

Seattle Business

Perfect Circles

A Bellingham buy local movement syncs up with sustainable business practices and energy efficiency.

Tim Newcomb | January 2011 | FROM THE PRINT EDITION



Aaron Nelson/Evantide Photography
Sustainable Connections' Derek Long at Bellingham's La Fiamma Wood Fire Pizza, which bought its ovens locally.

Dorie Belisle, owner of BelleWood Acres near Lynden, used to sell her Jonagold apples wholesale and to local grocers and school districts. But she was searching for a way to increase her distribution. At the same time, Haggen Inc., an independent grocery store chain, was always on the lookout for local products to underscore its commitment to the region. Belisle reached out to Haggen and the two formed a relationship. Now, BelleWood is doing a thriving business selling six apple varieties in five Whatcom County Haggen outlets, and two of the varieties in all 26 Haggen stores. And Haggen is making good on its pledge to promote local products.

It's the kind of relationship that a unique local organization called Sustainable Connections is trying to promote as part of its Think Local First program, an effort to encourage consumers and businesses to seek local sources of products and services before considering other alternatives. And it's an approach that's gaining traction in other parts of Washington state.

That approach has the triple-bottom-line advantage of creating local jobs, helping local businesses make profits and encouraging sustainable business practices, says Sustainable Connections executive director Derek Long.

"As a locally owned business in a grocery industry primarily populated by companies based outside the Pacific Northwest, we appreciate the 'buy local' efforts of Sustainable Connections," explains Haggen

spokesperson Becky Skaggs. "Membership also strengthens some of our core values among customers and growers." That includes sustainability, also one of Haggen's values.

Sustainable Connections is 8 years old, but its efforts really took wing with its more recent Think Local First campaign. Surveys show that more than 72 percent of Bellingham residents now recognize the Think Local First brand—the campaign's logo can be found everywhere from advertisements to store windows. Impressively, the group says 58 percent of residents actually change purchasing habits because of the logo. And while it's a bit harder to quantify, business surveys also show that the campaign has a cumulative impact, says Long. Businesses that benefit from the "buy local" logo, in turn, tend to source from local providers first.

"You are getting more business because you are being supported locally and have the opportunity to source more locally yourself," Long says.

At Haggen, the program lets local farmers—connected to Haggen through Sustainable Connections—experiment with new products and place them in Haggen's Whatcom County stores. If the products sell well, they are made available in all 32 regional stores.

Tom Dorr, director of Western Washington University's Center of Economic Vitality, says that Sustainable Connections empowers the community and creates connections that are "really important for small businesses."

"Beyond the obvious economic boost and creation of jobs, buying from locally owned and independently operated businesses creates the web that ties our community together," says Chuck Robinson, owner of Village Books and Paper Dreams.

Partnerships among the 600 members that are part of Sustainable Connections help to generate new sales. But they also promote sustainability. When CH2M Hill recently moved to Bellingham, it used the Sustainable Connections' network to divert 80,000 pounds of potential waste (old office equipment, etc.) to 70 nonprofits and local businesses.

The program has also increased civic pride in the region, says Steve Roguski, owner of Fairhaven Runners & Walkers. "Sustainable Connections and Think Local First help to remind folks how much they love their great locally owned places to shop," he says. "These folks get the added benefits and know their money is well spent and will return value in many ways, including great relationships and environmental and community benefits."

These ideas of Sustainable Connections are gaining currency across Washington state. Spokane, Tacoma, Vancouver, Seattle and Whidbey Island have launched similar efforts in their communities. Derek's wife, Michelle Long, the original director of Sustainable Connections, runs the group's parent, BALLE (Business Alliance for Local Living Economies), which acts as a kind of umbrella organization for the efforts.

“Each one takes on an identity that really understands its local needs,” Derek Long says of the other groups. “It adapts to the marketplace.”

In Seattle, an organization that calls itself Seattle Good Business Network is working on a “buy local first” program that will be launched in early 2011. The group will begin by promoting locally owned businesses that sell to consumers, but will then encourage companies to source their products from other local companies.

Buy local sentiments have been around for decades. What makes this Bellingham effort notable is the way it has linked “buy local” to sustainability. It’s not just about helping local businesses; it’s also about being environmentally responsible. By buying local, you can also help the planet. When you help the planet, you may well help local businesses.

“There are a lot of ways businesses can engage with Sustainable Connections and learn sustainable practices,” he adds, noting that 275 of its members are signed on to the group’s zero waste program.

“Every single one who cuts waste, saves money,” he says, pointing to Samson Ropes, one of the region’s larger companies, which saved over \$20,000 per year by smartly disposing of waste.

That same mentality helped Sustainable Connections launch a Community Energy Challenge in which businesses voluntarily purchased green power. The effort contributed to making Bellingham the top green power city in the nation in 2009, with 12 percent of its power coming from green sources. Those results helped Sustainable Connections, in conjunction with Whatcom County, the city of Bellingham and the nonprofit Opportunity Council, to earn a \$4.1 million stimulus grant to run a community-wide energy efficiency campaign for two years.

The goal is to retrofit 150 commercial buildings and 900 residential households. It will create 35 jobs and generate \$10 million in local construction activity, Long notes. Whatcom County can also save \$1 million per year in energy costs by the end of the grant.

With 34 businesses already involved, Sustainable Connections becomes a one-stop shop for building owners and individuals to obtain a quality building energy assessment—all paid for by the grant. The money also pays for marketing the plan’s energy efficiency incentives and for energy monitoring, as well as offering interest rate buy-downs at Banner Bank for the actual retrofitting work.

“The goal is to create jobs and make an investment in deep energy retrofits,” Long says. “Our program is a pilot of the most cost-effective ways to save energy.” In the end, Sustainable Connections hopes its efforts can be repeated in other cities and organizations.

Sustainable Connections also leads the local Green Building program, bringing private and government entities together to reduce barriers and create friendly working relationships. “With a lot of different

stakeholders with different demands, we get everyone with a little skin in the game,” Long says. “That is where powerful things start to happen.”