

Board Election 2025 Candidates



Lionel Cassin

1. Describe your involvement with the Co-op.

I have been a member and a daily customer of the Kensington store since I moved to Syracuse in August of 2023. I have not served on a committee, but I did attend the general meeting at the Salt City Market location in November of 2024.

2. What skills or experience will you contribute to Board service?

Since moving to Syracuse, I have volunteered for Literacy CNY and am currently in Big Brother/Big Sister of Syracuse. I have legal training and decades of experience in computers, higher education, and executive management. I also have extensive experience working with non-profit organizations: I worked for the Philadelphia Opera Company and served as a board member for The Philadelphia Singers many years ago. I am told I am a passable writer.

3. What do you see as the Co-op's role in the broader community?

To provide not only healthy, local foods, but also to demonstrate how much a community can be enriched by something as humble as a 1,000 sf store filled with good food and friendly people. I cannot imagine living in my neighborhood without the Kensington Co-op and I want to do whatever I can to ensure that it thrives.

4. Please provide any other details you would like to share in connection with your candidacy.

N/A



Kate Oja

1. Describe your involvement with the Co-op.

I have been a member of the Co-op for at least 3 years, and have been an active shopper for more. I frequent the Kensington location and occasionally the SCM location as well. I have not attended a meeting, however, I know and am personal friends with several board members. I also live in the neighborhood and am a strong proponent of buying local.

2. What skills or experience will you contribute to Board service?

I have served as a board member for UNPA (University Neighborhood Preservation Association) for 8 years, and am currently its Vice President. I served on the WNA (Westcott Neighborhood Association) board for 3 years. I volunteer with both UNPA and Ed Smith school. I also serve on the boards of CNY Works and the Broome-Tioga Workforce Board.

My professional career is in Workforce Development. I work for a statewide non-profit, based in Albany. My background includes non-profit development, grant writing and administration, program management, and higher education.

3. What do you see as the Co-op's role in the broader community?

I see the Co-op as a community staple, offering quality, organic, and local products. It's a safe space, where everyone is welcome. With the new ramp outside, it is now physically more accessible as well. I can walk to the Co-op easily, as I live in the neighborhood, and I can count on it to offer fresh food and a variety of options. I also see it as a community gathering spot.

4. Please provide any other details you would like to share in connection with your candidacy.

I love the Co-op, and as an active member who appreciates all it has to offer, I would love to be a part of its board of directors.



Paul Harvey

1. Describe your involvement with the Co-op.

I have been a member of the Co-op for approximately three years and really enjoy each visit that I make to the Salt City Market location. Every time I go, I am thankful for this location because it has better produce and prices than many other grocery stores in the area and is only a short walk from my apartment in Franklin Square. I firmly believe the Co-op is a vital part of the downtown and university communities not just economically, but also socially. Growing up in the suburbs, it was normal to see friends and neighbors together in a common space doing an everyday, yet necessary activity. Although I have not been involved with many activities with the Co-op, I desire to serve to participate in these activities.

2. What skills or experience will you contribute to Board service?

My educational and professional background is government relations, receiving my Masters degree in Legislative Affairs from the George Washington University in Washington, DC in 2019. I also volunteer regularly with other organizations in the Syracuse area Meals on Wheels, Tomorrow's Neighborhoods Today (TNT), and the Onondaga County Human Rights Commission. These organizations are rooted in community service and betterment through communication and intentional engagement. I believe the best way for answering the challenges of our community is by listening to those who live in them. As a board member, it will be my goal to engage the broader Syracuse community in how the Co-op can grow and meet the needs of everyone. I will bring my communication skills, knowledge of community demographics, and regulatory acumen to encourage sustainable growth of both the membership and use of the Co-op.

3. What do you see as the Co-op's role in the broader community?

I believe the Co-op has a unique role to play in providing for essential needs here with the City of Syracuse. I grew up in the suburbs having access to reliable food sources less than a mile walk from my childhood home. Now as a city resident, I see first-hand the challenges residents face of obtaining affordable groceries in the absence of a personal vehicle or having to rely on public transportation. It will be my goal as a board member to assist the Co-op in identifying two new neighborhoods where city residents do not have access to healthy food options

outside of reliable public transit or walking distance.

4. Please provide any other details you would like to share in connection with your candidacy.

I am very excited to hopefully join the Board of Directors of the Syracuse Co-op. The main reason why I chose to live downtown was so I could be a part of a growing, diverse community. I believe I would bring a unique perspective to the Co-op knowing not only what young professionals like myself desire, but also knowing the history of Syracuse and how deserving the downtown and residential neighborhoods of the City of Syracuse are of a community-focused grocer.



Leah Witmer

1. Describe your involvement with the Co-op.

I joined the Co-op in the Spring of 2022 after being asked if I was interested in joining the Board. I am grateful that I was appointed and thereafter elected and am up for re-election again. I've served as the Member Engagement Committee Chair for the past few years and have enjoyed spearheading our Coffee at the Co-op and Board Picks over the past year.

2. What skills or experience will you contribute to Board service?

I work for the City of Syracuse as the Director and Chief Administrative Law Judge of the Municipal Violations Bureau. In this role, as well as, throughout my legal career I have focused on public service within our local community. During this time, I have also prioritized service on local boards (I currently sit on this Board as well as the Central New York Women's Bar Association Board), local volunteering (I volunteer with the Volunteer Lawyer Project legal clinics) and community involvement (I am on the PTO for my children's school).

3. What do you see as the Co-op's role in the broader community?

The pillars outlined on your website's homepage perfectly encompass what I see as the Co-op's role in the broader community: great food, strong community and local economy. Access to affordable and healthy food sourced through local vendors is imperative to our community's growth and stability especially in the wake of times of uncertainty. I've especially enjoyed digging in with the Board and our members into "What healthy means to you" over the past year.

4. Please provide any other details you would like to share in connection with your candidacy.

N/A



Emma Kaplan

1. Describe your involvement with the Co-op.

I have been a member for ~3 years, since moving to Syracuse in 2022. While I am a regular shopper at the Co-op, I have not attended membership meetings/events or served on committees.

2. What skills or experience will you contribute to Board service?

I currently work in Quality Assurance at a catastrophe modeling company, where I've progressed into a strategic projects role. This has given me experience managing teams of 4–6, coordinating across departments, delivering under tight timelines, and developing technical skills in R, SQL, Python, Microsoft Office, and automation tools. I've also had the opportunity to work with colleagues from diverse backgrounds, enhancing my communication and collaboration. Prior to this, I worked on organic farms in NY, CA and MA, planting, harvesting, attending farmers markets, and preparing CSAs. I also worked at a small, locally owned grocer that sourced from regional farms for retail and box delivery. These experiences gave me perspective on the challenges in bringing local produce to the market and the consumer.

3. What do you see as the Co-op's role in the broader community?

I see the co-op's role in the community as the hub connecting regional farmers and producers, and a broad range of shoppers in Syracuse. It should be a place both consumers and local producers are excited to frequent, and see it as an economic advantage to shop or sell there. I think it is too easy for co-ops to get the reputation of 'bougie' or just for fun treats, rather than a place to buy staples, or high-quality local produce that supports the local economy. I think this sentiment can be challenged by ensuring the co-op is a practical source for everyday items as well as high-quality, locally sourced products that support the regional economy.

4. Please provide any other details you would like to share in connection with your candidacy.

Since stepping away from farming work a number of years ago, I've been thinking about how to stay involved in local food systems. This feels like a great opportunity

to reconnect with that work in my own neighborhood. I'm looking forward to contributing in a practical way by supporting local producers and helping strengthen access to good food.



Miguel Tarrats

1. Describe your involvement with the Co-op.

Although, I've not been a member, I've shopped there since I was a student, approximately 26 years ago. I went to the last meeting, but have otherwise just worked closely with SRFC for over 7 years as an employee of Cooperative Federal in Syracuse.

2. What skills or experience will you contribute to Board service?

I have over 20 years of customer service and hospitality experience as an employee of Cooperative Federal and Syracuse Stage before that. I've been a resident of Syracuse for the majority of my life, after attending Syracuse University. Although I haven't done a lot of volunteering recently, I volunteered for around nine years at the Silver Bay Youth conference, in the Lake George region of New York.

3. What do you see as the Co-op's role in the broader community?

The Co-op was such a cool place to shop, where you could buy local foods and support smaller businesses. I feel like it transcends that now in such a lovely way, with the location at the Salt City Market. Having access to fresh foods in an area that is otherwise a food desert, is really a goal that led to my interest in applying for the Board at SRFC.

4. Please provide any other details you would like to share in connection with your candidacy.

Board Member, Meagan Weatherby recommended that I apply and I got a feel for how the Board Meetings run from attending the August meeting.