



BALLE BEAT

Ann Bartz

THE Republican National Committee of 1928 famously implied that a vote for Herbert Hoover would put “a chicken in every pot.” We don’t make campaign promises, but certainly see a BALLE network in every community as the surest road to prosperity.

What would that look like? What it looks like so far is a set of networks as diverse as the 34 communities they serve. And we’re getting inquiries from communities just as varied, from big cities to small towns to rural regions to entire states.

If BALLE is about businesses committed to the health and wealth of a particular place, then a BALLE network has to map itself to the contours of that place as well. What are the specific economic threats and opportunities? What will residents respond to and get excited about? What resources does a community already have, what can it build upon?

Sustainable Connections formed in the progressive Northwest college town of Bellingham, Washington, in 2001 and has quickly grown to 500 business members and a comprehensive set of programs that has set the bar for what a BALLE network can accomplish. Along with our other most established network, the Sustainable Business Network of Philadelphia, otherwise known as SBN Philly, they have pioneered the building block concept — building the local living economy around food and farming, green building, locally owned

THE “GO-TO BUNCH” ON SUSTAINABILITY

independent retail, and renewable energy. We call these two “classic” BALLE networks.

Having spent the last five years developing a solid reputation as the go-to bunch on sustainability in three counties in northern Washington, the leaders of Sustainable Connections are expanding further into renewable energy this fall. With Puget Sound Energy, they’re sponsoring the Bellingham Green Power Community Challenge, kicking off September 2, with the goal of becoming the largest Green Power Community in the nation. Already the local university and the city council have pledged to go to 100 percent renewable energy, leading the way for residents and local businesses.

SBN Philly began with the White Dog Café’s web of food vendors, as Judy Wicks proffered the lessons learned and connections made in her quest for sustainably-raised meat, dairy, and produce to the entire city’s food industry. The network now partners with businesses and organizations already leading in sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, green building, independent media, sustainable landscapes, small business development, independent retail, and fair trade, and have just launched a new building block, the healthy home. The network creates forums where business owners and nonprofit leaders can come together to learn about the interdependence of all of these building blocks in a local living economy.

VARIATIONS ON A BALLE THEME

The rest of our networks have often started with an existing business organization, such as the San Francisco Locally Owned Merchants Alliance, that has seen the potential for energizing its local economy with fresh ideas and a coordinated retail campaign encouraging residents to Think Local First, as a concept, not a prescription. It’s a way to think about what you buy, where you buy it, where it comes from. Is it an independent, locally owned store, or an absentee-owned chain? Was it grown in

the next county, the next state, or halfway around the world? Several of our networks are based entirely around Local First campaigns, and run from compact — four dense neighborhoods in Chicago — to expansive (the entire spread-out state of Utah), depending on what makes sense for that region.

Others start with a few committed individuals who envision a new economy in their region based on restoration rather than exploitation, and can see that transforming local businesses from the drivers of the old economy to the drivers of the new is the best way forward. They organize businesses to support each other toward greater simultaneous profitability and sustainability.

Some networks concentrate on green business, some work more on the local aspect. Some networks grew out of the Businesses for Social Responsibility movement, such as the statewide BALLE networks in Maine and Vermont. Some are Chambers of Commerce. We’ve signed up two, one representing a town, the other a county, and the inquiries keep coming. We’re talking with a local metropolitan chapter of a national women’s business organization. A small area of New England will soon be represented by a regional sustainability nonprofit with an increasing business focus.

All will be supported and encouraged to get their arms around as much of the task of building a local living economy as they can, moving toward “classic” status. A new green economy based on principles of decentralized ownership yielding a “living return,” fair wages and taxes, and stewardship of the natural environment and the community, is within reach of every community. □

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