

“It’s not just about groceries”: Understanding perspectives on a planned food co-op in West Charlotte, North Carolina

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Abstract


Food insecurity is a serious issue in the U.S., particularly in communities that have experienced long-standing disinvestment and racial segregation. In historically Black neighborhoods in West Charlotte, North Carolina, supermarket redlining and urban neglect have contributed to limited access to affordable, healthy, and culturally relevant foods. In response, the West Boulevard Neighborhood Coalition (WBNC), a local nonprofit, developed


the Three Sisters Market, a planned community-owned food cooperative (co-op) designed to address food insecurity, promote economic development, and serve as a community gathering space for West Charlotte residents. While community-owned food co-ops present a promising solution by expanding access to affordable food options in areas where no grocery store has been sited, there is a significant gap in research documenting resident perspectives on co-ops, particularly those planned in historically marginalized Black communities. To address the gap, this study used a community-engaged research approach in partnership with WBNC to explore local perspectives on the planned West Charlotte co-op. It aimed to answer

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the questions: (1) How do residents perceive community food co-ops; (2) What are the perceived benefits and challenges of a co-op in West Charlotte; (3) What services, attributes, and amenities do residents consider important for the success of the planned co-op. We conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with West Charlotte residents and local workers, and individuals from surrounding areas. Thematic analysis revealed both opportunities and concerns, that most participants were unfamiliar with food co-ops but would “very likely” shop there after learning more. Participants prioritized fresh produce, culturally relevant foods, and ready-to-eat healthy meals. They also envisioned the co-op as a hub for cooking classes, health education, and social connection in general. Concerns about the co-op’s ability to sustain itself financially, affordability, and transportation access underscored the importance of inclusive planning and engagement. This study contributes to food justice and co-op development literature by centering resident voices and offering practical insights for community-driven food access solutions in historically marginalized communities.

Keywords

food justice, food co-op, resident perspectives, community food systems, community engagement, community-engaged research

Introduction

Food co-ops are a significant strategy for increasing access to groceries in low-resourced communities where grocery store redlining is prevalent, the practice in which large grocery retailers’ calculations about potential profit margins and resident spending power lead them away from communities that tend to have higher populations of Black residents, lower rates of employment, and a disproportionate concentration of renters (Zhang & Debarchana, 2015). Consequently, residents of communities with limited access to fresh, healthy foods experience significant rates of food insecurity.

However, food insecurity, compounded with issues such as political exclusion, poverty and unemployment, is producing what has been called a fourth wave of Black cooperation in the U.S.

(Nembhard, 2014). Cooperators are working at the grassroots level with locals to open food co-ops to increase food access in food-insecure neighborhoods. They offer an alternative to traditional grocery stores where community members can purchase an equity share of the co-op and become member-owners of the market. Member-owners participate in decision making such as choosing the types of products that the store offers, electing their board of directors, and voting on how store profits are distributed. Food co-ops often hire and purchase locally and reinvest in the community (Katchova & Woods, 2013). Thus, co-ops contribute to community wealth, appealing to low-resourced communities and offering an alternative to the extractive practices of dollar stores and large chain grocery stores that often pay poor wages and can negatively impact under-resourced communities by driving out existing grocery stores or deterring new ones from locating there (Institute for Local Self Reliance, n.d.).

Residents of the West Boulevard Corridor in Charlotte, NC, with the leadership of the West Boulevard Neighborhood Coalition (WBNC), a nonprofit that enables community-led economic development in the Corridor, are pursuing a food co-op to address food insecurity, health disparities, and limited community wealth. While substantial research documents the benefits of food co-ops, far less attention has been given to their implementation in historically Black communities such as the West Boulevard Corridor (Katchova & Woods, 2013; Zitcer, 2014). To encourage the success of the planned food co-op, the WBNC partnered with researchers in the Department of Earth, Environmental and Geographical Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to study resident perspectives and needs.

This community-based research study aimed to answer the following: (1) How do residents perceive community food co-ops; (2) What are the perceived benefits and challenges of a co-op in West Charlotte; and (3) What services, attributes, and amenities do residents consider important for the success of the planned co-op. To address these questions, we conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with West Charlotte residents, local workers, and individuals from surrounding neighborhoods.

It was important to capture the perspectives of those living outside of West Charlotte, as WBNC recognized that support beyond the neighborhood is important for the co-op's sustainability. Through thematic analysis, we identified both opportunities and concerns surrounding Charlotte's proposed first food co-op.

We begin with a review of literature on food (in)access, sovereignty, and co-ops before providing more details on the research context and approach. We then provide the findings on resident knowledge and perceptions about co-ops, anticipated benefits and challenges, and the features desired by residents and prospective customers. The final two sections propose a holistic framework for co-op success and offer concluding recommendations for practitioners.

Literature Review

Limited access to affordable, fresh and nutritious food has received significant attention in public, academic, and policy spheres. Through different terminology—such as food deserts and swamps, supermarket redlining, and food apartheid—researchers and activists call attention to inequities in food access and the power structures that produce them (Eisenhauer, 2001; Zhang & Ghosh, 2015). The concept of food desert is particularly significant in focusing on food justice and equity. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food deserts as “areas with limited access to a variety of healthy and affordable food” (Dutko et al., 2012, pg. iii) and policymakers have responded by incentivizing grocery stores to establish locations in these areas (Shannon, 2014; Zurawski & Higgins, 2024). However, these efforts have produced inconsistent results in improving access and health outcomes (Chrisinger, 2016; MacNell et al., 2017; Zenk et al., 2011), and have been described as inattentive to political and economic structures that have disinvested in communities of color for decades (Hammelman, 2018; Reese, 2019; Shannon, 2014). Accordingly, there are increasing calls for empowering communities to build their own food systems grounded in principles of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty has been taken up by food producers and activists worldwide since the 1990s, calling for local ownership and management

of food system resources and for autonomy, solidarity, and dignity for food system actors (Brant et al., 2023; Chaifetz & Jagger, 2014; Coté, 2016; Hammelman, 2018; Jones, 2019). While emerging from landless peasant movements in the Global South, the ideas of food sovereignty have more recently galvanized some urban food activists pursuing alternative solutions to food access (Block et al., 2012). For them a more holistic approach to addressing food system inequities, that is grounded in self-determination, sovereignty, and sustainability, is critical for building more equitable food systems.

In parallel, agricultural and consumer cooperatives have a long history in the U.S. food system and in struggles for food sovereignty (Hale & Carolan, 2018; Pitman, 2018). Co-ops are self-sustaining businesses in which member-owners maintain control over the business and benefits are distributed to members (Deller et al., 2009). They emerged as part of the Black populist movement in response to White supremacy (Nembhard, 2024) and as a movement to overcome the inequities of the Industrial Revolution by shifting power toward local ownership and giving consumers more control (Zitcer, 2017). Today, many co-ops follow seven cooperative principles established by the International Cooperative Alliance: voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy and independence, education, training and information, cooperation among cooperatives, and concern for community (International Cooperative Alliance, 2025).

Co-op grocery stores are distinct from traditional grocery stores in several important ways. Typically, a member purchases an initial membership share that entitles them to participate in the management and decision making of the store and to receive any store income that is distributed back to members. Most co-ops are committed to their communities and pursue food system relationships, such as with local suppliers, that are values-based rather than exclusively economic-based, as is more common in traditional groceries (Katchova & Woods, 2013). The market shares and collective impact of retail food cooperatives have increased in the past decades (Meter, 2014). Today, the

National Co+op Grocers, an association supporting retail food co-ops, has 166 members operating 240 stores in 39 states (2025).

Co-op groceries have been lauded for serving as alternative economic spaces that can contribute to food sovereignty, improve access to local and organic foods, and serve as spaces of hope (Zitcer, 2014). They have also been critiqued, however, for exclusivity and inaccessibility. Nevertheless, in recent years some communities of color with limited food access have turned to co-ops to reclaim their food systems. A pioneering store in this movement is the Detroit People's Food Co-op, a Black-led and community-owned grocery that opened in 2024. However, given the fairly recent advent of co-ops, there is limited research on the role of co-ops in addressing limited food access and historical disinvestment in food systems in communities of color.

Context

Neighborhoods in West Charlotte experience some of the highest rates of food insecurity in Charlotte as a result of decades of disinvestment and supermarket redlining that precluded access to affordable, fresh, and nutritious foods. The area has not had a full-service grocery store in operation in over 30 years. A Harris Supermarket operated from 1961–1976, but left to follow wealthier residents to the suburbs when the neighborhood's demographics shifted. The last neighborhood grocery store was a Wayne's Supermarket, which closed in 1989 after government seizure of the strip mall in which it was located (Moore, 2021). Today, residents primarily purchase food at low-cost retailers (i.e., Family Dollar), corner stores, gas stations, and a Walmart that is primarily accessible by car or a lengthy bus ride.

For decades neighborhood residents, community leaders, and local organizations, including WBNC, have fought to bring a grocery store back to the neighborhood. In 1998, the City of Charlotte's West Boulevard Corridor Plan specifically called for a grocery-anchored shopping center in the neighborhood as a critical part of their revitalization plan (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Planning Commission & The West Boulevard Corridor Team, 1998). In 2000, the Charlotte Housing

Authority (now Inlivan) purchased a vacant lot to attract a grocery store to the neighborhood, but one never arrived. In 2016, Inlivan leased part of that lot to WBNC to operate the Seeds for Change urban farm and a prospective food retail project. That same year, residents also began to actively pursue a food co-op for the West Boulevard Corridor. Community volunteers of the Reid Park neighborhood and WBNC had been steadily building community influence and capacity and working towards gathering the necessary resources and support to launch a food co-op. As a direct result of residents advocating for their needs and cultivating partnerships with Inlivan and the City of Charlotte, recommendations for a West Charlotte food co-op were incorporated into Inlivan's 2018 Annual Plan and the Center City 2040 Vision Plan. Two market studies—the City of Charlotte's 2019 West Boulevard Market Assessment and a second market study commissioned by WBNC—confirmed the potential success of a food co-op.

In late 2020, a participatory-action research project was developed with community leaders representing community-based development corporations, resident associations (including WBNC), a church and a non-profit that works with youth, and faculty researchers in multiple disciplines from UNC Charlotte and Johnson C. Smith University to address the challenges of food access in West Charlotte and build a food ecosystem grounded in principles of food sovereignty. With funding from Mecklenburg County, this collaborative met regularly in three distinct phases during 2020–2021 to examine the conditions needed to establish a full-service grocery store, identify the most promising model (which was decided to be a food cooperative), design the co-op and develop an implementation plan (Anderson et al., 2025). The final plan was presented to the Mecklenburg County Board of County Commissioners in late 2021. Since then, the WBNC has garnered more than \$5 million in funding, hired a general manager, secured land, and completed design steps in anticipation of opening the store in 2026. This study extends these efforts by exploring local perspectives on the co-op, its perceived benefits and challenges, and the services, attributes, and amenities critical for its success.

Materials and Methods

A community-engaged research design was carried out to ensure that data collected would be helpful for the WBNC's food co-op planning efforts. Students and faculty met with staff from WBNC to learn more about the community and efforts to launch the co-op. Both university researchers and WBNC then developed preliminary research questions and a plan for data collection. Methods include semi-structured interviews and a review of relevant reports. Data gathering was conducted from October to November 2024.

Interviews

This study relies on 34 semi-structured interviews conducted with West Charlotte residents (47%), local workers (6%), and residents from the greater Charlotte region (41%), and one participant each from nearby Franklin, NC (3%) and Gastonia, NC (3%). The goal was to capture a diverse and in-depth range of perspectives that are analytically representative of the study participants, rather than statistically representative or quantifiable. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached.

Participants were recruited primarily from two WBNC-hosted community events. Flyers, social media posts, and word-of-mouth recommendations from WBNC employees also helped with recruitment. To minimize bias, researchers aimed to interview those who had not been involved in food co-op planning processes. Interviews were conducted on Zoom, recorded with permission from participants, and transcribed. After completion of each interview, participants were emailed a \$40 Visa e-gift card. On average, interviews lasted 30 minutes. Developed in partnership with the WBNC, interview questions followed an interpretivist approach (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014), exploring participant insights regarding food co-ops, the benefits and challenges they perceived to be associated with them, and what they hoped to see and experience in the planned co-op. This study was approved by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte Institutional Review Board (IRB-25-0191). Table 1 presents the demographics of our study participants and how they compare to the Mecklenburg County population.

Data Analysis

The research team conducted a thematic analysis, using NVivo 15 to code the 34 interview transcripts. The research team first analyzed the data inductively, reading over transcripts for what themes emerged. Then the data was analyzed a second time to specifically search for how participants discussed topics of interest. Three main themes served as the framework for organizing the coded data: (1) knowledge about and attitudes toward co-ops, (2) perceived benefits and concerns, and (3) desired services, products, and amenities.

Codes were grouped thematically based on similarities in meaning and relevance to the study topics. For RQ1, codes such as affordable/reasonable and expensive were categorized under Price; excited, interested, welcomed, positive, and negative concerns were grouped under Perceptions/Attitudes; and not familiar, limited understanding, expert, and confusing were placed under Knowledge. For RQ2, codes reflected perceived benefits and challenges of a co-op. Benefits included access to fresh foods, community building, economic growth, improvement in health, and community pride; challenges included accessibility, sustainability, lack of information, concerns with cost, and product availability. For RQ3, codes were organized into four themes: expert-led guidance (e.g., cooking classes, nutrition classes, and food growing instruction), products (e.g., organic, cooked foods, culturally appropriate foods, unique items), services (e.g., volunteer exchange, vendors, communication channel), and Amenities (e.g., patio area, kitchen, and classroom space).

After coding, the data was exported to CSV format and R was utilized to produce more refined and customizable visualizations. Though NVivo has some basic tools for code frequency, R was used to create visuals that made it easier to compare various themes, enhancing our ability to interpret and present the data visually for a broader audience, including community partners.

Positionality

Our research team includes three non-West Charlotte researchers who approach this study with humility and a commitment to learning from local residents. This study was also guided by two coau-

Table 1. Study Participant Demographics (N = 34)

Category	Group	Study Sample (%)	County Population Share (%)
Race/Ethnicity	Black or African American	47%	32%
	White	21%	57%
	Asian	12%	7%
	Prefer not to answer	9%	N/A
	Hispanic or Latino	6%	17%
	Two or more races	3%	3%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	3%	1%
Gender	Woman	56%	48%
	Man	38%	52%
	Prefer not to answer	3%	N/A
	Non-binary	3%	N/A
Income (US\$)	Prefer not to answer	18%	Median household income: \$87,005
	\$35,000–\$49,999	18%	
	\$50,000–\$74,999	18%	
	\$25,000–\$34,999	12%	
	\$100,000 to \$149,999	9%	
	Less than \$10,000	6%	
	\$15,000–\$24,999	6%	
	\$10,000–14,999	6%	
\$150,000–\$199,999	3%		
Education	Bachelor's degree	27%	32%
	Associate's degree	21%	8%
	Graduate or professional degree	21%	19%
	High school graduate degree (includes equivalency)	18%	17%
	Some college/No degree	15%	16%

Source: Demographic survey conducted by researchers; U.S. Census Bureau, 2024.

thors who during the study period held leadership roles at WBNC, including Community Engagement, Research, and Organizing Director and Interim Executive Director.

Results

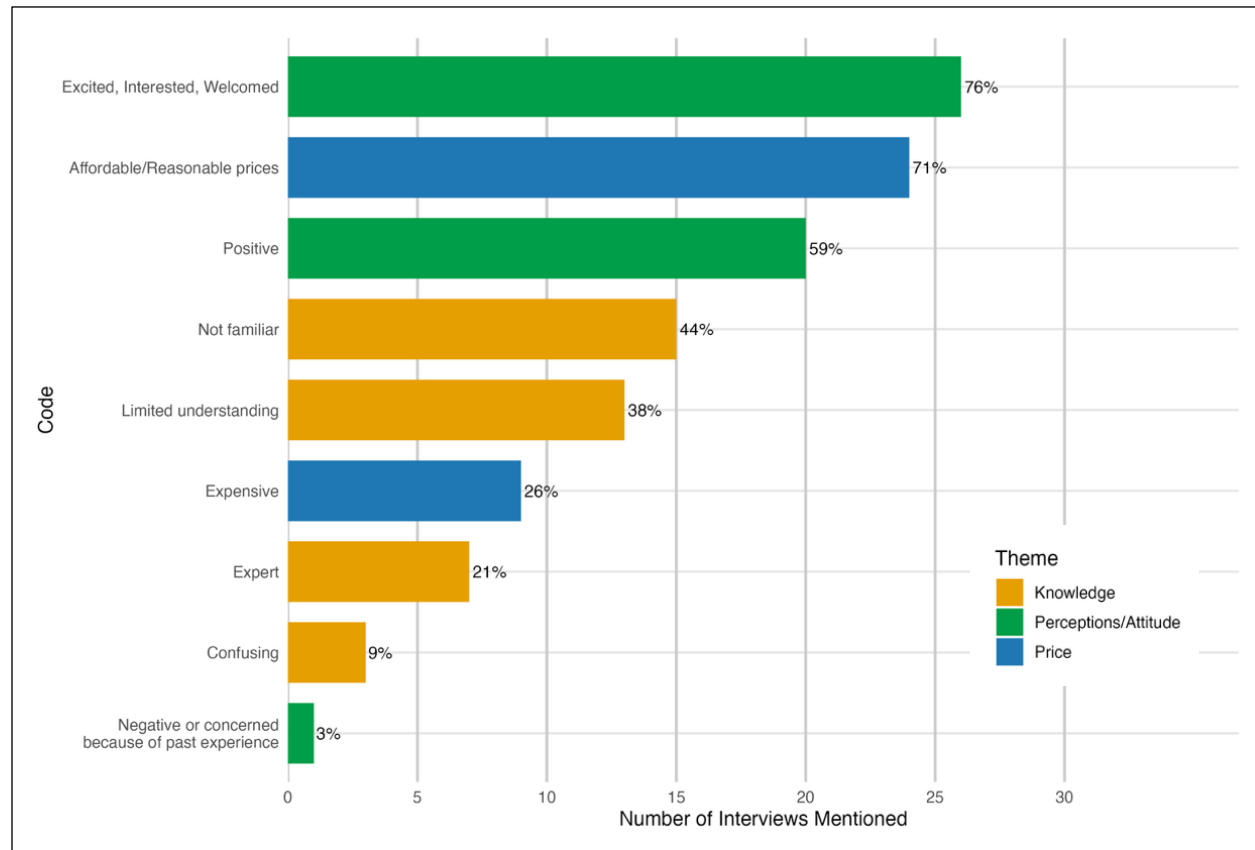
Knowledge and Perception of Food Co-ops

Participant knowledge of food co-ops varied, ranging from complete knowledge to no prior awareness. As seen in Figure 1, food co-ops were unfamiliar to 15 (44%) of the 34 participants. A longtime West Charlotte resident remarked, “I’ve heard the term, but I have a very limited understanding of how they actually function.” Similarly, other long-term residents expressed unfamiliarity:

“I don’t really know much about them, or who owns it” and “To be honest, I am not very familiar with food co-ops.” Nevertheless, most participants were open to learning more, and many expressed interest in shopping at the food co-op after hearing about its mission from the interviewer.

Some participants had prior understanding of food co-ops, though 47% found the concept confusing, with 20% describing themselves as knowledgeable or experienced in the topic of food co-ops. Some participants expressed confusion between farmers markets and food co-ops. One long-time resident shared, “Yes, I’ve shopped at one before and my perspective of food co-ops is like a market, similar to a farmer’s market setup.” Nevertheless, 59% described co-ops in favorable

Figure 1. Perceptions of the Planned Food Co-op



terms, highlighting benefits such as community empowerment, local investment, and improved food access. In total, 65% of interviewees were classified as “Excited/Interested,” indicating a high level of emotional investment. Participants who expressed the most excitement about the planned food co-op were primarily local residents, especially Black and Latina women, and those who reported low to moderate household incomes.

However, a few participants voiced skepticism. One participant expressed concerns rooted in community conditions: “You are dealing with poverty areas that have been affected by drugs and violence...people are only thinking about their safety.” She added, “Anything that beautifies the community can be difficult for them to accept to have a co-op,” highlighting the role of social and environmental realities. A young professional involved in community outreach recalled a prior co-op visit as “pretty mundane,” lacking emotional resonance. However, they valued the co-op’s

broader mission of shared ownership, affordability, and accessibility. Their support was based more on the practical role of a grocery store meeting their needs than from excitement about what more the food co-op could be.

Affordability

Regardless of support for the planned food co-op, affordability was a recurring concern, with nearly 70% of interviewees expressing hope that the co-op would offer prices either lower than or at least competitive with traditional grocery stores. Participants often stated that they did not want the co-op to mirror the high prices of upscale chains. One long-term resident explained, “I would not want to see a co-op...like a Fresh Market or Whole Foods,” hoping it would be “a little more affordable for the community.” Similarly, a newer resident envisioned a balance between quality and cost, saying they would like to buy the “quality of Harris Teeter meat...at the price of Walmart.” Many par-

ticipants stated that they would support and shop at the co-op if it met these expectations, one resident remarking, “If it’s affordable and community-focused, I’d definitely shop there. It feels like a way to give back to the neighborhood.” However, about 26% expressed concerns that the co-op might be more expensive due to its smaller scale and lack of buying power. A participant acknowledged that while a co-op could offer substantial community benefits, that “probably isn’t going to completely outweigh the cost ... if [prices] are significantly higher than a typical grocery store.” Another participant expressed that prices at the co-op “have to be reasonable,” or else people might continue to shop at conventional grocery stores, suggesting Trader Joe’s as a pricing model that balances affordability and quality.

Nevertheless, many participants viewed the planned co-op as a valuable addition to their community, with the most frequently cited advantage being better access to affordable, fresh food. A North Charlotte resident envisioned the co-op offering “fresh produce, tomatoes, fruits, maybe meats, or if they have any farmers that are making their own jams or peanut butters and things like that.” Similarly, another participant expressed enthusiasm for a “good selection of fresh fruits and vegetables, especially ones that are affordable and locally grown.” These responses demonstrate a frequent desire for healthier, better-quality food options that do not rely on expensive or distant grocery stores. A North Charlotte resident noted, “If they can provide more fresh and naturally grown food options, that would be a strong selling point for the co-op, especially when it comes to marketing.”

Community Building

Beyond food access, 68% of participants cited as a major advantage the co-op’s potential for building community. A West Charlotte resident shared, “I definitely think it’s a benefit to the community ... a community building endeavor ... a good opportunity to help people make connections to each other.” Others saw it as a place that could foster a sense of identity and belonging. A Southwest Charlotte resident stated, “It’s like a community initiative where people can come in and see that this is

happening in their neighborhood, not anywhere else.” These responses indicate that the co-op is viewed as a potential social hub, much more than simply a market.

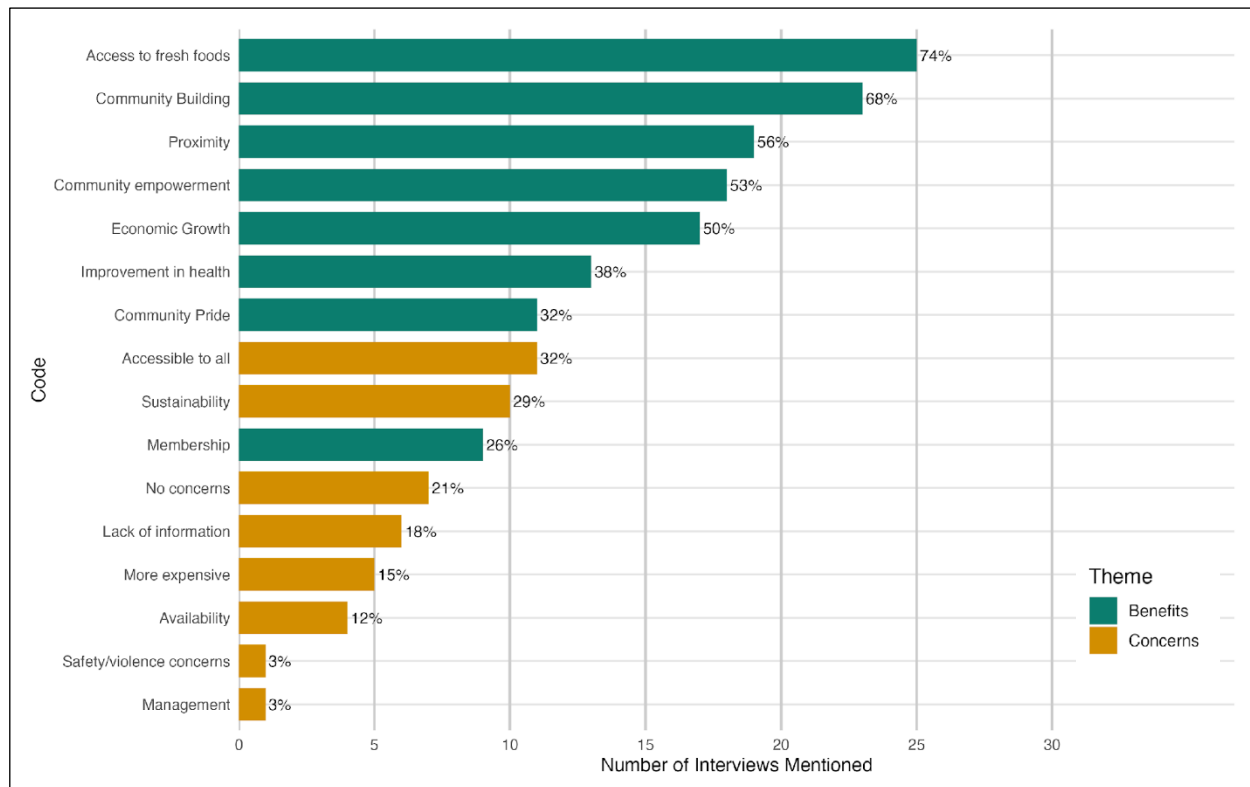
Many also saw the co-op as a way to give residents more control over the local food system. A South Charlotte resident explained, “I can understand that having the opportunity to be part owner of the store gives members of the community more decision-making power.” Similarly, a Southwest Charlotte resident said, “If it’s member-driven ... the members might have a bit more input on what’s sold or maybe even get certain benefits.”

Participants also identified the co-op as a source of community pride and economic opportunity. A longtime resident of Southwest Charlotte said, “It could offer jobs to some people who have a hard time finding employment,” and another participant added, “It would create jobs which will benefit the economy, especially the local economy.” For others, the co-op represented a place of emotional connection, legacy, and belonging. A South Charlotte resident affirmed she would shop at the food co-op because “I grew up in that neighborhood... Every chance I get to give back, I try to do that.” A resident from Northeast Charlotte added, “If it were well-stocked and well run, it could definitely be a point of pride, a place where people feel connected to their community. It would empower people to use the resource and be involved in making it as good as it can be.” These insights suggest that participants see the co-op as more than a grocery store. It is envisioned as a space of empowerment, healing, local investment, and community pride.

Perceived Challenges of Food Co-ops

The question of whether the co-op would be accessible to everyone was one of the most often raised concerns, as reported by 32% of interviewees (Figure 2). A newer resident of West Charlotte highlighted transportation challenges: “People who have issues with transportation, that would be a problem ... you’re not gonna go on a city bus to go grocery shopping.” Others questioned whether there would be sufficient inventory to meet community needs, asking, for example, “Is there enough to go around for everyone?” Concerns

Figure 2. Perceived Challenges and Benefits of the Planned Food Co-op



were also raised about the co-op’s ability to manage deliveries and stock levels, one participant noting, “They don’t really have huge trucks coming in, so ... it’s limited.” These comments reflect underlying concerns about physical access and supply reliability as potential barriers to equitable participation.

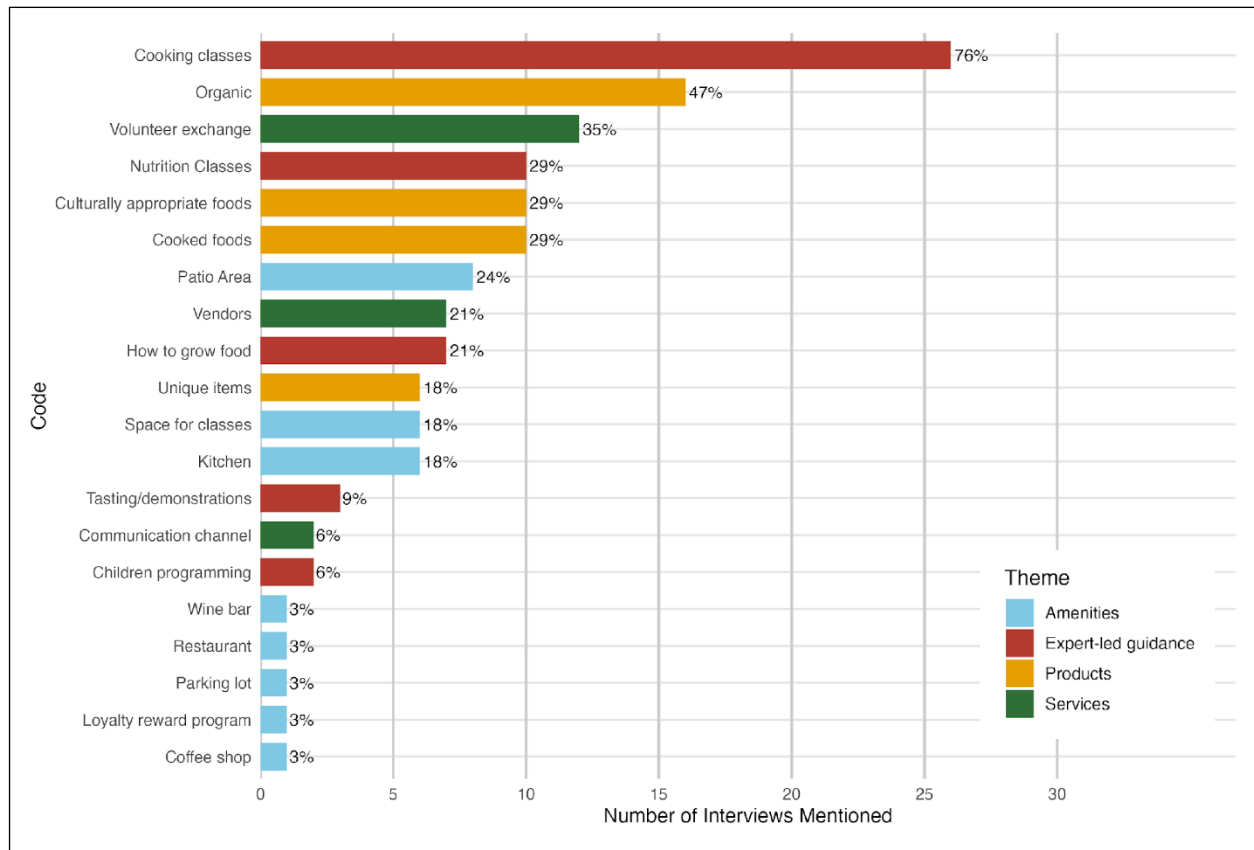
Concerns about the co-op’s long-term viability were also common, with roughly 30% of participants questioning its financial and operational sustainability. A longtime West Charlotte resident shared, “I don’t know how sustainable it’s going to be. ... We’ve seen a lot of things like that happen in the past and then closed because of lack of big support.” Some participants also raised practical concerns about the need for skilled management and operational leadership.

Features that Matter to Participants

Expert-led guidance

Participants expressed a strong interest in expert-led guidance, particularly in the areas of nutrition, cooking, and food-growing practices (Figure 3).

Cooking classes emerged as the most frequently mentioned educational component, 77% of participants identifying them as a key need. Many viewed cooking not only as a practical skill but also as a social and enjoyable activity that could support healthier lifestyles. A participant explained, “Cooking will be pretty fun. And I know a lot of people may suffer from high blood pressure and diabetes, so you can kind of tailor it to those people. Teach them how to make healthier meals.” Others emphasized the value of workshops focused on food planning and budgeting to help households cope with food insecurity. A participant commented, “It would be great if the co-op offers some budgeting or meal planning workshops. Learning how to make affordable healthy meals could really benefit the community.” Learning how to grow food was a frequently cited topic, with 21% of respondents indicating interest in gardening or farming. A smaller number of participants (6%) recommended children’s programming, noting the benefits from involving youth in farming and market-related activities.

Figure 3. Desired Services and Amenities in the Planned Co-op

Amenities

One of the possibilities most often suggested was a community kitchen for shared cooking, events, and small business opportunities. A West Charlotte resident proposed, “It would be nice to have a community kitchen and mobile service...to see how everything is run.” Similarly, another participant saw the kitchen as a space for community ownership and entrepreneurship, suggesting, “It could be like multiple Black owners ... anybody in business selling foods.”

Other frequently mentioned features included parking, gathering places, and seating areas. A Southwest Charlotte resident emphasized the importance of convenient parking: “As long as it has parking.” A patio space was also seen as beneficial for hosting events, with one participant connecting it to workshops and engagement. Several participants advocated for dedicated spaces for group learning and decision making. A West Charlotte resident said, “I do believe everybody

needs...the space to have meetings, to decide the future for a lot of things.” Some participants also offered creative ideas, such as opening a small café or restaurant within the co-op.

Products

Culturally relevant foods were also important, with 29.4% of participants identifying them as an offering related to belonging and identity. A West Charlotte resident said, “You know the kind of foods I grew up on and are familiar and comfortable to me...If you are not from this area and you crave food from your childhood, then there might not be things as easily found.” Also, organic products were seen favorably by 24% of interviewees. One participant shared, “I am trying to eat less processed foods and make sure that the food I’m consuming is as organic as possible.” Others liked having the opportunity to get items that were unique or very difficult to find. Overall, the responses demonstrate the importance of a comprehensive

approach to stocking products that balances diversity, affordability, cultural familiarity, and healthfulness.

Services

Notably, 35% of interviewees indicated that they would like to actively participate in a volunteer exchange program. A Southwest Charlotte resident enthusiastically expressed, “Please let me know if you need another volunteer. I’ll try to sign up for it.” This strong sense of engagement and ownership suggests that service-based models can help build shared responsibility. Vendorship was mentioned in 21% of interviews as a way to support local entrepreneurs and diverse product offerings. A West Charlotte resident suggested, “I could see having some sort of specialty vendor ... handmade candles ... kind of those smaller [items].” Such comments reflect interest in using the co-op as a platform for local entrepreneurs. Other service ideas, including a loyalty reward program (3%) and sampling or demonstration events (9%), also pointed to the importance of engagement. A West Charlotte resident noted, “I think it makes me more likely to come and check it out.” Additional services such as communications channels (6%) and on-site coffee shops (3%) were also mentioned as ways to promote social interaction and keep residents informed.

Discussion

This study examined the perspectives of a sample of West Charlotte residents and of the broader community on a planned food co-op in a historically Black neighborhood that has been without a full-service grocery store for decades. Findings indicate that while many residents remain unfamiliar with food co-ops, concerns regarding affordability, sustainability, and management are prominent. Participants would like more than a grocery store; they want a space for community building, safety, and belonging. These perspectives align with previous research that highlights calls for local ownership and management of food systems (Brant et al., 2023; Chaifetz & Jagger, 2014; Coté, 2016; Hammelman, 2018; Jones, 2019) and alternative solutions to food access (Block et al., 2012).

Previous research has delineated co-ops as self-

sustaining businesses where member-owners hold decision-making power and benefits are distributed among members (Deller et al., 2009). However, our findings demonstrate that much more research is needed to understand how co-ops operate in historically underinvested and redlined communities where structural challenges are distinct. Participants raised concerns such as violence and safety, illustrating how environment shapes the role and expectations of a planned food co-op. Beyond access to groceries, participants expressed a desire for a community space that promotes safety and belonging, aligning with the International Cooperative Alliance’s seven co-op principles, particularly the principle of concern for community (International Cooperative Alliance, 2025). Prior research also has emphasized that food co-ops are committed to food system relationships and their local communities (Katchova & Woods, 2013). Our findings extend this work in illustrating specific ways food co-ops can demonstrate their commitment to community. Suggested approaches include volunteer opportunities, gardening, cooking and nutrition classes, provision of culturally relevant foods, and community kitchens, as well as access to fresh, quality, and affordable food items, all of which can strengthen community relationships and reinforce the co-op’s role as a trusted entity.

These insights are important as WBNC continues planning and as more organizations across the U.S. propose food co-ops. Accordingly, the study suggests that a holistic approach will be necessary to ensure that similarly positioned co-ops meet community needs. From this study, five areas of recommendations for a holistic approach emerged: (1) education and outreach, (2) affordability strategies, (3) comprehensive offerings, (4) community engagement and trust building, (5) sustainability planning. These considerations reflect the concerns and perceived challenges and highlight pathways for aligning a co-op’s development with community priorities.

Education and Outreach

More than half the respondents expressed confusion or misunderstanding about what a food co-op is and how it functions. This gap shows the importance of targeted educational outreach to

ensure that residents feel informed and empowered to participate. Clear and accessible campaigns should communicate the co-op's structure, benefits, and operations. Workshops, informational sessions, and collaborations with local organizations, both within and outside the immediate community, are strategies to enhance understanding.

Affordability Strategies

More than half the participants emphasized concerns with affordability, and recommended affordability strategies such as tiered membership options, discounts for low-income households, and partnerships with local suppliers and farmers to balance cost and quality. Transparent communication about pricing structures and sourcing practices could also mitigate misconceptions that co-ops are more costly.

Comprehensive Offerings

Fresh, local, and organic produce, especially staple items such as leafy greens, tomatoes, and peppers, were identified as a top priority. Beyond produce, respondents stressed the need for culturally specific foods, including grains, spices, and sauces that reflect the area's diversity. Ready-made, minimally processed, and health-conscious meals were also suggested to meet the needs of busy households seeking convenience without sacrificing nutrition. By offering a wide range of products, co-ops have the potential to serve both the nutritional and cultural needs of residents.

Community Engagement and Trust Building

Building trust emerged as a significant theme, participants emphasizing the importance of hiring local people, ensuring community representation in leadership, and maintaining a strong neighborhood presence. Participants envisioned the co-op as a multifunctional space that integrates education, social interaction, and cultural exchange. Suggested initiatives included cooking classes, gardening workshops, nutrition seminars, and volunteer opportunities that would allow residents to contribute directly to co-op operations. Collectively, these strategies could strengthen a co-op's role as a trusted, community-centered institution and enable more holistic contributions to a complex food system.


Sustainability Planning

Concerns about long-term viability were frequently raised, with participants noting need for transparent operations, financial resilience, and diversified revenue streams. Governance structures that actively involve community members in decision making could reinforce accountability and shared responsibility. To ensure financial sustainability, participants suggested marketing the co-op to both neighborhood residents and the broader Charlotte community, diversifying revenue through special events and space rentals, and generating income from prepared foods. Volunteer programs could also simultaneously reduce operating costs and strengthen community involvement.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate a somewhat widespread ignorance of what food co-ops are, but, overall, positive perspectives of what the food co-op could be for locals, such as a space for community building, belonging and safety, and what the co-op could serve—fresh, healthy, and affordable produce. In terms of important products, services, and amenities needed, participants mentioned that culturally relevant foods, cooking classes, and hot ready-to-serve meals could be beneficial. Participants also underscored the importance of working together with the community and ensuring that the community benefits from the services, products, and job opportunities. Nevertheless, a few participants expressed concerns related to affordability and the sustainability of the food co-op in an area with unsafe neighborhood conditions. Without a recognition of neighborhood conditions and sound management practices, there is concern that the food co-op will fail.

A limitation of our study is that most interviewees were recruited from the WBNC community events. Accordingly, residents who are less engaged with WBNC may not have had their voices heard in this research. Future research could focus on door-to-door surveys to obtain perspectives from the broader community and to assess how the planned food co-op may complement and interact with residents' broader food access strategies, including farmers markets, food assistance programs, and informal self-provisioning practices.

Nevertheless, we present a holistic view of how participants view food co-ops and the comprehensive approach needed. A key takeaway for scholars and practitioners is the importance of centering local resident perspectives in the process of planning food co-ops so as to ensure their sustainability. Apart from resident perspectives, it is also important to consider contextual needs, including ease of transportation, sense of safety, and social concerns that may influence one's acceptance and use of a food co-op planned for their area. We present recommendations for practitioners seeking to plan food co-ops in U.S. communities similar to West Charlotte that have faced supermarket redlining and seek to address food insecurity. In doing so, we aim to advance more sustainable food co-op planning in the U.S. and contribute to the broader food systems literature. 

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