

# Whatcom Watch

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## Local Communities Network to Change the World

by Kimberly Cauvel

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### Bellingham Hosts 9th Annual BALLE Conference

Hundreds of people gathered at Western Washington University's Performing Arts Center (PAC) Wed., June 15 at 6:30 p.m. for the official start of the ninth annual Business Alliance of Local Living Economies (BALLE) Conference. The three-day conference included talks by 80 speakers, 24 interactive sessions, an expo and several off-campus celebrations.

In the PAC Lobby, information tables representing various participating businesses and organizations bordered the walls, forming the Living Economies Expo. The American Sustainable Business Council, Yes! Magazine, and WWU's Office of Sustainability were accounted for, to name a few. Another, Chelsea Green Publishing, offered stickers displaying a message central to the overall conference: "The world is changing. What do you need to know?"

The theme shared by speakers and participants meshed into the initiative to re-develop the economic system in an overarching effort to obtain the "world we want."

### About BALLE

The Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE) is a network of socially responsible businesses, representing more than 22,000 independent business members with more than 80 community networks in 30 U.S. states and Canadian provinces. The network is comprised of various types of local economic 'building blocks' including local food systems, green building, renewable energy, local manufacturing initiatives and others.

According to the website, "BALLE's mission is to catalyze, strengthen and connect networks of locally owned independent businesses dedicated to building strong Local Living Economies," and that, "A Local Living Economy ensures that economic power resides locally to the greatest extent possible, sustaining vibrant, livable communities and healthy ecosystems in the process."

### Some Entertainment

In the evening on June 15, a performer with the Cirque du Bellingham stood out from the crowd — actually above the crowd — supported by stilts. The Cirque performers evoked laughter and cheers until the crowd was rallied into the PAC Concert Hall. The evening later drew to a close in the presence of musician Peter Buffett. In addition to the appearance of the well-known musician (and son of billionaire investor Warren Buffett), acclaimed author Naomi Klein gave her talk Thursday morning.

The crowd drawn to the conference was colorful, in many senses of the word. The people formed a patchwork of hair and skin colors from black to white. They sported apparel in an array of shades and styles. Plaid shirts, leather and jean jackets glided through the crowd. Heels, boots, sneakers and sandals shuffled across the floor.

The lively bunch of approximately 700 BALLE members included business owners, investors, elected officials, philanthropists, economic development professionals and BALLE network leaders, according to the BALLE website.

Many toted large purses, reusable bags and backpacks. Several of them toted paper – information packets, flyers and business cards gathered at the expo. A majority drank from reusable mugs and water bottles. The smell of brew permeated inside the PAC as a few, however, sipped beer from plastic cups.

### **International Congregation, Local Goals**

Executive Director of BALLE and co-founder of Bellingham’s Sustainable Connections Michelle Long gained attention of the audience.

“With BALLE, it’s a better party,” she said with a smile that lasted almost the entire evening. It only faded for a brief, emotional, moment when she later addressed the struggles and dedication of BALLE members. Through a few tears she said, “I’m so thankful for all of you who are pioneering this . . . there is no greater task than re-working our entire economy.”

Long was inspirational, repeatedly encouraging the audience by stating, “our time is now.” She also spoke with humor, initiating laughter from the audience throughout her talk and a few hoots and hollers in the beginning.

“I think everyone’s had a few drinks,” Katie, a young attendee, said giggling.

Long continued, welcoming the participants to Bellingham. “This time you came to me, and for the first time I can say ‘welcome to my place’,” she said.

By way of introducing Bellingham and Whatcom County, Long mentioned the drinking water resource Lake Whatcom, the farming community known for raising dairy cows and berries, and a bumper sticker from the Mt. Baker Bike Club that reads, “Welcome to Bellingham Now Get on Your Bike!”

Long introduced BALLE co-founder Judy Wicks. “We came from the four corners of the continent,” Wicks said, addressing the scope of the BALLE network, “and we welcome those from other continents.”

### **Sharing Native Tradition, Lummi Song**

A traditional activity, passing a prayer bundle, initiated the first complete silence since the conference convened. Wicks said the prayer bundle represents BALLE’s collective vision to change the economy, and is a Native American tradition.

Following the passing of the prayer bundle from the previous year’s conference host to a representative of Sustainable Connections, ‘Uncle Smitty’ of the local Lummi Nation spoke.

Singing and beating a drum ‘Uncle Smitty’, his wife and their nephew Daryl shared a Native American song left to them by an elder. ‘Uncle Smitty’ spoke of Gov. Gregoire’s 2007 recognition of the Lummi people as the original inhabitants of the area drawn to be Whatcom County, a recognition he said was celebrated as the first.

“We have witnessed a lot of changes in our lifetime,” he said of himself and his wife. “One thing we have noticed is that our mother, the Earth, is very sick. She has given us almost all she can give – but still we ask for more.”

“We are supposed to be the caretakers of our environment; everything that keeps us alive,” he added. “I have traveled to many countries, and I’m sorry to say in America we are the most wasteful people there are.”

### **Dreaming of a New Economic Model**

As Long reclaimed the stage, captivating the audience with her enthusiasm, she briefly highlighted what she called ‘good times’ of the past eight BALLE conferences, identifying returning members and first-timers with hand raising.

“We are dreamers,” she said of the participants. “And thank God we’re not the only ones.”

Throughout her talk, each time she said ‘we’, she emphasized the inclusion of everyone in the room – a network of people striving to make local, economic initiatives a reality.

She showed a clip from the PBS special, “Fixing the Future”, that describes Bellingham as the “epicenter of the new economic model.” The special, which premiered in October 2010, features Long discussing Sustainable Connections of Bellingham (see Whatcom Watch, January 2011, page 4 “Bellingham’s Sustainability Highlighted in PBS Documentary”). “We are a community, we should have a relationship economy,” Long said, expressing the central goal of the BALLE Network, in contrast to the way she describes the existing economic structure in “Fixing the Future” as a one-night-stand model.

Jason McLennan of the Cascadia Green Building Council, International Living Building Institute and the Living Building Challenge described the current economy as an 'ecological paradigm.' McLennan described the idea of building living cities, the next step beyond 'green' buildings.

"It's about participating in the real fabric of life," he said. "What is life? And how do we participate in that?"

McLennan shared an inspiring example of a living building – a sewage plant so beautiful and clean that people also used the building to do yoga. This building, McLennan said, has plants and butterflies thriving in it, is scentless and functions without producing carbon dioxide.

In 2012 a living building will rise in nearby Seattle, Wash., he said. This building will be net zero for energy and water use, requiring no input of these resources from outside the building itself.

### **Playing Music, Raising Voices**

The final speaker of the evening, musician Peter Buffett, performed with a fellow cello player, and talked between songs, describing his life and addressing international social issues. He shared moments from his childhood, family photos, and a love and admiration for The Beatles.

With mention of his recently-published book "Life is What You Make It," he described what he found to be the difference between privilege and success – a discovery he made as a son of Warren Buffett.

Through his music and the visual medium that accompanied each song, Buffett discussed Native American culture, female education in India, the problems of plastics, human trafficking and changing the world.

"We don't pay the real price of anything we buy. There are social, environmental and health costs that we don't pay for," Buffett said of the current economic system. "It's about relationships. And that's what's going to change the world, as far as I'm concerned."

Bringing the evening to a close, voices throughout the concert hall joined Buffett in the chorus of his last song, asking, "can we love in the time that we live in?"

The final two days of the conference continued with a series of interactive sessions that addressed local food systems, the university as a sustainable business model, and green energy for a community. §