

Six years ago, Food Co-op 500 started with a volunteer task force and no staff. NCB/NCB Capital Impact donated some staff time (Richard Dines) to coordinate a round of seed grants and to assemble teams of volunteer experts to monitor and advise the recipients.

Two years later, a contract position was created for a food co-op development specialist. With full-time involvement, the organization could expand its support to more organizing groups, start creating training materials, and really find out if their concept could make a difference. With more than a dozen new retail co-ops opening in each of the following three years and hundreds more continuing to organize, the answer was clear.

Starting early in 2011, Food Co-op Initiative (FCI) will have two employees instead of one. While one new hire may not end the unemployment crisis, it will double our capacity and make it possible for us to better serve the ever-increasing pool of start-up teams around the country. The new position will be a food co-op development specialist whose work will encompass rural co-ops and general resource creation, training, and advising.

More than half of the retail food co-ops now orga-

## The Cooperative Economy Is Booming!

### Food Co-op Initiative doubles its workforce

nizing are in rural areas (as defined by the USDA, communities with a population less than 50,000 and not contiguous to an urban area). When FCI incorporated as a nonprofit foundation in 2009, we became eligible to apply for USDA grant funding designated for the support of rural cooperative development centers. We were pleased to be awarded a \$225,000 grant for 2011. Our grant proposal was unique in that we are one of the only cooperative development centers with a national scope and an emphasis on retail co-ops.

This grant will fund a variety of activities:

- Primary financial support for the new development specialist position;
- Approximately \$100,000 in seed grants to qualifying rural startup groups;
- Funds to support the creation of new toolboxes for rural co-ops and buying clubs—including a comprehensive guide to starting and operating

different types of buying clubs, how to capitalize and operate a viable co-op in low-population areas, and a toolbox addressing the unique needs of boards and steering committees of developing co-ops;

- Live regional training sessions held in conjunction with other cooperative development centers;
- A new webinar series;
- A pilot project and case study for conversion of privately owned grocery stores to co-ops; and
- New resources and resource updates on our website, including a new buying club page.

It is an ambitious agenda, but there are now 375 people on the FCI contact list representing at least 250 potential new food co-ops. Add to that our new mandate to support buying clubs, and the numbers will only grow.

FCI is committed to making new co-op organizing easier, more successful, and more rewarding by providing convenient access to information and training, learning from both our own experience and that of the greater co-op community, and encouraging existing co-ops to become more involved in supporting our new communities.

— Stuart Reid

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