



LOCAL FIRST CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED IN NORTHWEST WASHINGTON

BALLE BEAT

Stacy Mitchell

MORE than 250 independent businesses in the city of Bellingham and surrounding Whatcom County in northwest Washington have joined together to urge residents to “think local first” when shopping. Organized by Sustainable Connections, a local business coalition and BALLE affiliate, the campaign has sparked a lively public discussion and is already beginning to influence shopping habits.

It will serve as a model for BALLE affiliates across North America as they develop their own “Local First” campaigns. The goal is to build broad public awareness of the economic, community, and environmental benefits of supporting homegrown enterprises.

Sustainable Connections, one of the largest and oldest BALLE affiliates, has more than 270 locally owned business members. Its mission is to help members collaborate; buy goods and services from one another; minimize their environmental impacts; maximizing their community benefits; and educate the public about the importance of a strong, sustainable, locally owned economy.

Sustainable Connections kicked off its Think Local First campaign in early December with two dozen sponsoring businesses, including Village Books/Paper Dreams and Food Pavilion/Cost Cutter grocery stores. The campaign has already become very visible within Bellingham and Whatcom County. Its eye-catching logo, which features Mount Baker and the words, “think local, buy local, be local,” now appears on hundreds of storefronts, posters, tee shirts, bumper stickers, flyers, and news-

paper advertisements.

The campaign’s web site (www.ThinkLocal.org), encourages “residents to Think Local when they are considering where to make purchases, to Buy Local whenever possible and to Be Local by supporting businesses that make Whatcom County unique.” Sustainable Connections Executive Director Michelle Long explains, “We want to increase market share to independent, locally owned businesses by increasing awareness about the personal and community benefits of choosing local. People don’t always make the connection between their quality of life and the choices they make through their purchases.”

The coalition provided every participating business owner with a kit that includes tips on how to promote the campaign; a fact sheet on the top ten reasons to support local businesses; a poster to display in their stores; and a window decal with the campaign’s logo.

The kits also contained six different thank-you cards for business to give to their customers. Each has a unique message about why supporting locally owned businesses is good for the community. One, for example, reads “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.”

Participating businesses also received a listing on the campaign’s website and were supplied with master copies of the campaign logo, which they’ve been reproducing in their own advertising and in-store marketing.

Small businesses “tend to be more flexible, more attuned to what their neighbors need and want, and they tend to give more to charitable organizations,” said Kathy Van Winkle, man-

ager of Griggs Office Supply. “The more you spend your money with local businesses, the more those dollars stay in the community.”

To get the campaign off the ground, Sustainable Connections created a month-long contest in which residents gathered receipts from local businesses. Those who collected from the highest number of diverse locally owned businesses win prizes. The two runners-up get \$100 gift certificates good at any participating business. The grand prize is a month of daily free meals at locally owned restaurants. More than 100 people have entered the contest, according to Long. The winners will be announced in a few weeks.

The campaign has received extensive coverage from local radio and television, the Bellingham Weekly, Business Pulse, Business Journal, Lynden Tribune, and the Bellingham Herald, and participating businesses say it’s beginning to affect residents’ purchasing decisions. A letter-to-the-editor in the Bellingham Herald said it well:

“My wife and I recently moved to Bellingham... We have been very impressed with the buy local campaign. It has influenced our shopping patterns and choices. We went to locally owned furniture stores for furnishing our new home. We shopped at local grocery stores, which also provided insights in to the many local meat, fish, dairy and produce sources in Whatcom County.... Programs like this buy local campaign can influence newcomers to become contributors to the local economy much more quickly than would otherwise be the case.”

According to Long, businesses that have gone the extra mile to highlight their role in the local economy are get-



ting the most from the campaign. Village Books, for example, has been promoting local authors, and has used the logo liberally throughout their store on employee name tags, store banners, shelf tags, book marks, and the like. La Fiamma Wood Fired Pizza invited local farmers to talk about the local ingredients used in its pizzas. Moka Joe's locally roasted organic, fair trade coffee has been using the logo on its packaging and coffee bean bins in local grocery stores.

Food Pavilion/Cost Cutter Grocery Stores ran weekly ads with the logo and a different factoid from the 'top ten reasons to buy local' each week. One read, for example, "Significantly more money recirculates in Whatcom County when purchases are made at locally owned, rather than nationally owned, businesses." Another noted, "Our one-of-a-kind businesses are an integral part of our distinctive character."

Sustainable Connections plans to expand the campaign in the coming year to ensure that the Think-Buy-Be Local message and logo are widely and consistently visible in 2004. Reinforcing and expanding the reach of the message, the coalition believes, is essential to ensur-

ing that residents truly understand the differences between locally owned and chain businesses and can make more informed shopping choices.

"In conducting research before launching this campaign, we quickly learned how much confusion there is about the definition of local and independent ownership," noted Sustainable Connections Program Manager Heather Johnson. "When doing short exit interviews with customers of a local grocery store, one person responded that she shopped at locally owned businesses 95 percent of the time. When probed further, she said it was very convenient for her since she worked at the local Wal-Mart and could do all her shopping on the way out."

Sustainable Connections is developing several major promotional events for 2004, including a float in a local parade with business owners dressed as their business (e.g., I'm a pizza! I'm a book!); a 4th of July "Independents" Week celebration, inspired by Independents Week in Tampa, Florida, a three-year-old annual event organized by the Tampa Independent Business Alliance; and a special Buy Local Day during the

holiday shopping season. The campaign also plans to develop more in-store promotional materials carrying the Local First message, new slogans, and creative holiday twists on its core message (for Valentine's Day, "Think Local - Buy Local - Be MY Local").

BALLE affiliates are planning their own Local First campaigns in Salt Lake City; Philadelphia; Portland, Oregon; Pioneer Valley, Massachusetts, and British Columbia.

See the campaign's logo and poster at www.ThinkLocal.org. Learn more about Sustainable Connections at www.Sconnect.org. Learn more about BALLE at www.livingeconomies.org. Learn more about Institute for Local Self-Reliance at www.newrules.org. □

Stacy Mitchell serves on BALLE's Advisory Council and is a senior researcher with the New Rules Project, a program of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, and author of The Home Town Advantage. She produces an email newsletter (www.newrules.org/hta) on effective strategies to limit chain store proliferation and strengthen locally owned businesses, and chairs the American Independent Business Alliance.