



Powerful ideas, practical actions

Growing Local: Interview with BALLE's Michelle Long

by Brooke Jarvis
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By working with local businesses, Michelle Long helped make Bellingham, Washington a national leader in urban sustainability. As executive director of the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, she's taking her vision to cities around North America.



Michelle Long, Photo courtesy of BALLE.

Bellingham, Washington is the nation's leader in community [green power](#), was named the number one small city in the nation in urban progress toward sustainability, and is home to businesses, consumers, and government programs that make creating a "[local living economy](#)" a priority.

As co-founder and director of Sustainable Connections, a non-profit network of nearly 700 Bellingham businesses promoting a sustainable local economy, Michelle Long played a major role in Bellingham's transformation.

Now, Long wants to build on Bellingham's successes to help strengthen local economies around North America. In August, she became executive director of the [Business Alliance for Local Living Economies](#) (BALLE), which supports 79 community networks of independent businesses in the U.S. and Canada, including Sustainable Connections.

[YES! Magazine](#) Web editor Brooke Jarvis spoke with Long about her plans for scaling up, including the challenge of replicating profoundly local solutions at a national level.

Brooke: What is a local living economy?

Michelle: A [local living economy](#) is one where local business owners make up the majority of the local economy, where today's innovations in sustainable agriculture, in [green building](#), in renewable energy and energy efficiency, in [community capital](#), in green jobs, in local manufacturing are all tied together within the context of a place, so that you have an economy that is community-based, green, and fair.

Brooke: And how does BALLE help create that?

Michelle: BALLE is the fastest growing membership organization of socially responsible businesses in North America. We have 79 community networks, but they have members that now represent 21,000 independent businesses. What BALLE does is catalyze the creation of new networks of businesses in different communities—we connect them to each other so they can share best practices, and we strengthen them with new tools and resources.



Bellingham, Washington, population 75,000. Photo by [Dwiki](#)

Brooke: Until recently, you led Sustainable Connections, a BALLE network in Bellingham, Washington. This summer, the Natural Resources Defense Council named Bellingham the number one small city in the nation in urban progress toward sustainability. What does that actually mean for people who live in Bellingham, and how has Sustainable Connections contributed to that success?

Michelle: We started Sustainable Connections back in April of 2002. Today, Sustainable Connection has nearly 700 independent businesses as members, representing every sector of our economy, including farmers, manufacturers, builders, nonprofit organizations, service providers, and retailers.

All of them are committed to this idea of creating and modeling a local living economy. It's built community. I'm thinking of one particular businesswoman—she'd been waiting

so long for government or big business, the guys in charge, to do something about all that's wrong in the world. And now she feels such hope and pride that [we are just going ahead and taking it on ourselves](#)—and actually seeing a difference.

Instead of a global village, we want a globe of healthy, connected villages.

Sustainable Connections helps our businesses learn how to be sustainable in the new economy, whatever their field. What do you need to learn, if you're an architect, about building for maximum solar gain? If you're a farmer, what do you need to know about season extension, transitioning to organics, and serving regional markets? Or if you're a retailer, about sourcing from other independent business in our community, about moving toward [zero waste](#), about switching your operations to use green power, about paying people fairly?

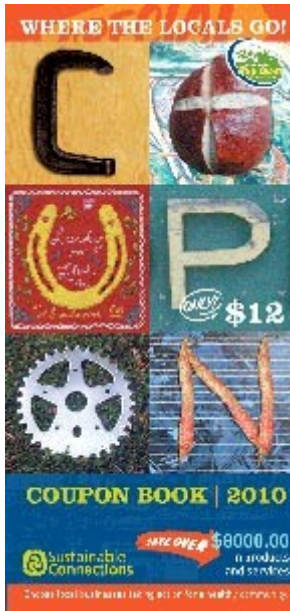
We help them to get connected to the cutting-edge information that they need, and then we connect them to each other. That's very, very powerful, we've found, to have peer businesses sharing ideas with you and mentoring you and cheering for you when times are hard or when you're trying to be innovative. And no one business can be sustainable by itself, it's really part of a system.

And then finally, we work in market development. We ask our community to [think local first](#)—to first support our local businesses for any of their services or product needs. Not to buy more, not to consume more, but when they're going to buy, to choose locals first.

Brooke: In fact, 60 percent of households in Bellingham report that they choose independent retailers and services whenever possible. What “market development” techniques did you use to encourage that mindset?

Michelle: Well, that was pretty astounding. We give great Think Local, Buy Local, Be Local tools to our business members. All these independent businesses then post them on their storefronts, use the materials to write articles for their own newsletters, or include the logo on their invoices to their customers. Any day of the week, you can pick up a newspaper and you see multiple ads that have the logo.

Our logo is Mount Baker, something that means local to all of us. The emphasis of the campaign has been: What is it to care about your place? What is it to be a local? What does that mean, what does that look like? How do we each take actions in our everyday lives that support a healthier community? Are we using our bikes instead of our cars? How can we be more energy efficient in our own lives? And, how are we choosing to support other locals? They're our friends and neighbors—people who may be the parents of your daughter's friends, people who live in your community and care about it just as much as you do. The whole campaign is built on pride of place.



Sustainable Connections' 2010 local coupon book.

First, we had to let people know what businesses were local—we found, in early polls, that people weren't quite sure what we meant by that. We created a directory so people could find local businesses and a coupon book so they could try them. We also made seasonal marketing materials—posters for Valentine's Day that say 'Be a Local Lover' or 'Celebrate Your Independence' for the Fourth of July, and Buy Local Week around the holidays. Now, it's constant, it's year-round, and it's everywhere you look.

We are, in a way, competing with the rest of the advertising world. Consistency, paired with the authenticity of something that really feels right and good, has brought localism to a high level of consciousness within this community.

Businesses started to get calls from people asking if they were local—they'd never been asked that before. Customers at the register started to say, 'I just want you to know that it matters to me that you guys live here, too.' Our coupon book became the number one bestselling book at our most popular local bookstore.

We hired a research firm to do a community-wide survey that was statistically significant within a couple of percentage points and found that, indeed, 69 percent of our community recognized our campaign and our logo. Three out of five households said that they had changed their purchasing behavior and that [were thinking local first](#). This was a few years ago, so I'm sure it's higher now. We experienced a real cultural shift.

Brooke: Has that cultural shift had measurable effects on the local economy?

Michelle: In the '70s, '80s, and '90s, Whatcom County had higher unemployment than the rest of Washington State. But not now. Throughout the 2000s, since we started this

program, we've had lower unemployment rates than the rest of Washington as a whole. That's [remained true throughout this recession](#), as well.

Our small businesses development center has found that we also have higher retention rates. When somebody starts a business, people are more apt to want to give it a go—to try, say, the Bellingham Pasta Company for the first time—and if it's a good product or service, to want to support them.

We've also had an impact for farmers. In addition to connecting local farms to local grocers and restaurants, Sustainable Connections also has a [new farmer](#) training program. According to federal agricultural census data covering 2002 to 2007, the number of new farmers that are selling for direct and regional markets increased 20 percent in Washington State. But it was up 44 percent in our county. The actual volume of direct sales to consumers increased by 8.7 percent in Washington State, but by 94 percent in our county—more than 10 times the level of the rest of the state.

Brooke: What methods and ideas did you learn in Bellingham that you hope to transfer to other communities via the wider BALLE network?



In Bellingham's Fairhaven district, a historic building now houses the Colophon Cafe, a member of Sustainable Connections. Photo by [Joe Mabel](#)

Michelle: I think that what's most important is that we help connect the dots between all the healthy pieces of a local economy—and do so deeply within the context of place. We aren't isolating. Some groups work on [local food](#), but they don't really think about supporting the independent grocer or restaurant that actually has the autonomy to buy local. Or they're not thinking of land use and green building practices as farm issues—yet cities need to be really green, dense, exciting magnets that draw people in, leaving the country for farmland instead of suburbs.

There are so many ways that all these things are connected. We understand that businesses need a profit to stay in business, so we want to help them to be financially viable and successful *because* of their stewardship. We're not just about getting them to change their employment practices or getting them to change their environmental impact. People often come in one gateway—maybe they're interested in energy efficiency, for example—but soon they start seeing the whole picture, realizing that they should be doing more local sourcing and whatever else.

It's also important that our programs are led by businesses. These are the entrepreneurs and innovators that are actually building our homes and growing and distributing our food and powering our lives—if they are thinking in creative ways, then we can get to the root of change much more quickly. Businesses have such wide influence—their customers, the traffic of their storefront, their clout in local government.

As an example, we did a Green Power Community Challenge two years ago—we asked our business members to switch from polluting power to sun, wind, or local cow power (we have a methane digester here). At the time, .6 percent of our electricity came from renewable sources; our goal was to move to 2 percent, enough to make us an EPA-certified Green Power Community. There are only a handful in the nation, which is, of course, pitiful. Over a nine-month period the community went from .6 percent renewable power to 12 percent. We became the number one Green Power Community in the entire country.

That cultural shift can only happen once people see examples that allow them to believe it's possible.

Because businesses were saying, 'we're going to do this,' it made it a lot more difficult for government to just say, 'that's not a fiscally smart thing to do.' Instead, they were able to say, 'Okay, business wants us to do this? Well, we are going to switch to 100 percent renewable energy for all our municipal operations.' And both the city government and county government did that.

The success kept building on itself, enabling more people to get involved. Because of the bulk purchase of this one community, the utility was able to negotiate better rates and the price of green power went down 40 percent for the entire utility district, not just Bellingham.

Brooke: In Bellingham, your work depended on building relationships in a particular community. What is it like to try to scale some of Sustainable Connections' innovations up to a much larger level?

Michelle: I am getting used to being on the phone a lot more! But it's still relationship-based. All BALLE is, really, is a nervous system that supports the work of local communities. They're the ones that are leading the way with innovation. We connect them with what's working in different places and with other national organizations that need to be connected to a grassroots presence. We're scaling up in a networked way: our 79 networks all have deep relationships in their [communities](#).

Brooke: That structure seems almost like an answer for my next question, which is about how you scale up these local economies themselves.

Michelle: That's right. Instead of a global village, we want a globe of healthy, connected villages. Lots of places that are strong. We want lots of owners of businesses, and we want lots of unique communities sharing ideas with each other.

Brooke: So that's what a North American economy based on a network of local living economies looks like?

Michelle: It looks like lots more [small business owners](#), lots more people with the opportunity to be entrepreneurs and innovators. More attention to questions like: 'Why don't we grow broccoli here anymore? In the Pacific Northwest, we used to grow broccoli really well. We're eating this much broccoli every day and yet we import it all in. Does that make sense?'



[31 Ways to Jump-Start the Local Economy](#) :: How to make it with less, share more, and put people and planet first.

We're one of the top dairy counties in the entire country. We have lots of cows. Lots of cows means a lot of cow manure, and in the 1990s environmental groups and dairy farmers really battled about manure in the watershed. And yet, as we were starting our 'local first' campaign, I was at a garden supply shop and saw huge plastic bags filled with cow manure for a garden. But it had been imported from Texas. That's insane: filling big plastic bags and putting it on a diesel truck and driving it from Texas, when we've got piles of it getting into our watershed.

Because we subsidize unhealthy parts of our economy, prices today don't tell the truth, and the result is insanity like that. We need [more import substitution](#), more owners, less consolidation, less monopolization, less moving everything farther and farther away, and instead more people doing it within their own communities. Of course, there will still be trading and importing and specialization—of things like coffee, for example, or the raspberries that grow uniquely well here in Whatcom County.

Brooke: What's still needed to create local living economies on a broader scale?

Michelle: We need a different story. [YES! Magazine](#)'s an important part of that. Issues like [climate change](#) and the [recent financial crisis](#) have caused a lot of people to think differently about the relationship between people, the economy, and the planet. But a lot of that cultural shift can only happen once people see examples that allow them to believe it's possible. BALLE's networks, because they show rich, deep, interconnected models of what communities can be, are like Petri dishes or incubators. People say, 'Aha! I see

how!,’ and then they share ideas, and they learn from each other, and create huge cultural momentum.

And then there are necessary policy shifts. We need to shift how much of the national budget—in terms of [subsidies](#), investment, and research—goes toward market farms versus those that are designed for export. We need policies that encourage built environments that work for our environment. You just wouldn’t believe how many archaic zoning or building codes work against innovation. There’s also a need for regional tax sharing so that tiny communities don’t have to compete against each other for yet another big box store because they need the tax dollars.

To me, policy will change later, just like the cultural shift comes after proof of concept. The biggest area of focus for BALLE is innovation from the private sector—connecting the businesses together, helping them to mentor each other and come up with new ideas for how to create a healthier world. We support the business shift because we believe it will enable the cultural and policy shifts that are also necessary.



Brooke Jarvis interviewed Michelle Long for [YES! Magazine](#), a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions. Brooke is YES! Magazine's Web editor.

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