

## Sustainable Connections on a crusade

### Organization aims to connect the local economy



Derek and Michelle Long's Bellingham-based organization, Sustainable Connections, is approaching its sixth year of working to build a local, sustainable economy.

### January 2008

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Asked whether they take any credit for the New Oxford American Dictionary's decision to name "locavore" its 2007 word of the year, Derek and Michelle Long sheepishly admit to a small slice of the responsibility.

Locavore describes a person who endeavors to eat only locally produced foods, and even though it was coined in 2005 by a group of Bay Area residents, the Longs' modesty may be an understatement.

Michelle and Derek are the forces behind Sustainable Connections, the 5-year-old membership nonprofit that seeks to create a sustainable local economy. Some might say they are responsible for the recent flurry of accolades in national books and media for Whatcom County's growing sustainably focused microeconomy.

Recently, a Nov. 15 broadcast on National Public Radio's "Marketplace," in which Michelle was interviewed, described Bellingham as "the epicenter of a new economic model for a post-consumerist economy: locally produced goods and services focused on what surrounding communities need and can sustain."

With mentions of Bellingham and Sustainable Connections in popular nonfiction books such as Bill McKibben's "Deep Economy" and Paul Hawken's "Blessed Unrest," many credit the organization for fostering Bellingham's budding ecopreneurs and triple-bottom-line companies.

Michelle, the group's executive director, is the type of person who cannot sit still. She talks several miles a minute and frequently leaps out of her seat, grabbing charts to illustrate points, or swiping a honeycrisp apple to feed her small frame's seemingly breakneck metabolism.

It's a bit of a chicken and egg scenario (most likely organic and locally grown): Who came first, Sustainable Connections or the local, "living" economy movement? It's hard to say.

Michelle has always wanted to take on the world, and feels a certain weight of responsibility to do so, she said. But she realizes she can't do it all, and more recently, has realized she doesn't have to.

"Several years ago, when I was younger and more naïve and feeling the weight of everything on my shoulders ... someone read me this great quote from the Talmud: 'Look ahead, it's not for you to complete the work, neither is it for you to lay it down,'" she recalled. "And it helped me a lot to think about (the fact that) there are a lot of us working on these things and we are one part in that."

The question of who came first, the local, organic chicken or the egg, is no longer relevant, because now there are so many more chickens and eggs.

## **A path of sustainability**

In Sustainable Connections' third floor, pear-colored office in the Bellingham Towers building, boxes of coupon books overflow and plant vines curlicue down eggplant- and orange-painted window frames (the recycled version of cubicle walls). The organization's roots need more soil, however, and will soon get relief in the form of an office expansion.

"We're busting at the seams," Michelle said.

Things were not always so abundant.

The Longs moved to Bellingham in the summer of 2001 after participating in the private sector — Derek at a Federal Reserve Bank and Michelle as an MBA student at the University of Washington, and both as owners of an online fair trade business. They had spent two years traveling in Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, Southeast Asia, Europe and Egypt in 1996 and 1997, and decided to solve the world's problems through a business model.

"Businesses have got to be leaders in creatively addressing environmental and societal challenges," Michelle said. "We have to make a living and we have to do it in a way that allows future generations to make a living."

In December 2001, Michelle met A-1 Builders owner Rick Dubrow at a business sustainability symposium in Seattle. Dubrow told her about a group of Bellingham volunteers formed in 1998 called Sustainable Connections. At the time, the group met quarterly and focused on environmental issues and triple-bottom-line management. The effort fizzled after the volunteers refocused their energy on other endeavors, and the Longs decided to reignite the cause in a new membership format.

Spring 2002 marked the official beginning of the group, and the Longs had to decide on membership criteria. Initially the answer seemed simple: sustainable businesses. But then they tried making a list of those who would qualify.

"We realized sustainability is a path, no one's perfect, we all have more to learn," Michelle said.

And so the group opened its doors to owners of local, independent businesses who were interested in building a "strong community, a healthy environment, meaningful employment, and buying local first."

In turn, Sustainable Connections would support those business owners with access to technical resources, continuing education about best practices for a sustainable economy, connections with other businesses, and marketing campaigns.

In the summer of 2002, the group had 50 members, an unpaid staff of two and a large handful of volunteers.

Now it has more than 600 members, eight full-time employees and a national reputation.

### **The local movement**

It may surprise some to recall that the first of the now-ubiquitous green and yellow “Buy Local” posters only first debuted a little more than four years ago in 2003.

Sustainable Connections’ Think Local First marketing campaign relied on studies by groups such as Civic Economics and the Institute for Local Self-Reliance that showed local economic multiplier benefits of supporting local businesses, along with other benefits of buying from local, sustainably minded businesses. Those included studies on increased job creation, charitable giving per employee, and environmental benefits.

“There has been a prominent shift in how the market perceives value in products or services going beyond price, convenience and quality,” Derek said. “Consumers are redefining quality to [include] social and environmental quality. The [Think Local First] campaign was an attempt to bring forward that value.”

A study funded by the group and conducted by Applied Research Northwest in 2006 found that 69 percent of local residents are aware of the Think Local First program, and three in five households have changed purchasing behavior because of it.

“Sustainable Connections has radically changed the business climate [in Whatcom County], and the most visible part of that is the buy local campaign,” said Dubrow, who has been on the organization’s board since its inception. “And even further is how other communities around the country are cloning the same idea.”

The Sustainable Connections member directory is the first place Dubrow goes when looking for services, he said. But it is not the end-all-be-all of his financial decisions, as some local economic experts have criticized.

“A lot of people think it’s ‘Ye shall buy local.’ It is not that. I’m tired of hearing that from some very educated people in the community,” he said. “It is buy local first. It’s a starting point.”

Not everyone has been as enthralled with the program or the organization.

In a January 2005 guest column in The BBJ, Hart Hodges, director of Western Washington University’s Center for Economic and Business Research, said the buy local campaign was misleading in its assertion that a dollar spent at a local store stays in the economy longer than one spent at a chain store, as well as other assumptions about job creation and employee benefits. He questioned the studies used to support the economic multiplier effect.

“I found that the authors of those reports made heroic assumptions and often warned readers that the findings may not be appropriate for other businesses or cities,” he said in the column.

But the criticism hasn’t seemed to thwart the organization’s propulsion forward.

Sustainable Connections’ repertoire of programs also includes its Sustainable Practices, Green Building, Green Power Community Challenge, and Food and Farming programs, as well as a consulting arm to educate other community organizations on implementing similar groups and programs in their own neck of the woods.

This year, Sustainable Connections will host its fifth annual spring business conference — the largest in the county — according to Michelle, and its Sustainable Communities and Land Use conference.

Its accomplishments include helping the city of Bellingham become the Environmental Protection Agency’s No. 1 green power community in the U.S. with 12 percent of its power coming from renewable sources. It also helped the Port of Bellingham apply to the U.S., Green Building Council for the Waterfront District’s participation in the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Neighborhood Development program.

And while some in the local economy remain unconvinced of the group's positive impact, it hasn't hurt the group's national reputation.

Bill McKibben, author of "Deep Economy," said he thinks Sustainable Connections is the finest example in the U.S. of a local economic network.

"The ideas being pioneered in Bellingham right now, for a robust and durable local economy, will be needed across the continent and around the world in the years ahead," he said. "You can see pieces of this happening all over the country, but there's nowhere I know of where it's as coherent as Bellingham — I've been sending people there to take a look for a couple of years now."

But Michelle feels most proud of a less tangible accomplishment.

"The thing I'm most proud of is the community this has built ... this network of people who have found with each other common cause and a better life," she said.

Even outdated infrastructure and occasional funding struggles can't shake her optimism. But both the Longs admit some new computers and a 401(k) plan for their employees would be nice, and the group recently sent out a letter to members requesting donations for infrastructure improvements.

Regardless, the group is planning full steam ahead with a new zero-waste initiative, energy efficiency program and Web-based farm product distribution software program planned for 2008.

For their part, Michelle and Derek are becoming more and more comforted by the fact they are becoming less and less alone in their effort to change the world through a business model.

"We've certainly arrived at a time in history where there is great awareness," Michelle said. "And right now, the issue isn't getting awareness anymore, it's about providing solutions."

## **Annual all-member meeting on Jan. 17**

Sustainable Connections' annual all-members meeting will be held Jan. 17 at 6 p.m. at the Bellingham Cruise Terminal.

The organization invites anyone interested in learning more about the organization to come.

The meeting will include a potluck, music, and a guest speaker, Yoram Bauman, Ph.D. Bauman is a professor of economics at the University of Washington, project economist for Impacts of Climate Change on Washington's Economy, and the "world's first and only stand-up economist." For more information, visit [www.sconnect.org](http://www.sconnect.org).

## **Where the funding comes from**

The organization's 2007 budget: \$500,000

Membership dues: 20 percent

Program income (including technical assistance, participation fees, sponsorships and publications): 24 percent

Foundation grants: 20 percent

Contracts with local, state and federal governments for environmental protection and community/economic development: 28 percent

Individual donations and fundraisers: 8 percent

## **Membership rates**

Business/Organization with annual sales under \$50,000, 12 months — \$135

Business/Organization with annual sales \$50,000 to \$250,000, 12 months — \$190

Business/Organization with annual sales \$250,000 to \$500,000,

12 months — \$270

Business/Organization with annual sales over \$500,000, 12 months — \$380

Sustaining Member, 12 months — \$1,000

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