

October 23, 2003

Director, TA&I-FSP Financial Accounting Standards Board 401 Merritt 7 P.O. Box 5116 Norwalk, CT 06856-5116

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to comment on Proposed FASB Staff Position No. FAS 150-c. I support deferring the effective date of Statement 150 for mandatory redeemable financial instruments of nonpublic entities for at least one year. It could take cooperative businesses and other nonpublic entities at least that long to make the changes in their capitalization plans and structures that this pronouncement might force them to make. I request that the Board consider deferring the effective date for these instruments two years to fiscal periods beginning after December 15, 2005.

While the Proposed FASB Staff Position only addressed the effective date for these instruments, I further request that the Board clarify that member equity in a cooperative business is not mandatorily redeemable when the board of directors retains the authority to redeem that equity.

Members of a cooperative join primarily to receive the benefit from patronizing the business, not to receive a return on their investment. Members provide equity capital to the cooperative to finance its business operations, but they recognize that this equity is risk capital. The board of directors of a cooperative may choose to redeem equity to deceased members or others no longer doing business with them in order to keep ownership in the hands of members actively doing business with the cooperative. However, attempts to align ownership of the cooperative with its use by members are always subject to the fiduciary duty of the board of directors to the financial well-being of the entire cooperative.

Member equity, though, always retains the character of equity and the board of directors has the discretion to redeem or not to redeem it. Courts have affirmed that the board of a cooperative can "exercise the discretion it has been granted to determine when the cooperative is financially able to redeem patronage equity," Great Rivers Cooperative v. Farmland Industries, 198 F.3d 685 (1999). The board does not have this discretion for debt owed by the cooperative. When a cooperative finds itself in bankruptcy, all of the creditors are paid before any of the equity held by members is redeemed.

Many accountants familiar with the policies and practices of cooperatives plan to continue presenting member equity in a cooperative as equity on its balance sheet. At least one accountant, though, has notified its cooperative client that it intends to reclassify member equity as a liability based on its interpretation of FAS 150. Since there appear to be divergent practices among accountants on this issue, the Board should clarify its position and hold that member equity is not mandatorily redeemable and will be treated as equity on a cooperative's balance sheet when the board of directors retains the authority to redeem that equity.

Reclassifying member equity in a cooperative as a liability on its balance sheet could also result in a legal obligation to redeem that equity. The authority of the cooperative's board of directors, now recognized by law, will be compromised and member equity would truly become mandatory obligations of the cooperative. This would seriously impair the ability of cooperatives to raise and retain capital for their business operations.

Proposed FSP on Statement 150 (FSP FAS 150-c)

Comment Letter No. 14

The Williamson Street Grocery Co-op would be adversely affected by a mandatory reclassification of approximately \$600,000 of member equity, which is held by our over 10,000 members. An individual membership is \$56.00 and a household membership is \$91.00. Members can pay their equity in one single payment or over a number of years. Our by-laws allow for refunding of equity upon leaving the Co-op subject to our Board of Directors determining how much can safely be refunded in each fiscal year. All members receive this information when they join the Co-op; their money is at risk, if we do poorly there is a chance that they will not receive their equity. We consider the money collected by the Co-op from each member "at risk equity", and not a loan.

The Williamson Street Grocery Co-op presently has \$3,870,000 in assets, \$1,970,000 in liabilities, \$1,300,000 in retained earnings, and \$600,000 in membership equity. The proposed rule change would force us to list all of our membership equity as debt; anyone looking at our financial ratios would get an erroneous impression of our debt to equity ratio. We are not borrowing money from our members, we are asking them to make an investment into their cooperative.

Sincerely yours,

Eugene Hahn, Financial Manager Williamson Street Grocery Co-op Anya Firszt, General Manager Williamson Street Grocery Co-op.