



Local Community Organization Sustainable Connections



Joanne Ienna, CCN Staff

Vision: A local economy that is the standard for sustainability.

Mission: To empower local business and consumer behavior that promotes a vibrant community and a healthy environment.

"Great communities don't just happen; they are consciously created." Sustainable Connections Executive Director Michelle Long makes this statement with the conviction that small local businesses are the fiber of our community. Michelle also reminds us that just 25 years ago, 10 percent of the people in this country controlled 50 percent of America's wealth. Today, the U.S. economy has evolved so that 10 percent now control 75 percent of household wealth. So what do these statistics mean to small businesses in our own community? In many cases corporate market domination has proven disastrous for small to mid-sized independent enterprises, often forcing them out of business. The brighter side of this is that Sustainable Connections offers a membership network to help support and organize community-focused Northwest Washington small businesses, farms, organizations, and individuals.

Sustainable Connections is committed to fostering a local living economy, which supports sustainable business practices that address waste, energy efficiency, and resource conservation. It also emphasizes economic and cultural diversity, sharing of information, and a commitment to local sourcing and purchasing. Michelle says, "Today we have 140 members from all kinds of businesses—building, local food systems, store-front retail, finance, healthcare, even nonprofit organizations. We believe in thinking globally, acting locally."

The concept for Sustainable Connections began in 1997 with Rick Dubrow, owner of A-1 Builders who is currently president of the Sustainable Connections board of directors, and Chris Webb, of 2020 Engineering. The original organization was an informal group of local building and engineering businessmen attempting to collectively make good decisions about their impact on the local environment. In January 2002, Michelle, Derek Long, and a dedicated group of local business people helped reorganize Sustainable Connections to establish even more specific goals for the organization.

Over the last year, Sustainable Connections has successfully evolved to a business membership network. Businesses pay membership rates based on their company's sales and are required to be local and independently owned. The organization is focused on educating the community about the importance of creating opportunities for business leaders to network and share the best practices of sustainable business. They also encourage local purchasing and mentoring member businesses. Sustainable Connections' first annual pledge meeting drew 100 members. The meeting encouraged participants to design

their own unique goal or pledge for what they personally plan to do to positively affect our local economy, community, environment, and their own workplace.

Sustainable Connections believes that small businesses make up the character of a community, helping to keep it strong and viable. Small local businesses usually give financial and volunteer resources to our community more often than non-local businesses. Also, these businesses have greater control over and an investment in the environmental impact of their businesses on the area in which they live.

With a goal of strengthening healthy business practices, Michelle and Derek are also National Coordinators for Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE). This group is made up of approximately 20 organizations similar to Sustainable Connections, and connects them to a larger national organization with the same values and objectives. Michelle says, "People call this a 'movement' now. There have been articles about this approach to promoting local business, ecology, and financial stability in magazines as diverse as *Inc.*, the *Utne Reader*, *In Business*, and *Yes*." BALLE Co-chair Larry Hammel said about Sustainable Connections, "Northwest Washington is uniquely positioned to become a 'model living economy' nationally for BALLE and for communities everywhere. The whole world is watching!"

Sustainable Connections sponsors several projects to help educate the community and support their efforts. Currently, they offer a member directory, decals for identifying member businesses, a purchasing club for group discounts on environmentally friendly office supplies, a food group to connect local food producers with retailers, a building group to encourage low-impact development practices, and numerous events and public

forums. In March, a 100-page coupon book will become available in our area. (*See Buy Local! below.*) This book, called the *4th Corner Connector*, will not only provide valuable coupons, but will also include beautiful photos of our area and interesting articles authored by local community members on a variety of subjects. In addition in late spring, Sustainable Connections will sponsor a community garden and home tour highlighting environmentally supportive examples. Then next fall, the group will host a Local Living Economy Conference featuring speakers who will address the topic of "Good Business—Sustainable Economic Systems."

Michelle, Derek, and Program Manager Heather Johnson work for Sustainable Connections on a part-time basis while the balance of help remains dependent on volunteers. "We're fortunate to live in a progressive community. This organization is made up of enthusiastic people who are committed to shared values. It's beautiful here and none of us want this beautiful place to become anything less. We know we can show the rest of the country what's possible."

If you would like to volunteer or get more information about Sustainable Connections, contact Michelle@Sconnect.org, visit their website, www.Sconnect.org, or call 592-2614.

You can also support Sustainable Connections by shopping on their Community Shopping Day, Saturday, March 15, when 2% of the day's sales will be donated to this group.

Buy Local!

The Co-op will support local businesses by selling the *4th Corner Connector* coupon book, developed by Sustainable Connections with the support of the Department of Ecology and the City of Bellingham. This beautiful book, which will sell for \$12.95, celebrates what's great about where we live and offers valuable discounts to local businesses. Get over \$2,500 in discounts on 150 different items such as \$5 off a \$25 Co-op purchase, free admission to films at the Pickford, 30% off at Hardware Sales, \$21 off an oil change, discounts on clothing, books, wine, ice cream, free coffee and scones, two free bus passes on WTA, and more. This coupon book would make a thoughtful gift for employees, friends, and colleagues.

Sustainable Connections supports local, independently owned businesses to preserve the unique character of our community and supports local businesses that are concerned with protecting and restoring the natural environment to preserve our quality of life.



COMMUNITY SHOPPING DAYS

What is a CSD?

Each year the Co-op invites local organizations to apply for a Co-op Community Shopping Day (CSD). Organizations are selected for their service to our community in the following areas: Food, Environmentally Sound Agriculture, Peace, Human Rights, or Environmental Issues. One additional organization is selected with a focus on Education of Youth. The Co-op's Member Affairs Committee (MAC) reviews and recommends 12 organizations and the Board of Directors gives final approval. For more information contact Jean at 734-8158.

2003 CSD Organizations

JANUARY 18	Whatcom Civil Rights Project
FEBRUARY 15	Nooksack Valley Ctr. for Sustainable Agriculture
MARCH 15	Sustainable Connections
APRIL 19	RE Sources
MAY 17	Food Not Lawns
JUNE 21	Animals as Natural Therapy
JULY 19	Whatcom Peace and Justice Center
AUGUST 16	Readiness to Learn, Meridian School District
SEPTEMBER 20	Maple Alley Inn, Opportunity Council
OCTOBER 18	People for Lake Whatcom
NOVEMBER 15	Blue Skies for Children
DECEMBER 20	Lummi Island Community Land Trust, Kulshan Community Land Trust