A grocery store of their own

For nearly 50 years, Saskatoon's Steep Hill Food Co-op has offered something bigger stores cannot

By Brook Thalgott Photos provided by Steep Hill Food Co-op



In 1978, a handful of Saskatoon residents went looking for food they could not readily find in the city's grocery stores. They wanted organic whole foods. They wanted to buy in bulk. More than that, they wanted some control over where their food came from and how it reached them.

Steep Hill Food Co-op began as an entirely volunteer-run operation and grew into a fixture on Broadway Avenue, connecting shoppers with organic food and local producers for nearly five decades.

"The focus was on controlling our own food, on being the decision makers about what was available for people to purchase and participating in operating the store," says board president Cathy Holtslander.

Nearly 50 years later, that idea remains at the heart of Steep Hill.

"We need to be financially sustainable, but we have a wider range of goals than just making money," says Holtslander. "We focus on community and environmental values, helping people learn about and access nutritious food and doing it in a cooperative manner."



WHEN MEMBERS SAID NO

The clearest demonstration of that came in 2023. Steep Hill was in trouble. The previous board concluded the store was no longer viable and would have to close. Members had another idea.

"The members said, 'What? We want to keep Steep Hill going. We want to keep it alive,'" says Holtslander.

They called a special membership meeting, elected a new board and gave it a mandate to keep the store open.

"We had a huge turnout at that membership meeting," she says. "We brought in a new board, and we kept it open because the members wanted it."

At roughly the same time, the Extra Foods store on Broadway closed. Holtslander points out that shoppers there had little ability to affect that decision.

"Even if they were loyal shoppers and spent lots of their grocery dollars there, they could do nothing about keeping it open," she says. "Whereas at Steep Hill, the members said, 'We're going to do what we need to do to keep it open.'"

For store manager Amielle Christopherson, that difference is also visible in everyday interactions.

"There's a community that exists here in a way that general retail just doesn't allow to grow," she says. "Our staff have gotten to know our members on a one-on-one basis, and we know people's favourite items. Everything is much more personal."



A DIFFERENT KIND OF GROCERY SHELF

Steep Hill maintains its own purchasing priorities, favouring organic products, local producers and processors and foods that fit its environmental and community values. Holtslander estimates roughly 80 per cent of sales are organic.

There is also a short line between asking for something and potentially seeing it on a shelf. Steep Hill keeps a small whiteboard in the store where shoppers can request products.

"I'll try anything once if it's something I'm able to purchase. If it does well, we'll keep it on the shelf, and if it doesn't, we'll see if we can find an alternate way to get it to the few customers who are interested in it," says Christopherson.

"There are dozens of items that I've brought into the store due to customers' requests, and some are now regular staples."

One of the most noticeable changes has been an expanded range of grocery items from Federated Co-operatives Limited.

"Folks new to the store comment regularly about how much they appreciate having items they're familiar with and are within their grocery budgets," Christopherson says.

"Not everyone is in a place to purchase only organic, fair trade or local, so giving the community the option to choose what works best for them has been welcomed."

KNOWING WHO GROWS THE FOOD

Steep Hill's relationship with producers is similarly direct. Holtslander says staff often have face-to-face relationships with farmers and small food processors, sometimes discussing what the store needs before crops are planted.

"There's a conversation about what they can offer and what Steep Hill has capacity to sell," she says.

For Holtslander, supporting those relationships is about more than buying locally. "If we can support the farmers, the farmers will support us," she says.

She believes that will become increasingly important as food systems face trade disruptions and other pressures.

"It's about not only food sovereignty, but food security."

MORE THAN A PLACE TO SHOP

For Holtslander, Steep Hill became more than a grocery store a long time ago. She was a working member while attending university and even served as the co-op's secretary in 1988. Today, she connects that experience to the idea of food sovereignty.

"It's community-based control of our food system based on our values as human beings," she says. "We are governing our food system at Steep Hill in a micro way, but it's important to show that there is a different way."

For Christopherson, that difference comes down to care.

"The ritual of caring is my favourite part of what I get to do," she says.

She thinks often about people who might have a harder time accessing food because of age, mobility or lack of access to a vehicle, and about those who might otherwise be isolated.

"For some, having us here means more independence because we're a walkable distance from their home, for others our expanded product range has meant they're more able to afford groceries, giving them choice, dignity and a feeling of belonging."

FOOD AROUND A COMMON TABLE

That commitment to community extends beyond Steep Hill's members and customers.

For about a year and a half, the co-op has been working with the Riversdale Community Fridge to keep edible food from going to waste.

"Our staff goes through produce that's most likely not going to sell but is still edible, writes it off, and twice a week a volunteer from the Community Fridge picks it up on our behalf," says Christopherson. "This means that the food is still eaten and people who otherwise may not have access to food are able to have that need met, if only in a small way."

THE NEXT CLIMB

Steep Hill will reach its 50th anniversary in 2028. For Holtslander, thriving at 50 means growing membership, bringing more locally produced food into the store and eventually generating enough surplus to expand what the co-op can do.

"I see Steep Hill as a vibrant element in Saskatchewan's and Saskatoon's food sovereignty," she says, "a place where people know that their food dollar is going to work building community, caring for our own ecosystem and providing good food."

The remarkable thing is that, after nearly five decades, the premise remains almost unchanged.

"We aren't 'just groceries.' We're families getting together, we're birthday dinners and impromptu picnics, soup for someone who's sick and grandkids helping grandparents bake cookies on the weekend," says Christopherson.

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