

If you land 32 squares after "Passing GO" in a game of Monopoly and roll an unfortunately high number, you can be burdened with a \$120 fine and a weakened morale, all while a crippling sense of regret sets in as you kick yourself for not buying the Electric Company square earlier. And even worse, you just know that when you get around the board again, nothing will have changed and you're probably going to hand over another \$120 while your sibling continues to display their arrogant smirk. Maybe this sense of competition and market capitalism is fine in a flat, mint green world with no actual residents, and in turn, no actual electricity. However in the real world, specifically in the cooperative world, life doesn't work this way, and I know I, along with many others, are thankful for this.

Cooperatives are guided by 7 key principles, each of which play an important part to ensure the community- and equality-focused values are upheld. One of these principles that plays a significant part to promote a sense of equity and involvement of members is the second cooperative principle—Democratic Member Control. This principle guarantees that each member has equal voting rights, and that each member has one vote to put toward electing a board of directors that will create and adapt policy. This principle allows members to voice their concerns and suggestions to their elected director, who can carry those concerns to the entire board of directors.

As a 17-year-old who doesn't pay our electric bill and doesn't vote for Chippewa Valley Electric Co-op's Directors, it could be assumed that cooperation and democracy haven't had a huge impact in my life. However, that assumption couldn't be more false. I have both cooperation and democracy to thank for my 7th grade dream coming true: A high school gymnastics team at Bloomer High School. It's a co-op between Colfax and Bloomer, as both schools individually didn't have enough gymnasts for a team. I attended the School Board meeting where I watched the many parents, community members, and our district's superintendent weigh the pros and cons of creating a team. It wasn't a complete representation of a cooperative board of directors meeting, as many young gymnasts with pleading eyes and

eager parents sat in the crowd. However, it was eye-opening to see how much of a difference can be made in a community as long as the public is willing to do their part. Many parents and young girls spoke their ideas into the mic to the School Board and ultimately jumped with joy when the motion had passed. Thanks to cooperation and democracy, I have the opportunity to participate in my favorite sport without having to transfer to another school.

In that room, although not actually given the ability to vote, the gymnasts and parents knew that showing up to that meeting was important in creating a difference in their community. Similar to how in a cooperative, each member can have peace of mind knowing that their vote makes a difference, as it is as important as everyone else's. This confidence in their ability to make a change promotes active involvement of the cooperative's members and incentivizes them to voice their opinions.

My opinion where I live here in Bloomer, is that we're slightly behind on advancements put in place to better our future. Our coffee shops don't use paper straws, our restaurants still use styrofoam take-home containers, and I think I've seen one electric vehicle drive through our town. So when I saw that my cooperative, Chippewa Valley Electric Co-op, paired with Heartland Cooperative to install the first EV charging station in our little corner of rural America, I had renewed hope for the future of our area. To know that my cooperative has their members' best interests in mind and considers their voice, makes me confident in the future of not only the area CVEC serves, but also the cooperative business model in general.

The next time I see a white mustache and a monocle staring back at me as I land on the Electric Company square, I might just consider asking my sibling if maybe he'd want to turn it into a co-op, to provide a better experience and community feel for its members: me. However, if he lands on my Boardwalk, decorated with a strategically placed hotel, I think I might consider market capitalism again.