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COURTESY PHOTO

Owners Julie and Andy Shimek hosted the Coop mixer at Luna's on Sunday.

Food Coop holds member mixer

by ANELIA K. DIMITROVA
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The Cedar Falls Food Coop hosted its first member mixer on Saturday at Luna's in downtown Cedar Falls.

The informal gathering drew a good crowd of firm supporters of the coop movement and some curious community members who wanted to find out more about the model the group wants to develop.

Tom Wickersham, the president of the board of directors, stepped up on a chair to address the party with

a brief update on the coop's progress.

He said the coop needed 1,000 member-owners to open its doors, and so far, that number has grown to 60.

In an interview with the Cedar Falls Times on Friday, he explained the road the group has traveled so far and mapped out its future plans.

Wickersham said the conversations about opening a coop in town started in 2012, after the closing of Roots Market on Main Street in town. A meeting at Cup of Joe's, with Wickersham, his wife, Melanie

Drake, and a couple of volunteers led to the first public event—a well-attended community conversation in September of 2012 at the Community Center.

“It was a great dialogue,” he said.

Two years later, the coop incorporated as a business and, with the help of a steering committee and subcommittees, has put together an impressive website, with bylaws and nuts-and-bolts details about the benefits of becoming a member,

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Food Coop holds member mixer at Luna's

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among other things.

“We saw a need for this and a benefit for the community for something like this in Cedar Falls,” he said.

Wickersham said in the process, his group has learned a lot.

“One critical lesson we learned about is how important education is,” he said. “We discovered at farmer's markets and other community events how important it is to make sure that people understand that a food coop is a unique model.”

In outlining the Cedar Falls model, Wickersham says his group has reviewed examples of an established coop, such as the one in Decorah, and newer ventures, such as the one in Dubuque.

“We have a unique business structure as owners are members and a member owner is eligible to participate in the decision-making,” he said. “We are striving to be financially sustainable and profitable.” Wickersham said the



TOM WICKERSHAM
BOARD PRESIDENT

group is looking for a building up to 14,000-square feet in or around downtown Cedar Falls and the projected opening is two to three years down the road.

“This has been a tremendous embracing experience,” he said of the reception the idea has received. “Everyone has stepped up and helped along the process. We worked with all kinds of individuals and businesses from UNI, their business center CEEE, to volunteers that are working on logos, it's great to be embraced by people who appreciate what we are doing and make a financial commitment to an organization that hasn't opened its doors yet.”



COURTESY PHOTO

The Food Coop is looking to build up to 14,000-square feet somewhere in the downtown area of Cedar Falls. They hope to open within the next 2 to 3 years.

“ We discovered at farmer's markets and other community events how important it is to make sure that people understand that a food coop is a unique model.”

- TOM WICKERSHAM

Food Coop board members



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KRISTEL MCCLENAHAN
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