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PBS features Bellingham's buy-local movement

Fixing what's wrong by sustaining what's right: that's the idea featured in a new documentary airing Friday (Nov. 26).



[Joe Mabel/Wikimedia Commons](#)

Bellingham, where it's Fairhaven historic district is popular, has a strong movement for supporting local businesses.

By [Bob Simmons](#)

Around Bellingham you can hardly avoid noticing stickers and small posters that carry the message "Buy Local, or Bye-Bye Local." It's a tiny part of a major campaign to sustain local banks, local stores, local agriculture, local manufacturers and service providers.

Bellingham stars this week in a PBS documentary being shown nationwide. It's called "Fixing the Future," a snappier name than "taking back the economy," which is what much of it's about. The idea, stated a lot

more pleasantly, is this: Wall Street and the huge multi-national corporations are out to own the country, and the best way to counter their predatory nature is to grow thousands of locally owned businesses that flourish when communities organize to support them.

In Bellingham it works both ways. The businesses have also organized to support the community. That's the story David Brancaccio and his TV production crew highlight in their one-hour special, airing on KCTS 9 Friday night (Nov. 26) at 7 p.m.

As their prime example of a locally rooted company tightly knit with its community, PBS chose [Woodstone](#), a Bellingham firm that makes top-of-the-line professional ovens. A few years ago, founder and CEO Keith Carpenter and his management team made a bold and expensive decision to fabricate their own metal parts rather than outsource the work to foreign companies.

"We looked at quotes from Mexico and China, and could have saved a lot of money by having the work done there," Carpenter told Crosscut. "If we were owned by a big corporation with thousands of investors, they would have made us send the work overseas."

But all 16 Woodstone shareholders work at Woodstone. Instead of outsourcing, they spent \$11.5 million for new equipment to do the work in Bellingham.

It was good for the company. Its reputation soared, and it has sold more than 9000 of its high-end ovens to restaurants, colleges and universities, grocery stores, and owners of very fine homes, looking for very fine ovens.

"The rewards are multi-faceted," Carpenter says. "We were able to grow our company by 35 people. We added brilliant young computer-savvy workers who produce wonderful, high quality parts. And the money stays at home."

That last sentence could well be the subtitle of the PBS documentary: the money stays at home. In a [lengthy internet conversation](#) with Brancaccio, economist and best-selling author David Korten (who is chair of the board that publishes Bainbridge Island-based [YES! Magazine](#)) warns against allowing Wall Street's giants to own the economy.

"Wall Street is basically dedicated to eliminating jobs or outsourcing jobs," Korten says, "in order to increase financial profits of the biggest corporations, to increase the financial assets of the world's already richest people."

The counter to all that is the Bellingham model, Korten suggests. Fixing the future, he says, requires "a financial system that is rooted in the community and accountable to community interest, and that operates by life values rather than financial values."

In addition to Woodstone, Brancaccio reports on a locally owned restaurant/B&B on Lummi Island called The Willows. It relies entirely on locally grown food (Whatcom County is rich in small, excellent food producers) and helps to support a traditional [reef-net salmon fishery](#) just off the island, a couple miles down the road.

In their search for ways to fix the future, the documentary's producers found [Sustainable Connections](#), a non-profit Bellingham/Whatcom County network of 600 locally owned companies. They collaboratively confront such challenges as saving energy, reducing waste, and locating locally produced supplies and services. Staff at Sustainable Connections hook up the searching buyer with the able supplier. They arrange scores of workshops and seminars on topics aimed at localizing every aspect of financing, production, purchasing and marketing, always with an undertone of environmental protection.

Sustainable Connections, in turn, is part of a much larger organization known as BALLE — [Business Alliance of Local Living Economies](#) — also headquartered in Bellingham. BALLE works to accomplish on a national and international scale what Sustainable Connections does locally. It claims more than 22,000 business members in 80 communities across the U.S. and Canada. The national organization and its local precursor have a tight relationship; their executive directors are married to each other. Derek Long and his wife Michelle were co-founders of Sustainable Connections nine years ago. When BALLE decided to move its headquarters from San Francisco and hire a new executive director, its board chose Bellingham and Michelle Long, based on the progressive changes Sustainable Connections had brought about in the local business community.

The idea that citizens can "bring the economy home" seems to transcend our current political snarling and snapping. Residents of conservative Whatcom County and liberal Bellingham appear to coalesce on the need to support local business. Sustainable Connections surveyed the buying habits of 400 city and county households and found that 58 percent had changed their buying habits because of SC's "buy local" campaigns.

It isn't just a matter of consumers buying from local businesses, but also local businesses buying from each other. "The expectation," Derek Long told Crosscut, "is that the same values that move consumers to buy locally will drive the local businesses to buy from local producers the supplies and services they need."

"Fixing the Future" [visits in Fargo](#), N.D., to report on a hugely successful local bank whose ownership structure could be seen as downright subversive in some political circles. [Bremer Bank](#), with 100 branches in three states, is 92 percent owned by a non-profit charity, The Otto Bremer Foundation. The other 8 percent is owned by its employees.

In Portland, Maine, Brancaccio explains the working of a bartering system known as [Hour Exchange Portland](#). It's a time bank where skills and services are deposited and withdrawn at the rate of \$1 an hour, with no cash involved. A surgeon's time and a landscaper's are traded at the same rate.

In Austin, Texas the documentary profiles four women, struggling to get by in a depressed economy, and starting a new catering cooperative that turns out empanadas on a commercial scale from home kitchens. Brancaccio doesn't say so, but there are parts of the country where the Texas cooperative and the Maine "time bank" would have been highly suspicious if not illegal, 70 years ago. The system changes slowly, but it changes.

The examples in the documentary are a molecule of what's happening as communities and local businesses strive to sustain each other through difficult times. Add all the businesses connected through BALLE and "sustainability" is still a tiny part of the nation's economy, but it's a movement. Every movement was once that size.

"Our mission to transform our local economy and have it be modeled across the country seemed a bit audacious when we first started out," Michelle Long says, "but it seems to be coming true."

Bob Simmons is a freelance writer and former KING-TV journalist living in Bellingham, Wash. You can reach him in care of editor@crosscut.com.