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Sustainable Connections networks community



Happy 2008! It is my pleasure to introduce you to the new BBJ Sustainable Connections column. This column is where we'll share the latest information about local business innovations and new programs designed to strengthen our community's capacity

to participate in the opportunities of a sustainable economy.

In less than six years, Sustainable Connections has grown to more than 600 members (representing all sectors and ranging from sole proprietors to the largest companies in our community), and these businesses are working to transform and model an economy built on sustainable practices.

We're committed to building the number and prosperity of local businesses that creatively address environmental and societal challenges, and support a community of innovators in some of the fastest growing sectors of many segments of the national economy. These include not just energy but renewable energy, not just building but green building and land use, and not just food production, but value-added, local and organic food and agriculture, as well as once again supporting independent businesses in town centers, and mentoring a new breed of entrepreneurs that have designed their business with a sustainable vision. Our members envision business practices that lead to Strong Community, Healthy Environment, Meaningful Employment, and Buying Local First as commonplace in our region and a model for the rest of the world.

This business community is now squarely on the map for leadership in this area and is often held up as a national model. Just this past December, the work of our local businesses was described on the National Public Radio show, "Marketplace," this way: "The northern Washington town of Bellingham may be the epicenter of a new economic model."

Paul Hawken's ground-breaking new book, "Blessed Unrest," spotlighted Sustainable Connections, saying our members are "working together to green their businesses, educate their customers, and support environmental building, farming, energy, and transportation alternatives." He also said, "If you are envisioning hippies, think again: these are engineers, contractors, technology integrators, homebuilders, printers, realtors, orchardists, health clinicians and

Sustainable Connections members participate at any level that meets their schedule, on any subject that they find interesting, and in any way that best supports their success. And 92% of Sustainable Connections' business members consider membership a major benefit to their business. Eighty-seven percent say membership motivates them to improve the sustainability of their business practices.

We work to facilitate sustainable economic development in three ways:

1) Education - We help businesses make progress with specific, measurable solutions and technical assistance from local or national experts;

2) Connecting our members to each other and to the marketplace; and

3) Promotion and market development that opens opportunities for sustainable economy businesses, and spotlights local businesses for their stewardship of our place.

Together, our members are making a dramatic impact in this community and inspiring many other communities. Three in five local households attribute the Think Local, Buy Local/Buy Fresh, Be Local program to changing their purchasing behaviors to think local first! More than 90 percent of participating businesses believe this program is working for their business and would recommend it to other businesses in their industry. More than 800 local professionals attended at least one of 21 'green building' and land use events in 2007, and two-thirds report having implemented what they learned.

Before the Green Building program started, there were three local LEED Accredited professionals and zero LEED Registered buildings — today there are 40 LEED Accredited professionals and 13 LEED Registered buildings. With our help, the port applied and was accepted to pilot a new LEED-Neighborhood Development standard for our waterfront.

Plus, since the program began in 2003, 17 brand-new organic farms — our next generation of farmers — have gotten a leg up through the new farm incubation program, and dozens and dozens of other farmers participated in continuing education workshops in 2007.

In addition, in collaboration with Puget Sound Energy, Whatcom County, and the city of Bellingham, we launched the Green Power Community Challenge with a goal to increase city wide use of renewable energy, (sun, wind, and local cow power) — and the result? Our community became the No. 1 EPA Green Power Certified Community in the nation!

Most importantly, our members report great support from each other. As one member said, "I've lived here all of my life and never felt more a part of this community as since joining Sustainable Connections."

That to us is what makes this network such a satisfying place to connect.

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