



## Buy Local, Think National

The folks who brought you Buy Local have a more ambitious future in mind for the Northwest. Think national model for sustainable communities.

**By Floyd McKay**

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Some 40 representatives of Washington communities interested in catching the next wave of green, sustainable community life were in Bellingham this month to hear from people who have put the city in the national spotlight for community-based business.

Sustainable Connections, host for the meetings, is best known for a Buy Local effort that has attracted national attention, including a recent *Business Week* profile that highlighted buy-local efforts as a way to keep tight money at home during the fiscal recession. Of the 20-odd local organizations listed in the article, Sustainable Connections (SC), with 11 staff members, was the only one with more than a couple of employees.

That's because Buy Local, the program SC began in 2003, is only one of several approaches to community sustainability in the SC arsenal. Sustainable Connections has grown to 600-plus local, independently-owned business members, a board of directors of 13 business owners, and an annual budget of \$500,000, according to the SC Web site.

Sustainable Connections is very organic and very Bellingham-centric; few of the 600-plus members are from rural Whatcom County, or Skagit or Island counties, the area of Sustainable Connections operations. Where the effort moves beyond Bellingham, however, is the Sustainable Connections effort on green building, renewable energy and local agriculture. Each of those fields has its own network directed by an SC staffer.

Key to success in promoting sustainability is engaging small-business owners, who bring credibility that may be lacking in eager activists. Creation of SC in 2002 was largely due to the work of a builder, Rick Dubrow, and bookstore owner Chuck Robinson. Without a strong network of local business owners who stand to benefit from sustainable practices, there is little fertile soil to nurture a local campaign.

Business outreach is the heart of the SC effort, and the organization will host an April Future of Business Conference, expected to draw about 400 people from the region. The agenda notes:

We're experiencing fundamental shifts in the cultural, economic and environmental landscape; studies show these changes aren't likely to reverse anytime soon. Learn what changing consumer attitudes, the current economic turmoil, and a new administration mean to your business. (Hint: The opportunities are clean, green and local.)

This is a serious expansion beyond Buy Local and makes Sustainable Connections stand out, placing it in a position to benefit from changed priorities in the Obama Administration. Executive Director Michelle Long cites the president's emphasis on green energy as an economic driver, and reforms to traditional farm subsidies as examples of a long list of areas where new federal priorities will help local sustainability.

Bellingham builder Rick duBrow, credited as co-founder of CS, is enthusiastic about Obama's

approach to green building, and notes that CS and local builders are already working on how to approach weatherization, retrofitting and other items in Obama's package.

Consumer awareness has shifted, Long believes. "Trust has become an issue . . . failed finances, bad products from China . . . people distrust large corporations." There is some evidence that they trust their neighbors better than distant corporations.

The Hartman Group, a leading research and marketing firm working extensively with sustainability, conducted a national survey in late September, just as the financial crisis was unwinding. Although the term "sustainability" is still vague in the minds of most consumers (see a Wikipedia discussion of the term), Hartman found respondents "often point to words and phrases that reference the greater good. . . . we find that sustainability is reflected at the consumer level in a myriad of behaviors, from purchases and non-purchases to voting and volunteerism . . . . Consumers say today that for something to be truly responsible in one way, it should not cause great detriment in another." The report's executive summary notes that "the consumer notion of doing the right thing for the common good is an even stronger guiding principle that establishes hope, even in what seem to be hard times."

A study by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, one of several networks involved in local sustainability, found that independent retailers in selected categories fared better during the 2008 Christmas holiday than did competing chains, and that independent businesses in communities with buy-local campaigns did better than counterparts in other communities.

Buy-local organizations exist in about 130 communities nationwide, ILSR researcher Stacey Mitchell estimates, and although the communities range from small towns to cities as large as Philadelphia, buy-local and sustainability have their best footing in communities with progressive politics.

Portland, a paragon of progressive politics, has a sustainability bureau in city government, and local efforts range from the Sustainable Business Network of Portland and a network of farmer's markets to a separate network of organic farmers organized to connect with city consumers. But organizing in large cities is difficult, with their diverse neighborhoods, and efforts in urban centers often focus on discrete neighborhoods and icon businesses, such as bookstores, theaters or eateries. Neighborhoods like Seattle's Fremont, where the *Seattle Times* found informal buy-local sentiments.

Success is often greatest in midsized communities with universities and progressive politics, such as Madison, Wis.; Corvallis, Ore.; and Austin, Texas. Bellingham has a substantial university community, a prosperous and active grocery cooperative, well-patronized credit unions, excellent new- and used-book stores, and a substantial organic-farming movement. "This community was predisposed to some extent," says Village Books owner Robinson. "They see the fabric of the community intertwined with local ownership."

Sustainable Connections makes no excuses for its progressive positions. "The world needs a fundamental transformation in how we do business," Long believes. The Longs — Michelle's husband, Derek, is SC's program director — have been at the center of much of the sustainable-community movement. While starting Sustainable Connections in Bellingham they also pioneered Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE), a national network of community-based groups in a half-dozen fields.

Sustainable Connections' point of view, widely known in the community, has meant that not every locally owned business supports SC. Notably missing are some firms that obviously benefit from buy-local efforts but also connect closely with construction, building supplies and hardware, non-organic agriculture and other businesses that often deal with customers of more conservative political views.

For the sustainable-community movement, the election of Barack Obama was a green light after eight years of an administration that was opposed to nearly all their goals and standards. Before they could break out the champagne, the financial system collapsed, leaving them wondering if the new administration would have any time left for programs they support.

The success of the limited buy-local efforts in scattered communities encourages the movement, but is perhaps the easiest task on the table &mdash; in times of distress, neighbors will want to help neighbors. Much more difficult will be finding support for sustainable farming practices that may cost more at the grocery, or energy-efficient cars and household appliances that require capital investments. Tax credits in the Obama recovery plan will help, but only if people have the money to spend in the first place.

It's a conundrum. Ordinary Americans are clearly fed up with corporate greed and supportive of businesses they know, but at the same time they are dealing with budgets pared to the bone. The soaring expectations from progressive victories at the polls are tempered by the harsh reality of financial collapse. Quite a challenge for the nascent sustainable-communities movement.

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