

SUSTAINING Local Economy

by Jodie Buller

"Christmas is coming and the goose is getting fat...." The local goose featured in that holiday song makes a meal that, like home made gravy, satisfies. It likely grew up in the garden of one of the townsfolk, was fed table scraps, and petted on the head. Yet for some of us in modern times, it's hard to feel good about our goose dinner—given the goose's uncertain history and impending future. If the goose grows up in some crowded hormone factory and the money we spend on the goose goes flying out of town to some big corporation affiliated with all sorts of crowded factories, then the meal settles poorly.

The notion of a local living economy is an old one; humanity has sustained itself by local folks contributing goods and services to one's village or community. With the advent of tract homes, strip malls, fast food and big-box stores, the use of local services were steamrolled by a surge of media marketing. Nowadays, there's a never ending stream of pitches to consumers: "Lowest prices!" "Best deal!" "Buy lots and buy now!" The value system reflected in the "success" of chain store proliferation is a hollow one: soul sucking and double edged, it sells you one message while delivering another, and we are all suffering for it. What is happening to us and in our names takes a while to sink in, but it's useless to stay stewing and irate—especially when there are folks in this community who are making huge strides in revitalizing the life of

Connections

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our local economy.

Sustainable Connections, a northwest Washington business network, was created two and a half years ago "to empower business and consumer behavior that promotes a vital community and a healthy environment". Its co-founders Michelle and Derek Long came here from Ohio after Michelle won a business plan competition designed to bring fair trade goods to market. The two of them helped start the local Sustainable Connections in Whatcom, Skagit, and Island counties at the same time they were starting a national network: the **Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE)**. Sustainable Connections is a groundbreaker, but it is far from the only one. Both Vermont and Maine have organizational networks of socially responsible businesses focusing on public policy in local economics. BALLE created a formalized relationship between these networks nationwide, so that they could support and learn from each other. In June 2005, nineteen formal member networks, including two from Canada, will meet in Vancouver, BC for the annual conference. Speakers this year include David Korten, Michael Shuman, and David Suzuki, and the public is welcome to attend, especially local independent business owners.

With BALLE and SC, Michelle and David wanted to create a model of what's possible, so that other emerging socially responsible communities wouldn't have to recreate the wheel. The success of SC's *Think Local Buy Local Be Local* campaign

has generated interest in many communities. BALLE created a how-to kit available to members and for sale to the public. *Think Local* campaigns are spreading the word about sustainable local economies in Michigan, Salt Lake City, and Portland. In our community, Skagit County's first *Buy Local Day* kick-off is on December 4th. Participating flagship stores include Scott's Bookstore, the Skagit Valley Food Co-op, Gretchen's Kitchen, and Lyon's Furniture, with grassroots support from lots of local businesses who want to

Buy Local First" on their windows.

The *Sustainability Practices* program is an entry point for businesses into Sustainable Connections, offering them resources that meet them wherever they are on their path of sustainability, and supporting their focus in this direction.

The second edition of SC's *Think Local First* coupon book, offering almost \$4000 in savings from 140 Whatcom sustainable businesses, is now available in Whatcom County for \$10. Along with the coupons, the *Think Local* section has

The *Livable City* study of Austin, TX, and similar studies in Maine and Toledo, Ohio found a "Local Premium": a quantifiable advantage that local businesses provide to the economic vigor of a community.

develop the presence of a local economy in Skagit County.

Sustainable Connections Programs

The *Think Local First* Campaign is Sustainable Connection's most visible program to expand awareness of sustainability practices. The entreaty to *Buy Local* on posters and fliers around town are a colorful reminder to consumers to seek out those businesses with decals featuring "*Strong community, Healthy Environment, Meaningful Employment, and*

monthly tips about educational resources and the role that purchasing choices make toward ensuring quality of life in Whatcom County. There's also fold-out maps of Downtown Parks and Rec. sites, bike routes, and greenways, and 20-30 county farms as a part of *Farm Friends*.

Food to Bank On, an SC program providing seed funding and mentoring to new local farmers, is a neat hat trick: the farmers get paid from the fund – which you can donate to at the Bellingham Co-Op – to deliver their fresh local produce

to the food bank, while developing a schedule of harvest and delivery to local grocery stores.

The *Sustainable Design Program for Green Building and Low Impact Development* promotes environmentally responsible building and design to those in building, landscaping, and design trades. The program offers builder and architect education through LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) accreditation trainings, as well as proposing a LEED standard policy for public and commercial buildings to the Bellingham City Council. SC is leading a bus tour to Seattle on December 10th to tour three green buildings, and hopes to provide a Green Building resource desk in their new office space on the 3rd floor of the Federal Building in downtown Bellingham. There's also the annual *Imagine This Home and Landscape Tour* in July—a great way for the public to see what is possible in green building and design.

Values-added Support

SC business members are "taking a leap with their values", placing the value of sustainability in the foreground. But in the current state of our capitalism and without the support of people who are making similar wise business choices, running a business the sustainable way can feel like operating in a void. The 350 members of SC in northwest Washington are connected to each other as part of an evolving international discussion through BALLE about how to keep money