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The Pittsburgh Chamber of Cooperatives is raising awareness about the benefits of co-ops.

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By [Marty Levine](#)



[Photo by Marty Levine](#)

Urban agriculturalists Ayanna Jones and Raqueeb Bey

It’s Co-opoly night at the Pittsburgh Chamber of Cooperatives, a kind of chamber of commerce founded this year to encourage worker-owned businesses. Tonight players of the Co-opoly board game are trying to achieve the opposite goal of Monopoly: They’re trying to win together.

It’s confusing for the 20-plus players, since there is only one piece, which they take turns moving around the board. The idea of Co-opoly is to create a business that everyone owns, where everyone has an equal share in the eventual profits, and everyone has a vote in how it runs.

“You can change the rules as a group, which is very real” for a co-op businesses, says Jeff Jaeger, who runs the group — whose motto is “Think outside the boss” — with Ron Gaydos.

“Your objective is to protect yourself from the cruel world and make enough money to start another co-op,” Gaydos says.

As in Monopoly, players land on spaces and pick cards to see what changing circumstances they face.

Player Jenna Maloney, of Squirrel Hill, is forced to put some money back in the bank, but it doesn't feel as bad as if she were trying to save enough to buy Boardwalk and Park Place. “I mean, it's all ours,” she says.

Will Cenk, of Shadyside, is forced to pay extra money for his mortgage. Then the other players,— David Matten, of Greenfield, and Parker Webb, of Squirrel Hill — give him a raise when it's their turn, to make up for his loss.

Cenk came to the Co-opoly event, at Repair the World, in East Liberty, because he wanted to learn more about co-ops. They “seem like a more ethical form of a company,” he says. “I wonder why there are not more co-ops?”

The Chamber plans to be a resource for people with aspirations to start a worker-owned or member-owned business but don't know where to start — or don't know how to make their idea viable. They've held, and are planning, networking events, workshops and business-coaching sessions, offering technical assistance for people whose vision outstrips their knowledge.

“You mention cooperatives to people,” says Jaeger, “and immediately you can see people [think], ‘Oh yeah, that's a hippie thing.’”

But that's only partially true: Not only have co-ops been around in Pittsburgh since the 1800s, in early Pittsburgh industry, but they remain a viable business model today, Jaeger and Gaydos say.

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Who wouldn't want to work in a co-op? Jaeger asks. It might not be the path to vast wealth, but co-op workers “feel passionate about what they are doing and good about the people they are working with. The amount of time that is spent at work is equal to or more than the time we spend with our families and friends. So you better have a stake in it.”

“Many people don't like working in hierarchical business settings,” Gaydos says. If they could experience working in a co-op, he believes, they would appreciate how co-ops are democratically run, more responsive to the communities in which they are founded, and, yes, let people make a good living.

Co-op workers “feel a sense of ownership,” which is a big value in American society, Jaeger adds. Isn't it better to come into a job and know what you want to do that day, instead of being told what to do by a person in authority — someone who might not even know as much about your day-to-day duties as you do?

There are millions of people involved in co-ops around the country, says Gaydos, but those co-ops just aren't very visible. That's especially true locally. Some may even be informal, such as the after-school childcare co-op Gaydos and his wife once organized with four other families here.

“Food co-ops are usually the most visible in town,” says Gaydos, a former board member of the one co-op Pittsburghers might know: the East End Food Co-op. They’re one of the most popular co-op ideas as well, along with utility co-ops and manufacturing and retail co-ops.

Some local groups — from construction companies to solar-energy promoters and neighborhood composting ventures — function as co-ops, even if they haven’t, or haven’t yet, incorporated officially as one.

The Chamber is working with several local groups, and one in nearby Indiana, Pa., on everything from their business models to their decision-making structures. “People are used to the command-control model,” Gaydos says. Co-ops are, well, cooperative, but they still need to figure out ways to manage simple decisions, “so they don’t have to have company-wide votes all the time — so they can figure out how to reach consensus.”

The Chamber’s chief focus in these early months is in connecting aspiring co-ops to legal resources and to other people who have already trod this business path. They’re working with an herbalist co-op, a sex-toy co-op, a food co-op and the Black Urban Farmers and Gardeners Cooperative, which is formulating big plans from a tiny cubicle in an incubator space in the Hill District’s Energy Innovation Center.

Urban agriculturalists Raquieb Bey and Ayanna Jones, the co-directors and founders of BUGs, already have 25 members who contribute sweat equity to each other’s gardens.

Growing up locally, they noticed the need for fresh, healthy, affordable food in black neighborhoods, and also noticed that most of the urban agriculture there was being done by young white people.

Jones grew up farming her grandfather’s place on a Hill District street that has disappeared since her 1950s childhood. They had a mule and chickens, and grew and canned vegetables.

“It was a long time till I realized you went to the grocery store,” she says. “Then I began looking at my community and realized it was important to organize ...” She pursued urban agriculture as her vocation and in her education as well.

She and Bey founded what they affectionately call BUGs because, Jones says, while the importance of Africa-centric art and culture is understood today in the black community, the importance of farming, and what their ancestral homeland can teach about food culture, is not well known.

Bey has also been active in urban gardening for years. In April 2011, she and friends began a community garden in Uptown, forming a youth program called Mama Africa’s Green Scouts. It soon expanded from their own children to the neighborhood kids and finally opened to everyone, offering lessons in community gardening, green sustainability and African culture.

BUGs has a similar social-justice component, working with local nonprofits and senior centers on their own urban gardens. Its founders chose to be a co-op, Jones says, because “we wanted not to be exclusive. ... We wanted to make sure every black gardener who wanted to be involved could be involved.” Some might need only BUGs’ labor, for instance, but not its expertise.

BUGs members promote the group at farmers’ markets in city neighborhoods, and Bey hopes to add cooking demonstrations and social-justice speakers to that mix. Jones says the group could even open its own grocery store in Homewood, run by African Americans, with a café and classes on cooking and canning.

And she hopes BUGs can eventually offer living-wage landscaping jobs, and training in running a greenhouse, to city youth.

She and Bey have been consulting with the Chamber of Cooperatives on how to turn their idea, eventually, into a paying venture. Gaydos has connected them with a lawyer and consulted with them about other necessary co-op moves.

"We're looking at longevity," Jones says.

So is the Chamber.

Gaydos and Jaeger have partnered with several local business schools to connect Chamber members to business-education opportunities from the University of Pittsburgh and elsewhere. "We're trying to be [a conduit] for this idea," says Jaeger. "You want to know what this is, we'll help you figure this out because we want to see it happen.

"At this point we are lending an ear to figure out what people want."

See [www.PittsburghChamber.coop](http://www.PittsburghChamber.coop) for the next event from the Pittsburgh Chamber of Cooperatives. It will include a meet-and-greet with local cooperative owners, an informational workshop — and games of Co-poly. Or send a note to [we@PittsburghChamber.coop](mailto:we@PittsburghChamber.coop).



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