

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA

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Neechi Foods Co-op Ltd. (Operates Neechi Foods Community Store)

Seeking to take control of their own futures, Aboriginal organizations in Winnipeg worked with the Metis Economic Development Training Program in the 1980's to design and create Aboriginal-owned and controlled services and enterprises in Winnipeg's inner city.

They identified the priority needs of the community, which included: a housing co-op, an artisan co-op, a daycare, and a grocery co-operative — Neechi Foods.

What emerged from this process is one of Manitoba's best known models of CED, and one that has garnered national recognition.

Neechi Foods (Neechi meaning "friend" in Cree and Ojibwa) is located at 325 Dufferin Avenue in the North End of Winnipeg. In addition to being a neighbourhood retail grocer, it is known throughout the city as a specialty store and catering business. Neechi Foods is well-known for their oven-fresh bannock, bannock pizza, wild rice, local fruits and vegetables, Manitoba-caught fish, specialty jams, hand-crafted moccasins, Aboriginal artwork and

children's books. The store features a wide variety of economically priced groceries, and offers city-wide delivery.

Neechi Foods began full operations in January 1990. Located in both a "food desert" as well as one of the poorest postal codes in Canada, their goals were to create sustainable, meaningful jobs for Aboriginal people in the local community and provide a healthy selection of food at affordable prices. Despite severe economic and social distress in surrounding neighbourhoods, the co-operative has consistently provided stable employment. ➔



➔ Neechi Foods is dedicated to the health of local residents and their families. They do not sell cigarettes or lottery tickets, and they offer a worker subsidized “kids only” fruit basket where children can purchase fruit for 25 cents, as a healthy alternative to unhealthier snack options. Neechi has also been active in community education regarding diabetes, and won a related national award for their work in 2004.

The impact of Neechi Foods is felt far beyond the North End. They also offer a service of packaging bulk goods for residents collecting supplies for travel to Manitoba’s isolated Northern communities, which helps to lower food prices in several Northern communities. Neechi Foods also sells and promotes food collected and produced by other Aboriginal ventures such as wild rice harvested by Kagiwiosa Manomin Co-op and wild blueberries both from Northwestern Ontario, and Manitoba fish.

Neechi Foods has left a permanent mark on the CED community, not only in Winnipeg, but throughout Canada. They are the celebrated creator of a set of “CED Principles” that have informed the creation of this CED Profile Project, and that are used by organizations in and around Winnipeg. In fact, the Province of Manitoba has adopted these “CED Principles” as part of their CED Policy Framework, and CED organizations across the country also use the principles to orient their work.

While many grocery stores are established as consumer co-operatives, meaning that the shoppers are members, the founders of Neechi Foods realized that in Neechi’s neighbourhood most people cannot afford to purchase shares of any significant value. In other words, raising the required equity

from local shoppers would be difficult. Memberships would not only be difficult to track from year to year, but the membership fees may actually discourage these people from shopping at Neechi Foods. Due to these unique circumstances, Neechi Foods was established, and has since thrived, under the worker co-operative model. This model has helped ensure a strong sense of collective ownership and responsibility among the members.

Neechi Foods is experiencing growth and success. In fact, due in part to the expansion of their catering and in-store food preparation, they will launch a much larger operation at 865 Main Street in

2011. Neechi Foods will be the anchor tenant in this new retail, restaurant and food complex that will be known as Neechi Commons. This community business complex will encompass 30,000 sq. ft. of retail, restaurant, storage, office space, and even a farmers market. Approximately 50 people — mainly neighbourhood residents — are

expected to be employed at Neechi Commons, compared to a dozen at the old store on Dufferin Avenue.

Neechi Foods’ expansion will ensure that this CED initiative will continue to nourish its North End community for many years to come. The legacy of Neechi Foods lives on in the health of the local community, the economic linkages made to local and rural Aboriginal enterprises, the jobs and ownership opportunities created for local Aboriginal people, and the skill and capacity built in the process.

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