

Going natural — Residents seek healthier lifestyle through food co-op

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At A Glance

The Brighton Food Co-op meets every fourth Tuesday in the lower level of Chilson Hills Church, 4440 Brighton Road in Genoa Township. The co-op opens at 9:30 a.m. The group is holding a membership drive at its next gathering May 14. For more information, contact Secretary Marilyn Mitchell at 517-404-8054 or visit <http://www.brightonfoodcoop.com>.

They have been a small, close-knit community for more than three decades, joining together to combine their pursuit of organic and natural foods into a consolidated mass of buying power.

Marilyn Mitchell, left, and Deborah Frazier check in Frazier's co-op food order with Brighton Food Co-op President Michelle Kaloustian in the background. / GILLIS BENEDICT/DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

Every four weeks, boxes and coolers are spread throughout the vast space in the lower level of Chilson Hills Church in Genoa Township, tables are lined with food items of all varieties and wheeled carts sit at the ready to haul off a month's worth of supplies to waiting vehicles

☑ . This is the monthly routine for members of the Brighton Food Co-op, a group of people from throughout the region who are looking for a healthier lifestyle and are concerned about what goes into their bodies.

“It’s a working co-op. It’s not a storefront,” said Fenton resident Megan Putnam. “So, we don’t have the overhead of a storefront or the waste of a storefront. We order exactly what we want. There’s a lot of people with food allergies here. A lot of people can’t have gluten. A lot of people can’t have dairy or eggs. That leaves a lot of options out. There might be just one tiny space for those items in a store. ...

“People are noticing our food system has its flaws, and they want to eat healthier,” she continued. “Eating healthier has its price, unfortunately. To cut those costs, we are trying to get more people here. The more people, the better our buying power.”

The Brighton Food Co-op was formed in 1981 as a way to offer residents healthy dietary options at lower prices by cutting out the retail middleman. The group takes orders each month from members who purchase items from a variety of vendors — many of them local or regional — that lean toward organic and natural products such as Zingerman’s Bakehouse in Ann Arbor, Higher Grounds Trading Co. in Traverse City, Motave Meadows organic farm in Marion Township, Almar Orchards in Flushing and United Natural Foods Inc.

Many members said they joined the co-op because it combined what they were looking for in a healthier lifestyle with the convenience of purchasing what they wanted.

“I wanted to eat healthier, but it’s difficult because there’s not a (Whole Foods Market) around here,” Putnam explained. “I would have to drive to Ann Arbor or Rochester Hills, so you’re adding the transportation costs. With this, you order what you want for that month. The only drawback is that you have to be open on that one day a month (to pick up

☑ your order).”

The benefit, she added, is not only the convenience but the better bang for the buck. Because there is no retail mark up and the orders are bulk purchases, Brighton Food Co-op members have buying power with vendors.

“We have 17 families right now. We, obviously, have room for many more,” Putnam said. “We’re a nonprofit organization. There is no profit. ... The pay is in the prices we can get. When you have a group of people, you have more buying power. When you have more buying power, the price gets better.”

The group has rented space at Chilson Hills Church for a number of years; however, it is not affiliated with the church or any religion. Putnam said the space is ideal because it’s big enough for the co-op’s needs, it’s clean, it provides storage

and the rent is low. Plus, it’s somewhat centrally located for co-op members, who come not only from across Livingston County, but from across southeastern Michigan.

“We have people from Livonia, Lincoln Park, West Bloomfield,” said Michelle Kaloustian, president of the Brighton Food Co-op.

Kaloustian, of Brighton, has been a member for roughly five years. She said she joined a food co-op in the early 1980s when her children were young as a way to provide healthy eating options for her family.

“Ordering was very different back then,” she explained. “There were no computers

. There was maybe a handful of items you could choose ... a couple of cereals. Any of the more popular health-food stores didn’t exist back then. It was not nearly the options or buying power we have now.”

She said she returned to the co-op system “just out of the necessity for healthier options.”

Each month, Adina Fisher makes the roughly hourlong drive to Genoa Township from Lincoln Park, just south of Detroit, to pick up her shipment of items she said aren’t available on the shelves of retail grocers. She’s been with the co-op for several years, initially coming to help out her daughter.

“My daughter is the one who started coming here. She has since moved to Savannah (Ga.), and she sorely misses her co-op,” Fisher said. “She has a lot of health problems. ... She decided to go holistic, and going gluten-free made a world of difference for her. She probably has 25 migraines a month. She no longer has headaches as long as she doesn’t eat gluten.”

When she saw how using the products offered through the co-op helped her daughter, Fisher said she decided to be more conscious about the products she purchased as well.

“I can get lots of things through the co-op that I can’t get from the regular store,” she said. “I kind of stocked up on frozen fruits and vegetables this month.”

Holistic health is a common refrain among co-op members. Howell resident Joan Johnson is one of the longest members of the Brighton Food Co-op, having joined just several years after it started.

“I was looking for it because I was doing co-op. I even had my own co-op down in Kentucky,” she said. “People come for a variety of reasons. Some people had cancer

. Some people had other illnesses. They couldn’t get the good foods they wanted.”

Before he joined the Brighton Food Co-op, Marion Township resident Jim Brown belonged to a co-op in the Hartland Township area.

However, that co-op folded after the supplier went out of business, so Brown found the group at Chilson Hills Church in 2002.

“I want organic and natural foods,” he said. “We try to go after organic as much as possible — things that are going to be less toxic to the body. This has been a great co-op for that.”

Meeting its members’ needs and providing an avenue toward healthier living is part of the mission Brighton Food Co-op, Putnam said.

“It’s not only a cooperative,” she said. “It’s a very familylike setting.”

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