

# THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

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## **Whatcom County ranks No. 2 in US for vitality of independent businesses**

DAVE GALLAGHER - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Whatcom County residents have a reputation for supporting local, independent businesses. Now it is being noticed nationally.

A new report about the vitality of independent retailers ranks the Bellingham metro area - which includes all of Whatcom County - second highest out of 363 metro areas studied. The top spot went to Ocean City, N.J.; followed by Bellingham, Medford, Ore.; Carson City, Nev.; and San Jose, Calif.

Metro areas at the bottom of the list include Kankakee, Ill.; Topeka, Kan.; and Auburn, Ala. The Indie City Index 2011 was put together by the American Booksellers Association and the strategic planning firm Civic Economics.



PHILIP A. DWYER | THE BELLINGHAM HERALD - Head brewer Kevin Davey pours hops into a brew kettle while brewing brown ale at the Chuckanut Brewery & Kitchen in Bellingham, Thursday afternoon, Jan. 20, 2011. The brewery, which opened in 2008, sells its beer from Whatcom County to Seattle.

The methodology involved taking a metro area and calculating the amount of sales from major chain stores to determine market saturation. The less chain store saturation for the area, the higher the ranking in the Indie City Index.

Whatcom County's high ranking doesn't come as a surprise to Chuck Robinson, co-owner of Village Books in Fairhaven. He said the support of local, independent businesses was good when he and Dee Robinson opened the bookstore in 1980 and it's continued to strengthen, particularly in the past seven or eight years with the growth of the Sustainable Connections organization and its "Buy "Local" campaigns.

"Many more people we see say they've changed their buying behavior because they want to support local businesses, and I think a lot of it has to do with increased public awareness," said Robinson, who has previously been a board member for Sustainable Connections.

Many advocates of independent businesses believe there's an economic benefit to shopping local and keeping the money within the community. Robinson notes there are also cultural benefits to having a robust independent retail community.

"Not many towns have something like Hardware Sales or two great local brew pubs like we have here," Robinson said. "Having these unique businesses are important to the community."

Strong independent businesses in a community also benefit the local tourism industry, as people look for authentic places, said Derek Long, executive director for Sustainable Connections. He's also impressed by the amount of business Whatcom County companies do with each other, keeping the money circulating within this area.

"This area is relatively healthy," said Long, referring to the vibrancy of the independent business community. "The population here thinks carefully about how they spend money, and we're fortunate to have that here."

The tourism and business-to-business benefits are alive and well at Chuckanut Brewery & Kitchen, said co-owner Mari Kemper. While the brewery has a regular customer base, it receives quite a few out-of-area visitors wanting to try out the latest beer. In turn, Kemper said they try to buy their products locally, including from Bellingham Pasta Company and Barlean's Organic Oils.

"We have a lot of talented, creative people here and we want to do what we can to support them," Kemper said.

It's still a challenge, however, given the current economic problems and competition.

"The recession continues to be challenging and we still need to get the message out there about the importance of supporting local businesses," Kemper said.

The Indie City Index was released at the Advocates for Independent Retail National Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., on Thursday, Jan. 20. To see the full report, visit [IndieCityIndex.com](http://IndieCityIndex.com).

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