



## Laying the groundwork for the next cooperative generation

**M**any business leaders look forward to changing gears and “getting away” from their career field in their retirement. But that isn’t the path the keynote speaker for the 2017 National Cooperative Month breakfast has taken. The passion for cooperatives that Rich Larochelle brings to his new role of adjunct instructor at the University of Mary Washington was evident to everyone in the room.

A longtime board member of the National Cooperative Business Association and current board chairman of the Cooperative Development Foundation, Larochelle spoke at the VCC breakfast on “Building a Cooperative Economy.” He recently retired as senior vice president of the Cooperative Finance Corporation, but felt called to continue spreading the word about cooperatives.

“Once this co-op stuff gets into your blood it’s hard to get it out,” Larochelle joked as he explained how he ended up as a full-time volunteer in starting a Fredericksburg area cooperative as well as teaching the cooperative model to the next generation of business leaders at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg. His co-teacher is

Adam Schwartz, a national cooperative consultant.

“I was working with the dean of the college of business for another

project, and she asked me if I would teach a course on the co-op business model. When I was working I was very unhappy that very few universities in the United States teach anything about cooperatives,” Larochelle said. “We need to be teaching students to understand the basics of cooperatives. Very few students have a clue. And to think creatively about the co-op business model.”

There are dozens of business opportunities for cooperatives in today’s economy, Larochelle noted, including health care cooperatives and other worker-owned cooperative opportunities. Those are the fastest growing type of cooperatives in the nation, he said.

Fortunately convincing his students that cooperatives are a sound business opportunity is not too difficult, because the democratic principles that cooperatives operate under are quite popular with today’s young people.



Rich Larochelle was keynote speaker at the annual celebration of Virginia Cooperative Month.



Debra S. Swiderski received the 2017 Career Cooperative Leadership Award.



Paul W. Rogers, Jr. received the 2017 Cooperative Member Leadership Award.



Erick R. Watkins received the Young Cooperator Leadership Award.

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*Read more about our Annual Cooperative Month Award winners on page 3.*

# Your chance to help start a cooperative

Virginia is home to two so-called food co-ops in Harrisonburg and Roanoke. These are grocery stores where cooperative members sell locally-grown foods and fill a niche market with consumers, while giving the members a more established sales point than a tent in a farmers' market. Rich Larochelle wants Fredericksburg to be the third city with a food co-op.

"It's exciting to start a new co-op. We welcome all of you. The first co-op principle is open and voluntary membership," he told members of the Virginia Cooperative Council Oct. 6 during the annual National Cooperative Month celebration.



"I've got sign-up cards here. For a mere one-time investment of \$200 you can be part of a new co-op."

The new business has been in development for two years and is now incorporated in the state of Virginia, he said. It currently has 500 members. Once it reaches 1,000 members it can start work on opening a physical store.

"I'm in the Fredericksburg Farmers' Market every Saturday morning" signing up members, Larocelle said. "We want to be part of the Virginia Cooperative Council too."

The Fredericksburg food cooperative would be similar to a small community grocery store, with the immediate goal of giving farmer members a new local market for their goods and consumer members access to more locally-grown foods.

"It's also about the environment, instituting the most sustainable practices in farming. It's about educating the community on the link between food and health. It's about giving back profits to the members. So it's all about local, buying from local farmers, when the co-op makes a profit it will go back to the local members. So that's what our co-op will be," Larocelle explained.

The Fredericksburg Food Co-op got a start-up grant of \$10,000 from the Food Co-op Initiative, which gave them the blueprint for starting their business, he said. Right now 25 volunteers are spending the bulk of their time spreading the word about the new business and recruiting investors.

Members of the new co-op have various reasons for joining, he said. "A lot of them say they just like local foods. Local producers love the idea because it would give them a place to sell their products. Others are joining because they think the food co-op would help the downtown Fredericksburg community thrive. Others join because they like the cooperative model. People who have lived in other areas where there are food co-ops are easy sells," Larochelle added.

"It's heartening for me to see all of you coming together from different cooperative businesses to try and make a difference at the Virginia Council of Cooperatives, and that's what inspires me about the cooperative movement."

For more information or to become a member, visit their website at <https://fredericksburgfoodcoop.com/>

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"It's interesting that REI, the outdoor equipment store, recently added the name cooperative back into their title," he said. "They didn't do that for decades and decades. Why are they doing that now? Market research shows the people prefer co-ops. Never be embarrassed that you're working for a co-op, it's a preferred business model."

"A lot of young students from UMW visit the Fredericksburg Farmers' market, and I was chatting with one of them," Larochelle continued. "She was reading the seven principles of cooperatives on a card I hand out, and she said, 'these principles are everything I believe in. I didn't know this existed. I didn't know a co-op was a thing.'"

"These co-op principles resonate with young people because they're authentic, they're real, and co-ops live these values."

Spreading the word about cooperatives is something anyone familiar with them can do, Larochelle said. In fact he encouraged other members of the VCC to put on their own professor's cap and take a turn.

"If any of you are interested in teaching a class on the cooperative business model at a nearby university, please let us know. We will share our syllabus with you, we'll share every idea we have with you, it's very doable. Colleges like it, students love it, and I'd like to encourage all of you to think about that. It's a fun opportunity," he said.

"Now the dean of the business college wants me to offer even more classes. I thought I was supposed to be retired!"



Whitney Perkins, program and development assistant with Agriculture in the Classroom, provided an update to the 70 cooperative council members on that program and inviting everyone to attend their 25th anniversary celebration at the upcoming Virginia Farm Bureau Federation annual meeting in Williamsburg.

## Three cooperative leaders honored in October

Virginia's cooperative business leaders honored three of their own for having a major and lasting impact on the cooperative business movement in the Old Dominion. The awards were presented Oct. 6 at the annual October National Cooperative Month celebration.

Debra S. Swiderski received the Career Cooperative Leadership Award for outstanding contributions to the furtherance and success of cooperatives in Virginia. A 23-year veteran of the Virginia, Maryland & Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives, Swiderski has worked in all five service areas of the cooperative trade association. Swiderski served as an officer in the Virginia chapter of the Center for Energy Workforce Development and has long been an active member of the Virginia Association of Meeting Planners International and the Virginia Society of Association Executives. A long-time Henrico resident, she and her late husband Ray are the parents of two grown children, Julia and Luke.

Paul W. Rogers, Jr. received the Cooperative Member Leadership Award for outstanding contributions toward the furtherance of cooperatives in Virginia as an organizer, member, elected officer or in some other volunteer leadership role. A lifetime farmer, Rogers has served on committees and boards of numerous agricultural, community and youth organizations, from the Tidewater Academy Board of Directors to the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Board of Agriculture. He has been a Colonial Farm Credit board member since 1981. He and his wife, Pam, live on their family farm in Southampton County, near Wakefield. They have two grown children, Paul and Sharon.

Erick R. Watkins received the Young Cooperator Leadership Award, which recognizes an outstanding young cooperator in Virginia who is actively engaged in cooperatives in Virginia as an organizer, member, elected officer or in some other volunteer leadership role. A member of Farmers Cooperative, Colonial Farm Credit, and Dairy Farmers of America, Watkins grew up working on his family's 700-head dairy farm in Amelia. He has worked with various local cooperatives to help guide his family's business through several tough years in the

industry. He has participated in Colonial Farm Credit's AgBiz Planner program, and he is currently a board member for Farmers Cooperative in Farmville.

Cooperative businesses are owned by their customers and operate according to seven service principles that emphasize democratic control, member service and community support.



J.T. Anderson, 2017 Virginia Cooperative Council President, accepted the Governor's Declaration of October as Virginia Cooperative Month from Lindsay Reames, Virginia Assistant Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry.

**SAVE THE DATE**  
**for the 2018**  
**Virginia Institute for**  
**Cooperative Education**  
**April 13-15, 2018 at**  
**Graves Mountain Lodge**  
**in Syria, Va.**

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# Virginia Cooperative Council



The annual Cooperative Month celebration gave industry leaders, young and old, a chance to celebrate and catch up with friends.