

A movement ahead of its time

Resilience: an ability to recover from misfortune or change.

The nearly instantaneous economic recession

triggered by the COVID-19 shutdown has wreaked havoc on businesses large and small. Our very way of life was suddenly shaken at its core. On the basis of sweeping proclamations about “the end of commuting,” “the demise of retail,” and “the collapse of globalization,” many have come to assume that everything will change.

Change, at its core, is impartial. It is simply the act of becoming different. It is also always triggered by something powerful enough to shift our vision of reality. If the challenges and hurdles of the year have brought anything to the Nova Scotia Co-operative Council, it is a strong desire to change for the better, to embrace the communities we live and work in, and to focus on what matters the most: how we can be of service to others.

Choosing to unite in the face of adversity and find ways to help and work with one another, the co-operative model in Nova Scotia shone brightly during an otherwise very dark spring.

“We lived it differently. As essential workers, people needed us to be there for them more than ever. With the support and cooperation of the community, we adapted quickly and made sure all staff members were equipped to do their job safely. The past months were busy and challenging, and we came out on the other side stronger. We’ve learned a lot about our operations and about the importance of what we do in our community,” says Steve Arkens, Manager of Pugwash Co-op.

The reality of how co-operatives dealt and are still dealing with the crisis and preparing for the recovery tells a very remarkable story, one of pivoting to business models conducive to short-term survival along with long-term resilience and growth. Simply put, co-operatives were already equipped with the flexibility and local-level decisional power to face the situation and were able to



deliver support to businesses and communities in a way that banks could not. Community Credit Union of Cumberland Colchester has shown the fastest growth in the Atlantic region, something that its CEO, Georg Oberprieler is quite proud of. “With the help of Atlantic Central, we were able to quickly transition everybody to work from home and still be there for our members. People needed flexibility, advice, and to know that someone was looking for solutions while everything else was so uncertain. We were able to be that someone for our members and the growth we’ve experienced is a testament to that.”

“Co-operatives and credit unions have always thrived in tough times,” says Dianne Kelderman, President & CEO of the Nova Scotia Co-operative Council. “In fact, the earliest co-operative businesses started in times of economic and social hardship, so meeting community needs, pivoting and survival is part of their DNA. They are deeply rooted in their communities and have significant staying power and longevity.”

The business model of community wasn’t built to go away when times get tough. Showing strong adaptation skills, growth, and flexibility, the co-operative movement not only survived but thrived.

As if dealing with such a profound operational change wasn’t enough, the co-operative community also launched Co-Pharm (www.co-pharm.ca). Designed to ease the financial strain of prescription medication, Co-Pharm came amid the COVID-19 pandemic when many were facing financial uncertainty due to job losses or budget cuts. Once again turning to the community and finding the best way to assist where needed the most, the Nova Scotia Co-operative Council has proven that it is the example to follow.

This pandemic may be rewriting the rules of business, but no matter what happens next, co-operatives will be ready to pivot, adapt and help, like they have been doing since the Antigonish Movement’s early days.

