

# Buy local campaign hits home

## Dozens of businesses on board

by Christopher Key

From all accounts, last month's Buy Local campaign was a howling success. Members of Sustainable Connections, who organized the event, are not resting on their laurels. They want the Buy Local mentality to become a year round phenomenon. Toward that end, they are distributing low cost Buy Local kits to interested merchants. Those kits contain posters, window decals, thank you cards for customers, and fact sheets about why buying locally is important. According to those fact sheets:

- Significantly more money re-circulates in Whatcom County when purchases are made at locally owned, rather than nationally owned, businesses. More money is kept in the community because locally owned businesses often purchase from other local businesses, service providers and farms. Purchasing local helps grow other businesses as well as the Whatcom County tax base.
- Non-profits receive greater support. Non-profit organizations receive an average three times greater support from smaller locally owned business owners than they do from large businesses.
- One-of-a-kind businesses are an integral part of Whatcom County's distinctive character. The unique character of Whatcom County is what brought many people here and will keep them here. Tourism businesses also benefit. "When people go on vacation they generally seek out destinations that offer them the sense of being someplace, not just anyplace," said Richard Moe, President, National Historic Preservation Trust.
- Reduced environmental impact. Locally owned businesses can make more local purchases requiring less transportation and generally set up shop in town or city centers as opposed to developing on the fringe. This generally means contributing less to sprawl, congestion, habitat loss and pollution.
- Most new jobs are provided by local businesses. Small local businesses are the largest employer nationally and in Whatcom County, provide the most new jobs to residents.
- Customer service is better. Local businesses often hire people with more specific product expertise for better customer service.
- Local business owners invest in community. Local businesses are owned by people who live in this community, are less likely to leave, and are more invested in the community's future.
- Public benefits far outweigh public costs. Local businesses in town centers require comparatively little infrastructure investment and make more efficient use of public services as compared to nationally owned stores entering the community.
- Competition and diversity leads to more choices. A marketplace of tens of thousands of small businesses is the best way to ensure innovation and low prices over the long-term. A multitude of small businesses, each selecting products based not on a national sales plan but on their own interests and the needs of their local customers, guarantees a much broader range of product choices.

- Encourages investment in Whatcom County. A growing body of economic research shows that in an increasingly homogenized world, entrepreneurs and skilled workers are more likely to invest and settle in communities that preserve their one-of-a-kind businesses and distinctive character.

Michelle Long is executive director of Sustainable Connections.

“We want to help support businesses that are good stewards of this area,” she said. “We rushed to get the effort going before the holidays and are putting together a strategic plan for future efforts. We’re looking for ways to help consumers identify local businesses, materials and tools to make information available to the public.”

She feels that it will take some time to build the message into the local consciousness.

“About 85 percent of the sales at the big boxes come at the expense of local businesses,” Long said. “They rarely buy locally and are, in fact, often mandated to buy elsewhere, so there’s no multiplier effect.”

It all ties in to a sense of place and quality of life, according to Long.

“Do we want a distinctive area with a great downtown or do we want to be Everywhere, USA?” she asked. “Businesses that maintain our character attract the investor and entrepreneurial classes.”

Well over 200 businesses are participating in the effort. Campaign co-sponsors, along with Sustainable Connections, are Brown & Cole Stores, Village Books and Paper Dreams. Supporting sponsors include 3D Computer Corp., A-1 Builders, Barkley Associates, Bay City Supply, Bellingham Independent Restaurant Group, Bellingham Weekly, Community Food Co-op, Copies Now, Downtown Renaissance Network, Dream On Futon, Fairhaven Association, Fairhaven Runners, Inc., Greenhouse, Griggs Office Supply, Kulshan Cycles, Lithtex, Louis Auto Glass, Moka Joe, Inc., The RE Store and RE Sources.

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**PULL QUOTE:** “We’re looking for ways to help consumers identify local businesses, materials and tools to make information available to the public.” – Michelle Long, Sustainable Connections

**PHOTO:** Long, Michelle.tif *Michelle Long of Sustainable Connections is spearheading the Buy Local campaign.*