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Local nonprofit most influential green business Sustainable Connections creates community of like-minded businesses

By Judith Sult

The most influential green business people in Whatcom County actually co-direct a nonprofit. The engaging and effervescent Derek and Michelle Long have been instrumental in changing the green business landscape in Whatcom County.

Michelle is known to talk at 100 miles per hour, each sentence packed full of complex, exciting ideas. Derek is the quieter of the two with a thoughtful, penetrating approach to the conversation. In 2002 the couple co-founded Sustainable Connections with 25 active, committed members. Currently there are 600 plus local, independently owned business members, a team of eight staff, an advisory board of local community and government leaders including County Executive Pete Kremen, Bellingham Mayor Dan Pike, and State Rep. Kelli Linville, a board of directors of 13 business owners, and an annual budget of \$550,000. How did it all come about?

Global cooperation

For more than a decade before starting Sustainable Connections the Longs had intense interests in sustainable living and socially responsible businesses. After obtaining business degrees in Ohio, the couple married in 1995 and in 1996 left the United States to travel extensively in developing countries for about 18 months. They met with local craftspeople and became attracted to the newly formed artisan co-ops. The artists were beginning to realize that they could more efficiently reach new markets and receive better prices for their wares by cooperating with each other.

Upon returning to the U.S. in 1999 the Longs started World2Market.com, an e-commerce Web site to sell fair-trade items from the artisan co-ops. "It seems hard to imagine that e-commerce was just getting started then. People were beginning to buy books and computer accessories online but they were still hesitant to make other purchases," said Derek.

In 1998-99 business community leaders and pioneers were contemplating how to become socially responsible businesses. World2market.com received national press from CNN, the Wall Street Journal and The New York Times for its fair trade business model. Then-President Bill Clinton made his first (and much promoted) online purchase, by buying Christmas gifts for Hilary and Chelsea from their company. The Longs received a lot of national attention, but not sales.

They ended up shuttering the Web site, but their experience provided opportunities to become consultants to corporate clients. One of their clients was the CEO of Overstock.com, who wanted Worldstock.com to become a Fair Trade portal. They wanted to show how companies could market products by presenting the stories of the artist behind the products.

Putting Lessons to Work

Their business, travel and consulting experiences taught the Longs about working with environmental and social values to figure out how people can make a living without harming the environment or being inequitable. As consultants they could live anywhere and, like many others, in 2001 the Longs chose to move to Whatcom County for access to mountain skiing and hiking. They held to a vision of a globe of local villages, each taking care of its own region and becoming galvanized to make its own community

sustainable.

The Longs sought out everyone in Whatcom County who shared their values. They found out who owned businesses and worked in the community and how they could all come together to re-examine how everything was done. They conducted a community phone survey to find out what people cared about: water quality, affordability and growth/land use.

About the time the Longs were researching interest in sustainability in Whatcom County, then-Gov. Gary Locke invited Michelle and 100 other people working on issues of sustainability in Washington to a daylong forum to provide input to his team on the state's role in shaping a more sustainable future. Michelle met Rick Dubrow of A-1 Builders in Bellingham during that meeting. Rick and a small community of local businesses had previously started a group called Sustainable Connections. The purpose of the group was to host programs around business and environmental issues, but the group had become inactive.

Derek and Michelle confirmed there was local interest in a group that focused on business, local community, economy, environment, meaningful example and triple bottom line (success based on economic, social and environmental factors). With Rick's permission they re-invented Sustainable Connections as a business membership group. The principle is to lead by example and show what is possible or work to create the possibility.

Rooted in the Community

About 25 businesses signed up at the first membership meeting in April 2002 and the first directory listed about 50 businesses with a cover quote, "No beginning too small."

Sustainable Connections currently works in five areas: Think Local, Green Building, Sustainable Agriculture, Renewable Energy and Sustainable Business Development.

In each area the organization works in three ways:

1. Education: Bringing in experts for hands-on education to facilitate a sustainable economy.
2. Connections: Connecting businesses and markets through forums and tools to teach each other and grow.
3. Market development: Promotion, changing purchasing behavior of individuals and businesses. Get consumers to buy what local businesses produce.

According to Michelle, "The organization is run much like a business. In the beginning there was very little money and the directors (similar to the position of business owners) didn't get paid. Each year it's gotten better. Everyone makes a living wage, there are some benefits, and we practice triple bottom line principals."

When asked why Sustainable Connections has grown so fast, Derek said, "This is a thoughtful community. Sustainable Connections matches the values of the community. The community at large cares about the environment and what we have in our community. That caring runs through the business community."

Michelle added, "The businesses are pioneering and innovative. The business owners are willing to, and want to, re-imagine their business. They are up for the challenge. Members know we are an efficient organization that makes a significant difference. Their time with the organization is well used. The businesses are doing the action and Sustainable Connections helps to coordinate that action. Ninety-two percent of the members say the organization is useful for their business."

Changing Neighborhoods

A new program under the Green Building area is LEED for Neighborhood Development (LEED-ND). This program is intended to bring together all of the stakeholders involved with development: neighborhood organizations, businesses, developers and the city. The desire is to introduce interesting ideas and choices for sustainable development including affordable housing, transportation and the environment. "The community is willing to accept density as long as we preserve our values: clean water, affordable housing, farmland," Michelle said.

Everyone is welcome to learn more at the all-members meeting Jan. 17 at the Bellingham Cruise Terminal from 6-9 p.m. It's always a fun time to share great food and exciting ideas.

Also in this Issue in the Business News section:

Sustainable Connections Business Members Optimistic about Doing Business Locally

In November Bellingham-based nonprofit Sustainable Connections conducted a poll of its business members, and with nearly half of them responding, found their members to be greatly optimistic. Recently the city of Bellingham hired Applied Research Northwest to survey the general Bellingham business community, and that survey showed businesses have a fairly positive economic outlook and attitude toward doing business here. However, at 28 percent, almost twice as many of the Sustainable Connections business members believe that this is an “excellent” place to do business, compared to 14 percent of businesses citywide, (members of Sustainable Connections or not). In addition, 67 percent of Sustainable Connections’ business members versus only 46 percent of the general business community in the city’s poll said it was a “very good” to “excellent” place to do business.

The poll found locally owned businesses to be enthusiastic supporters of local nonprofit charitable organizations. Thirty-one percent of the respondents give to five to 10 nonprofits per year, and another 32 percent give to more than 11 nonprofits per year, even as many as three per week.

Michelle Long, executive director of Sustainable Connections, said, “It’s exciting to see how engaged in our community and committed to being here our local businesses are.”

Sustainable Connections, which since its inception in 2002 has grown more than 20 percent a year to its current membership of 600 local businesses, was founded to support business stewardship of community and in turn to ask the community to support their local businesses.

Building council establishes environmentally friendly partnership

The Cascadia Region Green Building Council has established a new partnership that will enhance its green building initiatives, education programs and outreach throughout the Northwest. The building council has joined Bellingham-based Sustainable Connections’ green building program.

The program promotes healthy, efficient and environmentally responsible homes, neighborhoods and workplaces. The program achieves this through education, technical assistance and advocacy. Both organizations promote the value of the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards, among other tools and programs, to improve the performance of new and existing buildings.