

A Worker Cooperative: Bellingham Bay Builders

Deborah Craig, Co-op Board Member

The local construction industry, a major driver in the local economy, has seen better days. According to the Washington Employment Security Department, local construction employment in 2006 peaked at 7,877 jobs in Whatcom County and dropped to 5,433 at the beginning of 2011—a 31 percent drop. While it might seem that the construction industry in Whatcom County has slowed to a near halt, Bellingham Bay Builders (BBB), a worker-owned construction co-op in Bellingham, is running out of office space due to the demands of their growing business. In June, BBB will be moving into their new home, conveniently located on State Street in downtown Bellingham, giving them a much larger office area and a connected 1,200-square-foot staging and shop space. Ross Grier, one of three BBB member-owners said, "We wanted more exposure with signage and convenience for our customers and subcontractors. Our business volume is growing, and we need more space, too."

In many ways, BBB and other worker-owned cooperatives are businesses like any other—they produce goods or services in a competitive market. However, in cooperatives, unlike traditional businesses, the members producing the goods or providing the services do so as owners and managers of the operation, instead of as employees. Being a worker-owned co-op, BBB enjoys a unique business structure in the contractor world. Currently consisting of three worker-owners and

two apprentices, the co-op provides the structure for all members to be equal partners in the business, sharing in the responsibilities of the organization as well as sharing in the profits. At BBB, members take turns serving in the administration of the business; learning the business from all angles. New members join the co-op as apprentices and, based on the skill set they bring to the table, make their way through a trial period to become member-owners. Profits from the co-op are distributed to the member-owners through patronage based on hours worked.

Established in 2004, BBB started with a mission that set them apart from other local construction companies: "to be non-exploitive of others and provide our clients with an honest, good value." From the beginning, the member-owners also shared the goal of construction with a low environmental footprint. Using cost-effective green building strategies, BBB specializes in eco-friendly remodels and new construction and has a special interest in the craft of timber framing. BBB



One of Bellingham Bay Builders member-owners, Ross Grier, adjusts the arrow on the large blue, green, and orange sign at their new location on S. State Street.

Photo by: Joanne Puzey

has LEED-accredited professionals on staff and has worked on many green projects.

Worker-owned co-ops have an intrinsic local and democratic nature. Being worker-owned increases the likelihood that the business, along with its revenues, will remain in the community where the workers live. The democratic decision-making processes related to personnel, finances, and other business decisions are built into the structure of a worker-owned cooperative creating a pure form of democracy—one person, one vote.

For more information about this local worker-owned co-op, see www.bellinghambaybuilders.com.

Significant Changes Likely in 2012 Farm Bill

"Changes in the 2012 Farm Bill appear both likely and may be significant, if not radical," says Jon Scholl, President of American Farmland Trust (AFT). "Our country's economic situation will be the most significant driver and agent of change in the 2012 Farm Bill."

The *Wall Street Journal* recently reported that Standard & Poor's has lowered its outlook on the government's debt level to negative, the first time for such a rating. The article also notes the federal government is close to hitting its \$14.2 trillion debt ceiling authorized by Congress.

"This news is a significant warning bell," says Scholl. "It makes clear that our country must address the national debt level—with no options left off the table. Indeed, politicians like Senator Chuck Grassley, R-IA, and farmer leaders like National Corn Growers Association Committee Chairman Tony Bush have already made the connection that agriculture will have to take its fair share of cuts."

In recent days these farm leaders have noted, for example, that the direct payments program first authorized in the 1996 Farm Bill as a temporary measure is likely to be cut. "The direct payments program—in which farmers receive payments without regard to need—has long been a staple in farm policy, but appears likely to change," Scholl says. "Numerous producers across the country have told AFT that they would welcome change in farm programs, and I believe the 2012 Farm Bill represents an opportunity to create

a better safety net."

"A safety net for 21st-century American agriculture must be more publicly accountable, more market oriented, and it must focus on risk management," says Scholl. He says that one measure of public accountability is to require producers to suffer an actual loss before they receive payments from the government. "Within Title I of the farm bill, only one program makes such a requirement—the Average Crop Revenue Election, or ACRE program, first introduced in the 2008 Farm Bill."

"The biggest problem we have on the farm is extreme economic volatility. Factors totally beyond our control can have a devastating impact on our ability to keep our farm in operation. It also makes it much more difficult for farmers and ranchers to invest in the long term practices necessary to protect the productivity of our land and the quality of our environment," Scholl adds. "It is a legitimate role for government to provide an effective safety net that helps producers manage such risk to assure a productive agricultural system and a clean environment."

"Moving away from pre-determined, fixed, immovable target prices such as those in the current counter-cyclical and marketing loan programs will bring market orientation to farm support programs," Scholl says. "Most important, the real role of the government in the private business of agriculture



Photo by: Joanne Puzey

must be to help producers manage risks that are beyond their control, not to manage every single risk a farmer faces. As an added benefit, making these changes creates a less distorting support system which will benefit producers, taxpayers, and the environment.

"I believe the reality of the extenuating federal budget situation offers American agriculture an opportunity—to create a better safety net that will allow us to produce the food, fiber, and fuel to feed ourselves and the world for decades to come, while we are also doing our fair share in addressing the budget," says Scholl.

Source: American Farmland Trust www.farmland.org. Originally appeared in the Southwest Farm Press.



Volunteer Thanks

We want to express our gratitude to our volunteers. These folks helped out with various tasks in the stores, newsletter distribution, a new member mailing, and participated in the Member Affairs Committee. We appreciate you.

Adam Garman

Carol Waugh

Carolyn Miklavic

Carrie Rolfe

Cynthia Ripke-Kutsagoitz

Diane Blake

Diana Swann

Edith Dahl

Elizabeth Thielicke

Ellen Murphy

Erika Jett

Erin Thompson

Gabriella Andrews

Ginger Oppenheimer

John Lawler

Kate Birr

Katie Chugg

Lynn Marek

Nancy Steele

Robin Hammond

Sharon Souders

Shirley Jacobson



The Nutritionist Is In

Tuesday, June 14
4-6 pm
Downtown store

Thursday, June 16
4-6 pm
Cordata store

Bring your questions on nutrition and health to the Co-op's nutritionist, Tom Malterre. Available at a table near the front of the store, he'll be ready to answer your questions about nutrition, healthy eating, and diet.