

Andrew Borchardt: Proposed bill would undermine cooperative values

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I am writing to provide you with some thoughts surrounding my opposition of Senate Bill 281, concerning proposed changes to the legal definition and requirements of cooperatives in the State of Wisconsin. As proud and active members of Wisconsin Farmers Union, as well as long-time members of a local foods cooperative and wholesale cooperative for the crops we grow on our family farm, there are a host of reasons that have led my wife and me to our strong belief in the cooperative model.

Diversity of opinion and equal opportunity among members to speak and be heard are benefits to everyone who chooses to be a cooperative member. Together, we are all better equipped to devise strategies to survive and grow in times where the future is very uncertain.

Because all voices are equal in the co-op model, we can be certain that ideas can be discussed; that no ideas are silenced. Senate Bill 281 serves to alter that “one member, one vote” co-op model that gives voice to all members as equals, regardless of where their farm or enterprise presently stands on the continuum of financial success, patronage or tenure.

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If a member of an existing cooperative seeks a product, service or counsel that they are unable to acquire within their co-op, it seems to me that they may benefit by looking elsewhere, outside of the co-op model, to achieve what they desire. Reducing the volume of one voice to make another voice louder runs directly

counter to what the co-op model was created for in the first place.

SB 281 and its companion bill AB 353 propose allowing up to 20 percent of a co-ops board seats to be turned over to non-members (including outside investors) and removing members' rights to review certain cooperative records. The bill would also allow Cooperative Resources International (CRI), or its member co-ops Genex or Agsource, to base voting power on patronage.

To focus an organization's time, energy and resources on the initiatives of those who presently spend more, buy more or have more ensures that those members will continue their success, often at the expense of those with a smaller voice.

It does not seem prudent to change the definitions and rules that define a co-op for the benefit of one organization that wishes to retain the advantages they have enjoyed while all their members were equal. If a square peg no longer fits, it might be time to switch to a round one. Instead, this bill attempts to remove the distinction between the two.

- Andrew Borchardt runs Five Green Acres with his family near Poynette and is a member of Columbia County Farmers Union.