

I'm Caitlin O'Connor, one of the worker-owners of The Wine Source in Baltimore and I am submitting favorable testimony for SB 0114. I have been an employee of The Wine Source for 14 years. When the former owner announced he was retiring and putting the business up for sale, I and many of my co-workers worried about the future of the company and our role in it. We partnered with Baltimore Roundtable for Economic Democracy (BRED) to pursue purchasing the store and converting it into an employee-owned co-op, which we did successfully in September 2024.

At the beginning of this process, I considered a co-op conversion as the most logical way for us to retain the store as we knew it and to secure our jobs. As I learned more about creating and running a co-op, I began to see what a positive impact such a business model can have- an impact that can extend far beyond the company itself. Being able to purchase the store has been the opportunity of a lifetime for many of us. The co-op model allows for a more democratic approach to running a business that utilizes the talents and experience of all the worker-owners.

I can say with certainty that if we had not converted to a worker-owned co-op, this store would have changed in ways that would not have benefited the staff, the community and our customers. We have been able to implement changes that positively benefit the community, and put the health and needs of the workers over profits. Many of us live in the area, where we frequent other locally owned businesses and maintain strong relationships with members of the community.

We have also seen a sharp increase in the number of job applications to the store, and almost all of them have cited the conversion to worker ownership as a selling point. People in the city are hungry for a work environment that offers equity and transparency, and I believe anything that can be done to pave an easier path for co-operatives will only benefit the city and its neighborhoods.