a Personal Account Statement, setting out all that he/she has contributed, how much is in their Account, and how much would be returned if the Worker-Owner was to leave on the date of the Dividend Statement.
2. Worker-Owners should be balloted before their 'invested' Dividend money each year is utilized by Operations/Store Management.

When we were a small, 'corner,' Co-op, with a few hundred Owners, and a couple of dozen Employees, it was fair to suggest that we were all in the same boat, all with the same agenda.

Now that we are a \$20million turnover company, with five outlets (soon) over three towns, it is fanciful to pretend the same.

Our governance structures need to reflect this reality if we are not to have a re-run of the Food Production situation and the events of the 2007 Board Election.

I think we have reached the point where, as a 'grown-up' co-op, it is ok to admit that the aspirations of Workers in our Co-op may not always be the same as those of Store Management.

Both should be represented on the Board. Both contribute capital, after all. But maybe it's time that they have separate representation.

This will require a separate Worker-Owner Task Force, to consider both the Worker-Owner Program and Worker-Owner Elections (**Worker-Owner Task Force**).

This should be convened as quickly as possible, but its product will have no effect before the 2008 Election. So, I would suggest the following three stages:-

1. For the 2008 Election (and beyond), the Board should instruct the General Manager to take the necessary steps to include in the Co-operative's Affirmative Action Policy wording that covers inappropriate interaction between Managers and Workers during a Board Election.

For the purposes of these proposals, any supervisor is a 'Manager.' That would be the position of Specialist upwards. 'Workers' are Lead Clerks and below.

Something like the following might work:

Once the period for Nominations for Board Elections has opened, only nominated candidates, or those they have specifically chosen, may promote an individual for the Board.

'Promote' includes recruiting a potential candidate or campaigning for them.

Advertising any aspect of the Election itself, as opposed to an individual candidate, should be the sole prerogative of those specifically authorized by the Board.

Any breach of these rules will be regarded as a breach on a par with sexual harassment, and the same penalties will follow.

Evidence of breach, as with harassment, will be subjective not objective. That is to say, if a person feels they have been unduly pressured or disadvantaged, that will constitute potential harassment.

Incidents of breach may be reported, in total confidence, to the Director of Human Resources.

These new rules should be available to all Employees, in Orientation; in their Handbooks; in invitations to be a Candidate; and with Voting Papers (2008).

2. If Managers feel strongly about representation in 2008, beyond the General Manager, then they can find one of their own to stand (2008 and Ongoing).
3. I would be grateful if this Task Force would agree to recommend to the Board that it convene a Worker-Owner Task Force, using the following language:

A Board committee be convened, to be called the Worker-Owner Task Force, which will present options to the Board on: separating Worker-Owner Representation on the Board between Managers and Workers; the Worker-Owner Program; and other Worker-Owner issues generally.

This Task Force could be convened no later than early 2009, so that any necessary changes to the Bylaws could be before the 2009 Annual Meeting (Worker-Owner Task Force).

[As a matter of convenience, it might well be that the Representation issue could better be dealt with by the Board Task Force mentioned earlier.]

Further Thoughts – or ‘Can Platypus be Intimate?’

After the last Board Election, I presented to some individuals associated with our Co-op a strategy document called “Immediate Intimacy.”

It dealt with a whole range of matters that I thought might help to evolve co-operative issues in WSM.

Some have been covered in these thoughts; some not. If anyone wants a copy of “Immediate Intimacy,” hard or electronic, just let me know.