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## COUNTY VIEW

# Think Local raises bar for businesses

John D'Onofrio

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This week, Dec. 4-10, is our community's fourth annual Buy Local Week. The week was designed to encourage everyone in Whatcom County to celebrate our wonderful and unique community by thinking locally made, locally grown or locally owned first.

Sustainable Connections, the business network behind the Think Local First program, is a nonprofit membership organization of well over 500 local businesses and community leaders working together to transform and model an economy built on sustainable practices. We are dedicated to supporting local businesses, our community and our environment.

We believe that these practices — and the support of the community — make Whatcom County's economy stronger and have a positive impact on the quality of life available to all who live here.

In our fourth year it is clear that this program is having a tremendous impact in the community. Applied Research Northwest recently completed a community poll and a business survey analyzing the local impact of the program. The study, which has a margin of error of 6 percent, yielded some amazing results. It found that 69 percent of local residents are aware of the "Think Local First" program, and the "Buy Local," and "Buy Fresh" logos, and — more importantly — are making significant changes in their purchasing behavior because of it. This is huge.

The Think Local First program promises

a win/win for both the local business community and our customers. By making a conscious decision to seek local alternatives to multinational corporations, we can choose to support our community in important ways and by extension to help shape our future as a small, but growing, city. There is no shortage of places that have surrendered their unique local identity to the bland and homogeneous "Anytown" model.

The poll results seem to support with data what so many of us already believe, that Whatcom County is a special place and those of us fortunate enough to call it home have an opportunity (and an obligation) to try to preserve its unique character.

The program works with privately held businesses with local owners, who have the full autonomy to innovate on everything from where they buy potatoes for their French fries, to the kind of energy they use, to how they contribute to the county's unique culture. This has created change among business owners as well: 87 percent of local businesses that belong to Sustainable Connections say that being a member has motivated them to conduct business in a more sustainable fashion; 67 percent say they have voluntarily changed their business practices to decrease their environmental impact and to better support our community.

I recently had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Pamela Jull, the director of Applied Research Northwest and ask her about the poll. Her response was enthusiastic: "These results are phenomenal. If one in five households claimed familiarity with your program, and changed their behavior because of it, you would consider it a success. To have nearly three in five households attributing a behavior change to this program shows the Think Local First program is having an amazing impact."

As a local business owner and patron of other local businesses, I'm grateful for this community support. As a sponsor and steering committee member of this program, it's also gratifying to see that this new, mutually supportive community model is being embraced by the community.

Still, there are misconceptions about the Think Local First program. I am sometimes asked if we expect people to only buy locally made products, or only from locally owned stores, no matter what. This is not meant to be about guilt. We simply want to remind people to consider first whether there is a local option that might just as nicely meet your needs.

As locally owned businesses, it is our job to justify your consideration by offering value propositions that compare favorably with those available elsewhere. Value is often delivered as a result of business models that highlight service and expertise over sheer volume of sales. Smaller, independently owned businesses have the option to focus on offering this kind of value. Not all do. Those that do deserve your consideration. No one is saying that local businesses deserve your business simply because they are local.

On behalf of all of the business members of Sustainable Connections I would like to thank the community for your support of local business and to pledge that, in return, we will continue to work hard to build a local business environment that offers unique value and that supports our shared goals of building a Whatcom County of the future that honors the special qualities of life that we currently enjoy in such abundance.

John D'Onofrio is president and CEO of Northwest Computer in Bellingham. A locally owned business and longtime member of Sustainable Connections, Northwest Computer was selected as Whatcom County's Small Business of the Year in 2006.



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