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# Not Business as Usual: Michelle Long

**An interview with Sustainable Connections' executive director, Michelle Long. Bellingham's Sustainable Connections is forging a new model for business as usual.**

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What's the role of entrepreneurs in creating a healthy, thriving future for the Northwest? Huge, if the success of Bellingham, Washington's Sustainable Connections is any indication. Sustainable Connections is a fast-growing nonprofit membership organization that helps local, independent businesses pair sustainable practices with profits.



Members get hands-on training, technical assistance, and marketing tools to become more environmentally and socially responsible—from using green building techniques to buying local to reducing waste. In a few short years, it's grown to a thriving community of 500-plus business owners and community leaders who collectively are having a big impact. Michelle Long—executive director of Sustainable Connections, and longtime friend of Sightline—tells the story.

## **1. Tell us about Sustainable Connections.**

We're a nonprofit membership organization of business owners and community leaders working to model an economy built on sustainable business practices, such as sustainable agriculture or building green or using renewable energy. We provide means for them to connect to each other and to technical assistance and the marketplace in new ways.

In five years we've grown to 535 members. Our first member was A-1 Builders and our most recent was Chispa, a Moped/scooter store. Eighty-seven percent of our members say being a member motivates them to improve the sustainability of their business practices. That makes us happy.

## **2. What inspired you to start it?**

[The founders] shared a vision that to change this world for the better we needed to re-examine how we consume energy, shop, build homes, and grow our food and look for innovative ways to do these things. And entrepreneurs, innovators, and business owners are the people who have the autonomy to say "I am going to imagine a new way and I am going to make it happen."

## **3. What benefits do business owners see to being involved?**

I think they see Sustainable Connections as their means to do something about the things they're concerned about in the world. They feel motivated by each other and valued not only for [economic reasons] but also for their innovative choices around the environment or the community.

Also, our approach is very practical, very pro-their success. We are excited to help our members become the most successful business owners in the region in part due to their commitment to sustainability.

#### **4. What are some recent successes?**

One is the Bellingham Green Power Community Challenge, which is a partnership between Puget Sound Energy, the City of Bellingham, and Sustainable Connections to get businesses and households to switch their power usage from other power sources to Green Power--such as the sun, wind, and methane digesters.

Puget Sound Energy has had this program in place for the last five years, but since we started the Challenge two months ago we've tripled the business participation. We're on track to become the number-one community for using Green Power in the nation.

#### **5. What's your advice to communities who want to start a similar network?**

If you're going to have a core steering group, you need to involve the most successful, credible, progressive business owners in town. We decided early on that the steering committee members should be local business owners because they have full autonomy to change everything, from which potatoes they choose for their French fries to how much they pay their employees.

And keep it fun and positive—make it better party, as we say.

#### **6. If you could magically make one change towards sustainability in the Northwest in the next year, what would it be?**

Convenient, reliable mass transit. I can't believe I can't easily hop on a train to Seattle, to Vancouver, or Portland.

Note: Michelle is pictured above with her husband Derek, program and development director for Sustainable Connections, and their daughter.

*Find out more about Sustainable Connections here; another good resource is BALLE (Business Alliance for Living Economies), an international alliance of 37 independently operated local business networks--Sustainable Connections is one of them.*