



BALLE BEAT

Don Shaffer

BALLE — Business Alliance for Local Living Economies — is an international organization whose mission is to strengthen and connect local business networks. It serves 19 such networks in the U.S. and Canada.

We seek business owners who are committed to a spirit of transparency and continuous improvement regarding their local economy and sustainable business practices. Even if perfect “compliance” is hard to attain, at least movement is in the right direction.

My business, Comet Skateboards, designs and manufactures premium skateboarding products in Oakland, California. We are a typical “founding” member of a local BALLE network. Of Comet’s total funding to date, 93 percent came from four angel investors who live within five miles of the company’s headquarters, and from the city of Oakland itself, in the form of loans tied to local job creation.

Comet is committed to using suppliers who are in the closest possible geographic proximity. For example, the company two years ago secured a mutually beneficial relationship with an established snowboard manufacturer based in San Francisco and Chico, California to “outsource” skateboard production. Bags and accessories are produced by local Bay Area merchants. All coatings and glues used for skateboard production are water-based (unique in the industry) and sourced locally. The company is pioneering use of bamboo — a locally-grown and sustainable resource. Other woods (maple, poplar, hickory) are not available nearby, but all sources are certified by the Forest Stewardship Council and grown in the

“BRAND VENICE”

United States. Comet will convert one of its two factories to solar power later this year, making it “The World’s Only Solar-Powered Skateboard Factory!”

As part of my work, I travel to Venice, California (on the beach, west of downtown Los Angeles) at least once every six weeks to meet with customers who love our products. Last week, while visiting, I read an inspiring editorial in the local publication *VenicePaper*, entitled “Brand Venice” by Tibby Rothman. In it, Ms. Rothman examined the implications chain stores such as Starbucks would have on the area’s commercial district — Abbot Kinney Boulevard which is Venice’s *de facto* Main Street.

Until now, the street has maintained an eclectic mix of funky furniture stores, clothing boutiques, pizza places, skate shops and coffee shops — small stores owned and operated by local residents. However, as the area grows more affluent, Abbot Kinney Boulevard becomes more enticing to chains. Rothman believes that chains will come to the street but foresees their impact as making the area less economically viable rather than advancing commercial interests.

Ms. Rothman describes three central principles shared by BALLE. We agree with her — local ownership of retail stores helps preserve the following:

1. *Uniqueness*. “What difference will there be between a Banana Republic on Colorado in Pasadena, one on the Promenade in Santa Monica and one on Abbot Kinney in Venice. With the advent of chains, the street will actually have less to offer, rather than more; we will simply become ‘one of’ many locations. Not ‘the one.’”
2. *Independence*. “Abbot Kinney shop owners have the latitude to make their own decisions, creatively and economically. Surely that’s as representative of Venice’s rebellious spirit as the work of our artists. With chains, decisions will be made by executives who never visit our area.”
3. *Relationships*. “In Venice, we know the owners of the local coffee shop. We know the furniture collector. We know

the realtor down the street. We know the extraordinary fashion designer. We know the cook over at the barbeque. We know each other and we care about each other.”

Rothman makes a good case for how the relationships, unique character, and independence of Abbot Kinney’s merchants are precisely why people come to visit! Diluting that heritage, dilutes “Brand Venice” — and everyone suffers.

I contacted Tibby Rothman to make her aware of BALLE, including its successful “Local First” campaign. Hopefully BALLE can help concerned citizens in Venice, put a stop to chain encroachment. □

Don Shaffer is BALLE’s National Coordinator. Contact him at don@cometskateboards.com. Learn more: www.cometskateboards.com, www.livingeconomies.org, www.venicepaper.net.

BALLE CONFERENCE

BALLE’s 3rd Annual International Conference will be held June 2-5, 2005 at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada.

Conference topics will include the following:

- Best practices of local business networks;
- Local Living Economy business models;
- Bringing capital back to our communities;
- Public policy changes for a positive future;
- Equity and diversity in sustainable business;
- Organizing Local First campaigns;
- Connecting local economies globally;
- NEW for 2005: Local First Trade Show and exhibition.

Further details will be listed in coming issues of *In Business*, or contact Cathy Lehman, Sustainable Connections at (360) 647-7093; cathy@sconnect.org; or cathy@ballenetwork.org.