

## Bellingham to be new BALLE headquarters, Michelle Long named director

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Michelle Long, former executive director of Sustainable Connections, has been appointed to the executive director post at the Business Alliance of Local Living Economies (BALLE). Her husband and former program and development director, Derek Long, will step up to become Sustainable Connections' new executive director. BBJ file photo by Sean Echelbarger

**By Lance Henderson**

The Business Alliance of Local Living Economies (BALLE), a network of 75 organizations in the United States and Canada working toward sustainable local economies, is moving its national headquarters to Bellingham from San Francisco and

Michelle Long, executive director and co-founder of BALLE's most successful community network, Sustainable Connections, will be BALLE's new executive director.

Derek Long, former Sustainable Connections program and development director, will step up to be the local network's new executive director.

Both Derek and Michelle said while BALLE coming to Bellingham is exciting, it will not impact the quality or quantity of events and services offered by Sustainable Connections.

"Michelle and I have been side-by-side living Sustainable Connections for nearly eight years and we are not going to lose that being a couple," Derek said. "The strategic direction has been set and we've got a lot of exciting initiatives that are just going to move forward as planned."

Michelle will simply be moving to an office adjacent to the Sustainable Connections office on Ellis Street where she will manage the nationwide BALLE network.

"BALLE helps to catalyze, develop and connect new community business networks," Michelle said. "These networks are focused on local economies and the healthy building blocks, such as energy efficiency and renewable energy, green building, sustainable agriculture and zero-waste manufacturing — the same things we work on here — on the leading edge of healthy innovation in each sector of our economy."

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BALLE's roots are actually in Bellingham. In 2002, Derek and Michelle were BALLE's first staff members when they launched Sustainable Connections. The two young startups (one working locally and the other nationally) shared office space for the first two years until both entities became full-time jobs.

"Once they were both to a size where they needed full-time focus and more staff — we had to choose," Michelle said. "At that point in the movement, we felt like we had to focus locally because we needed more proven examples why it would work and how it would work."

While the Longs decided to stay in Whatcom County to work with Sustainable Connections, BALLE found an executive director based in San Francisco and the organization moved to California.

Seven years later, Sustainable Connections is the strongest BALLE network member in the nation and Bellingham was just ranked No. 1 in the Natural Resources Defense Council Smarter Cities challenge in the 50,000- to 100,000-population small-cities

category. The challenge is an effort to get cities to work toward becoming “more efficient, responsible and sustainable.”

“Our mission to transform our local economy and have it be modeled across the country seemed a bit audacious when we first started out, but it seems to be coming true,” Michelle said.

Partnering Sustainable Connections more closely with BALLE will also reinforce Bellingham’s reputation as a leader in sustainability and give the local network greater access to national resources, Michelle said.

“One of the benefits is that we will have greater access to the national thought leaders,” she said. “We will have more exciting people coming to town and being able to impart their cutting-edge knowledge to the local businesses here.”

During this transition, Michelle said, she will be hiring a new executive assistant and a part-time finance manager. Derek said Sustainable Connections will be getting a new Food and Farming program director, Laura Ridenour, on Sept. 11 and will be hiring a new program and development director in October.