

# SALT LAKE CITY BUSINESS LEADERS ORGANIZE “LOCAL FIRST” CAMPAIGN

## BALLE BEAT

*Laury Hammel*

**T**HE Salt Lake Vest Pocket Business Coalition was founded in 1999 by a number of locally owned independent business owners who saw the value of community businesses banding together for the common good. These visionary leaders recognized that locally owned independent businesses are not only a critical part of a strong economy, but play an important role in the cultural life of a community.

Recently Vest Pocket, working with the national organization — Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE) — developed a Strategic Plan calling for a local purchasing campaign that would create a more diverse economic fabric which would strengthen the economy of the Salt Lake metropolitan area.

In this ground-breaking document Vest Pocket writes: “The economy of the Salt Lake metropolitan area and Utah is experiencing major challenges. The results of this weak economy are an extremely stressful business climate, high unemployment, and severe budgetary difficulties for municipalities of all sizes. Decreasing revenues are affecting services in every area from education and social services to affordable housing and the arts. Salt Lake City, in particular, is in a state of flux as it struggles to define itself and reinvigorate its downtown area.”

Vest Pocket is leading a coalition of

local organizations committed to building a strong economy in the Salt Lake Valley and Utah by supporting the growth of small and locally owned businesses. Several studies have clearly demonstrated that money spent at locally owned businesses continues to circulate in the local economy which in turn strengthens the economic base of the community.

Following the lead of several communities throughout North America (Austin, Texas; Western Massachusetts; Maine; Whatcom County, Washington; Portland, Oregon to name a few), Vest Pocket is preparing a large-scale and multidimensional campaign centering on the theme of “Local First” which endeavors to: Educate consumers and businesses on the importance of buying locally; Demonstrate the benefits of buying from locally based businesses (both business to business and business to consumer); Promote government purchasing practices that support local businesses; Create an environment that promotes and supports local business; Provide assistance and support to locally based businesses; and Develop long-term economic development strategies that are consistent with local business development.

### LONG-TERM APPROACH

Vest Pocket is taking a long-term approach to this ‘Local First’ campaign and is organizing broad support for this carefully designed project. There have been extensive conversations with a diverse group of community leaders in an effort to include as many interested parties as possible. Currently ‘Local First’ proposals soliciting funding and active support have been submitted to the Salt Lake County, Salt Lake City, the Chamber of Commerce, and other

civic organizations all of whom have indicated considerable interest in this campaign.

Recently, great interest and enthusiasm has been shown by both government and private entities to commission economic studies. In a major breakthrough for locally owned independent businesses, the Salt Lake County Council voted to allocate \$30,000 to fund a study focusing on the impact of local purchasing. This study and possibly other research projects will measure the relative impact on the Salt Lake economy of business generated by the locally owned small business sector as well as the implications of the 20-year trend of that sector’s continuing decline. These studies will be a welcome addition to the growing body of research documenting the critical role that local purchasing has in building strong local economies.

An unexpected benefit to this new Vest Pocket Strategic Plan has been the opening of lines of communication between various local agencies and organizations. This has created a substantial and diverse network of community leaders with the mission of building a strong base of locally owned companies.

Salt Lake City has benefited greatly from the lessons of other ‘Local First’ efforts and Vest Pocket will reciprocate by sharing information and inspiration with other communities as the campaign unfolds. □

*Based in Boston, Massachusetts, Laury Hammel is cofounder of BALLE — Business Alliance for Local Living Economies. Website: [www.livingeconomies.org](http://www.livingeconomies.org). Information about the Salt Lake region was supplied by Kinde Nebeker, chair of the Local First Committee of Salt Lake Vest Pocket Business Coalition.*