



# THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

## **With the recession changing how people spend, sustainable practices are getting more attention**

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DAVE GALLAGHER - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Last fall's financial meltdown and the recession got many consumers thinking about how they spend their money. That step toward becoming a more responsible consumer is something Michelle and Derek Long want to build on through their organizations.

The Longs founded Sustainable Connections in Bellingham in 2002 and it now has more than 650 business members. The goal of the organization is having an economy built on or more directly tied to sustainable practices. This includes developing programs in a variety of areas, including green building, sustainable business development, local farming food systems and improving energy efficiency. The organization has also established the Buy Local program, which encourages consumers to shop at locally owned businesses.

Earlier this month Michelle Long also moved a national sustainable business organization to Bellingham and has become its executive director. The Business Alliance for Local Living Economies hosts 75 community networks, including Bellingham's Sustainable Connections. In total, BALLE networks have about 20,000 members.

With Michelle Long operating the national organization and Derek Long heading Sustainable Connections, the couple will work on replicating the success of Sustainable Connections on a national level while continuing to be trend-setters on the local level.

"What's been rewarding is seeing (sustainable economic practices) working not only here, but in different parts of the country, whether it's a big city like Philadelphia or other small towns," said Derek Long. "Our role as a consumer has shifted, including how we spend money. More often, people are thinking about value, not just in the product but what impact it has on things like the environment or energy usage. I believe Bellingham is five years ahead in many of these practices, and it is an opportunity for this area to be a national leader in sustainable economic development."

While sustainable practices has been a topic they've been building on through Sustainable Connections, the Longs believe the recession really got people thinking about what it means. TIME magazine published a poll for its Sept. 10 edition, which found that 82 percent of those polled said they have consciously supported a local or neighborhood businesses this year, while nearly 40 percent said they purchased a product in 2009 because they liked the social or political values of the company that

produced it. More than 60 percent of Americans have bought organic products since January, according to the poll.

"Many of these practices are becoming the norm, and I think there's a recognition that we need to be more responsible," Michelle Long said. "We had a separation of investment from place, and I think people are returning to idea of being more involved in the local community again."

## **WHERE TO GO WITH SUSTAINABILITY**

In setting new trends in economic sustainability Derek Long said his goal is to focus on enhancing the programs already in place.

In green building, for example, the organization has been developing partnerships with the city and the county to work on streamlining the permit process. One of the challenges to using new techniques and products to build a more energy-efficient structure is getting it approved by building inspectors who might be unfamiliar with the designs. Working with local government, Sustainable Connections found five barriers that have been slowing the private sector down and worked to have them removed. They plan on finding more red-tape barriers in the coming years.

Farming is another major focus of the organization, particularly in trying to strengthen connections between the local farmer and the local consumer. Derek Long noted the number of Whatcom County farmers that also sell directly to the local market have been growing in recent years.

"It's been very encouraging. Our agriculture industry can become more important to the economy if it diversifies," Derek Long said. "Exporting agriculture will continue to be important, but increasing the market share of the direct farmer strengthens this area while providing other benefits, such as cutting down on energy use bringing in food from somewhere else."

Michelle Long believes many of the changes that happened nationally will continue to force Americans to continue thinking about sustainability. It'll be quite some time before credit is as easy to get as it has in recent years, cheap energy won't be cheap for much longer and global warming will become more of an issue.

"We really don't have much of a choice, we'll have to learn to live within our financial means," Long said. "But many of the problems we've seen in the past eight years can be solved by focusing on sustainability."