

Renaissance Community Co-op Celebrates Opening

By Stuart Reid and Fund for Democratic Communities
Cooperative Grocer • January – February 2017 No. 188

One of the most anticipated new food co-ops has opened its doors to a welcoming community. The Renaissance Community Co-op (RCC) is not a typical food co-op, and their path to success was exceptional as well.

When community members first began talking to consultants and advisors, they were cautioned that they had a vision for something that had rarely been done, and that traditional natural food co-op benchmarks would not apply. As their board president, John Jones, told the audience at RCC's Grand Opening reception, "They said we were too poor, too black, and too uneducated to have a food co-op. Look where we are now!"

The store opened its doors on October 14 and on November 4-5, celebrated with a two-day grand opening ceremony, gala, and community fun events. Hundreds of people came to sit under the big-top canopy in front of the store while local and state elected officials praised their efforts and board members, development partners, and supporters said thanks and welcomed the community. After the formal ribbon cutting, everyone was invited to a fantastic buffet meal, music, and games. There was an overwhelming feeling of pride among all who were there.

The people who built Renaissance Community Co-op have been telling their story effectively from the very start. As part of the grand opening celebration, they produced a beautiful 22-page brochure outlining the co-op's history and its place in the community. The excerpt below from that brochure provides an excellent overview of this new co-op's history.

For further information, see these recommended recorded materials: https://youtu.be/xM1YX_BEEZ4.

A recording of a case study presentation made last year at the Up & Coming conference: <https://youtu.be/bhtdt7kaSv4>.

A more recent documentary by their videographer: "Phillips Avenue: How a Community Ended Its Food Desert Problem (Full Doc)": https://youtu.be/KmCiZm_gs94.

For a more technical summary of the project's business plans, there is a good piece here: <https://renaissancecoop.com/about/>

More Than a Grocery Store

From the Fund for Democratic Communities, November 1, 2016,

In 1998, the Winn-Dixie Corporation closed its grocery store on Phillips Avenue in Northeast Greensboro, a working-class neighborhood where the majority of residents are African American. Winn-Dixie made the decision to close its store despite the fact that it was profitable, just as many corporate grocery chains made similar moves in cities and towns across the U.S. These corporate chains were seeking to consolidate their operations to achieve economies of scale and chasing higher returns in more affluent markets (though these hoped-for higher returns did not always materialize).

The closure of the last grocery store in the area led to the neighborhood becoming what is now known as a "food desert," a term that hadn't been invented back in 1998. Northeast Greensboro was hardly unique in receiving this designation—food deserts arose in thousands of urban and rural places around the country in the 1990s and early 2000s. In Northeast Greensboro, being a food desert meant that the people who lived near the store—many of whom lacked cars and had limited incomes—could no longer easily access fresh, affordable food. The closure of the anchor store at the shopping center also contributed to years of economic decline that blighted the whole neighborhood.

Today we celebrate the story of a tenacious neighborhood that didn't give up in the face of this blight and discouragement. Instead, they organized and steadily increased their power and capacity until they were able to build their own community-owned grocery store, the Renaissance Community Co-op, or RCC. The RCC is not a glorified convenience store or any other kind of half measure—it is a 10,530-square-foot, full-service grocery store that stocks a full array of fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, dairy products, and groceries that you'd expect to see in any supermarket, and it does so at a price that its community and owners can afford.

Not only does the RCC provide access to a wide array of fresh, healthy foods, the store is playing a key role in turning around economic conditions in the community. The RCC currently provides 30 good-paying jobs in an area with high unemployment. The lowest starting wage is \$10 per hour, roughly 25% higher than the prevailing grocery starting wage in the area, and full-time employees receive health benefits. Since people from the neighborhood fill the majority of jobs, wages and benefits are projected to move more than \$3 million into the area in the next five years. The RCC also serves as the anchor store for a revitalized shopping center that will soon boast a new health clinic, pharmacy, and credit union—all services the community sought for close to two decades. Without the RCC, the shopping center would likely still be languishing, and all these other needs would remain unaddressed.

Best of all: the RCC is 100% owned and controlled by its community of over 1,000 owners, the majority of whom live right in the neighborhood. Because it is owned by its community and operated to meet community needs, this beautiful store is never going to pick up and leave, seeking a higher return on investment elsewhere. Its entire reason for being is to serve its neighborhood! And because the store is community-owned, any profits made by the store stay right in the community, to seed the next stage of community revitalization, as determined by the community of RCC owners.

This turn-around has been a long time coming: 18 years! Community leaders began organizing to fill the space left by the Winn-Dixie back in 1998, as soon as they heard the Winn-Dixie was closing. While the initial efforts to protest Winn-Dixie's decision and to attract a chain grocer didn't work out, the community continued to organize itself, visualize the kind of community they wanted, and build the power to accomplish that vision. Along the way, the community had to turn its attention to the urgent matter of closing down a poisonous landfill. While the landfill fight may have pushed the grocery store to the back burner, it ended up building the community's capacity and political power.

By the end of 2011, when the landfill struggle was well and truly won, the community had both the breathing room and the strength to tackle its food-access issue. When representatives from our organization, the Fund for Democratic Communities (F4DC), suggested that the community could take the initiative to build its own store, active residents in the community were immediately interested. Tired of waiting for someone else to solve their food-desert problem, the community was excited to solve the problem for itself. Working with F4DC, community members began to explore whether it would work for the community to own and operate its own grocery store. It took five years of education, organizing, political struggle, capacity building, business planning, and fundraising, but the community figured it out!

That's the triumphant story we want to tell in detail at some point, because this story carries both pragmatic and inspirational lessons about how black, brown, and working-class communities can take charge of their destinies by building inclusive, democratic, community-owned enterprises to meet their needs.

The RCC story directly challenges some pernicious myths about black people and marginalized communities, and it displaces some common assumptions about who should lead economic development. While certain key partners assisted in the development of the RCC and the shopping center, it was the community that took the lead, making good use of expertise only when it was needed to meet community objectives.

These are just some of the lessons we at F4DC want to highlight when we tell the RCC story. We're not the only ones telling this story, as many people and institutions around the country have connected to the effort, and each person and organization has their own unique perspective. Not surprisingly, a group like F4DC is going to highlight the social justice and democracy-building aspects of the story, because we want more communities to be inspired and to have the tools to take their destinies into their own hands.

For now, we ask you to go visit the store, so you can see for yourself: the RCC is bright, beautiful, and welcoming, and it signals hope and equity to its community. You see it in the faces of the customers, staff, and owners: a tangible feeling that the RCC is much more than a grocery store. While the opening of the store represents the culmination of years of work, it is also the start of something new, and we can hardly wait to see what this organized, powerful community does next! •

Stuart Reid is executive director of Food Co-op Initiative, which assists startups across the country (stuart@fci.coop).