

## Community pushes for grocery store



(<https://www.albertleatribune.com/author/heatherrule/>)

By Heather Rule (<https://www.albertleatribune.com/author/heatherrule/>)

Email the author (<mailto:heather.rule@albertleatribune.com>).

Published 11:05 am Thursday, January 10, 2013



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A group in Kiester hopes to re-open the town's grocery store. The store, which was owned by Brad Gohla of Elysian, has been closed since June 30. -Heather Rule/Albert Lea Tribune

KIESTER — Judy Meyer has a passion about getting a grocery store up and running in Kiester. The one they had closed “suddenly,” she said, back on June 30.

“It truly has been one of the foundations of the community,” Meyer said. “It is a basic need.”



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Judy Meyer stands outside the site of the proposed grocery store Monday in downtown Kiester. Meyer is co-chairwoman of the organizing board to bring a grocery store back to Kiester.

She's now co-chairwoman of an organizing board that's trying to bring groceries back to Kiester.

When the store first closed, the mayor and Kiester City Council made attempts to find someone who was interested in running the store, but a few who were interested led to dead-ends for different reasons, including funding.

Enter Meyer and a few interested citizens.

"There were some of us who thought, 'Well, maybe our only option is to do it locally,'" Meyer said. "We're determined to move as quickly as possible."

The interested citizens went ahead with some research, with the council's blessing, and then decided that they really wanted to move forward with opening a grocery store that would be owned and operated by the community.

Obviously with no grocery store in Kiester the past few months residents have had to go elsewhere for their food. Wells is the closest, with Blue Earth, Albert Lea and Lake Mills as other options.

"It's inconvenient for everyone to have to drive out of town," Meyer said.

The other problem is, it's affecting businesses in Kiester, too. When folks go to other cities to buy groceries, they might take care of more needs as well, like filling up the gas tank.

Meyer and organizing board member Don Nickel both agreed that the town has been spoiled with a grocery store for so long. Nickel has worked at the bank in town since 1983 (and moved to Kiester in 1985) — when there were two grocery stores in Kiester.

"It's never been without a store," Nickel said.

The name for the store will be Kiester Market, as chosen from community suggestions. About 15 name ideas came in after an advertisement in the weekly Kiester Courier-Sentinel. The board wanted Kiester in the name, Meyer said.

The next step for the organizing board will be to determine if the store should be a nonprofit cooperative or a for-profit enterprise. Meyer said that decision likely will come at the group's meeting today. Then there's just the matter of some paperwork to be done before things start to roll.

"We hope we can move very quickly toward finding the funds," Meyer said.

The group has found a helpful hand in the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation, which will have representatives at today's meeting. As far as funding options, Meyer said they're looking at small loans and some assistance from the Faribault County Economic Development Authority with its funds for new businesses.

But it also needs one more ingredient in the mix: the community.

"We're hopeful that the community will be very supportive financially," Meyer said. "We will be turning to them once again."

This isn't the first time Kiester has needed a community effort for the sake of a business in town. The movie theater and bowling alley in Kiester were able to be reopened because of volunteers and donations.

Based on the sales when Kiester had an open grocery store, "we have every reason to believe that we can make it go," Meyer said.

They are also considering a small gift shop as part of the store, since that's also something the town lacks. The city owns the building, so updating store equipment and rental or lease costs are considerations, Meyer said.

Buying wholesale groceries in quantities smaller than most stores do can be problematic. After some searching and asking around, the organizing board found Mason Bros. Wholesale Grocers out of Wadena, which only serves smaller stores.

The board decided to work with Mason Bros. as its distributor, one that will deliver products two times a week.

"We're trying to keep the people informed as much as we can," Meyer said. "We want it to be their grocery store."

They haven't been met with any opposition to the idea of bringing back the groceries, Meyer said.

"People are so hopeful that we can get it going again," Meyer said. "We're all in this together."

So when's the target date to have the store open?

"Yesterday," Meyer said, with a laugh. But in all seriousness, she hopes to have it up and running by late spring or early summer.

Those involved on the organizing board are Karen Baynes, Larry Dahleen, John Eilertson, Dennis Hill (co-chairman), Deanne Massey, Nickel and Meyer. Nickel and his wife live in town and "definitely have an interest in the community," Nickel said.

"We don't like going out of town to buy our groceries," Nickel said. "And I really think the community can support a grocery store."