

## Willy Street Co-op is best choice because it's more than food store

Like a crop of late summer eggplants, purple signs have been sprouting up in front yards all over the Monroe and West Lawn neighborhood. On one side the signs declare "We Need Our Neighborhood Grocery Stores." On the other side they make a specific request: "Please support the Willy Street Co-op on Monroe."

To their credit, the developers of the old Ken Kopp's site have listened to the community and are committed to installing a grocery store as the anchor tenant on the first floor of their planned five-story condominium building. The leading contenders are Trader Joe's and the Willy Street Co-op.

Which store should get the nod? Both the developer and local City Council members take the position that food stores are food stores. They assert that the selection of one or another grocer should be strictly a business decision rather than a matter of public policy.

They are mistaken. How food is sold is as important as how it is produced and has significant implications for the health and sustainability of our city and the surrounding countryside. For a variety of reasons, the Willy Street Co-op is to be preferred over Trader Joe's and, for that matter, over any grocery chain.

First, let's keep Madison Madison. In this too-homogenized nation, the erosion of what gives our city its unique ambience is not to be taken lightly. The Willy Street Co-op is a Madison institution, the homegrown product of the distinctive cultural, political and alimentary sensibilities of this place and this community. A Trader Joe's here would be one more step toward making the heart of Madison look and function like the everywhere/nowhere of the scores of other cities in which Trader Joe's has already located its stores.

Second, let's work to decentralize the food system. As in most other sectors, food retailing is now undergoing an enormous pulse of acquisi-

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tions, which is concentrating ownership of more and more stores into fewer and fewer hands.

Wal-Mart is now the world's largest purveyor of groceries. With its emphasis on price-cutting and global mercantilism, and its over 230 stores, Trader Joe's is a wannabe Wal-Mart. Willy Street, with its emphasis on local, sustainable and fairly traded products — and its ambition to open only its second store — is the anti-Wal-Mart.

Third, let's keep Madison democratic and participatory. The most important reason to prefer the Willy Street Co-op to Trader Joe's is because it is a cooperative. Willy Street is owned by its 11,000 members, who participate actively in its governance. The closure of grocery stores around Madison over the last year has underlined the vulnerability of neighborhoods to decisions made in corporate boardrooms without regard to community welfare. Co-ops are an antidote to such corporate autocracy. The expansion of the Willy Street Co-op will mean the growth of food democracy in Madison.

Fourth, let's keep our community strong. As a cooperative, Willy Street is committed to goals beyond the bottom line. It continuously reinvests both social and financial capital in our community. The co-op buys from local farmers, protecting and enhancing the quality of the social as well as the natural landscape.

Many community organizations have been assisted through the co-op's small grants program. Willy Street has also generously shared its expertise with its sister cooperatives here in Madison and has been instrumental in their survival. Trader Joe's would do none of those things.

Finally, let's support Mayor Dave Cieslewicz in his efforts to make

Madison a model "Healthy City." The mayor envisions Madison as the center of a place-based economy, a key feature of which is the processing and distribution of locally and sustainably produced foods. The vibrant and expanding Willy Street Co-op is a vital nucleus around which complementary, local food businesses can grow. For example, the co-op is making processing equipment in its new commercial kitchen available to the Wisconsin Homegrown Lunch project, which is working to foster the emergence of a fresh produce processing enterprise that would serve Madison's schools.

The Neighborhood Partners investment group deserves our gratitude for moving to develop the Ken Kopp's site, which has been vacant for nearly three years. The design for the building is attractive and it includes affordable housing among its units. Such developments in the center of the city will be instrumental in reducing urban sprawl. But in exchange for public assistance through TIF financing, Madison's citizens can ask for more from the developer. We can ask for a grocery store that works for more than profits.

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**A**t a public meeting at West High School, developer Dave Keller expressed the hope that neighborhood residents would start referring to the project site as "Monroe Commons" rather than "Ken Kopp's." I will be glad to do so as long as the developers take their own naming seriously. The use of "commons" is intended to draw on the legacy of positive associations that people have with the heritage of community interaction in a collectively owned public space. The true heir of that legacy is the Willy Street Co-op.

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