

Building A Strong Local Economies In The Greater Lehigh Valley

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Many of today's concerned economists are posing serious questions about the ability of the national economy to continually expand. In fact, a few are calling for public conversations regarding questions such as those posed by John de Graaf, co-author of *What's the Economy for Anyway? – Why It's Time to Stop Chasing Growth and Start Pursuing Happiness*, and David Korten, author of *Agenda for a New Economy: From Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth*. In this month's *Natural Awakenings* feature, "Economics of Happiness: The New Economy", de Graaf describes an economy that changes the rules to benefit the quality of life for America's people and proposes that

the kind of society that makes for health, happiness, true prosperity and sustainability is one with strong local economies and flourishing communities.

Korten, who questions whether the economy should give priority to money or life, the fortunes of the few, or the well-being of all, charges us to reorganize our human economies to function as locally self-reliant subsystems of our local ecosystems. He points out that this requires segmenting the borderless global economy into a planetary system of interlinked, self-reliant regional economies, each rooted in a community of place and organized to optimize the lives of all who live within its borders.

Both Korten and de Graaf agree that a new economy based on self-organized principles of healthy living systems should include local small business and banking, farmers' markets and urban gardens, and businesspeople sponsoring and volunteering for local activities, among other things. In the Greater Lehigh Valley these characteristics are slowing building momentum.

Buy Fresh Buy Local

An advocate for building a strong local economy while helping family farms, Lynn Prior, Director of Buy Fresh Buy Local's Greater Lehigh Valley Chapter, points out what could happen if each of the 390,000 households in the Greater Lehigh Valley committed to spending just \$10 per week on locally-grown foods during 28 weeks of the growing season. "From May through November, Berks, Lehigh and Northampton Counties would keep more of their food dollars circulating within their borders and residents would be eating fresher, tastier, healthier food," says Prior.

At present only \$5.4 million of the nearly \$1.6 billion per year spent by Lehigh Valley residents on food eaten at home is purchased directly from local farms. "That is only 0.3%, clarifies Prior, who notes that residents interested in building momentum for the grassroots movement should look for a Buy Fresh Buy Local® sign or label in stores, markets or restaurants. "The sign means that you've found a business with a commitment to feature local foods and support local producers," says Prior.

To help promote the purchase and consumption of local food, the chapter creates convenient food guides, provides an online searchable database, provides monthly updates about seasonal foods, coordinates tasting events, presents Farm-to-Programming, and other activities.

Sustainable Business Network

Several blocks from the Buy Fresh Buy Local's office in Easton is the Cosmic Cup, an independently owned coffee shop serving organic and Fair Trade coffees. Not only has owner Troy Reynard been personally greeting his customers from behind the espresso machine for more than 6 years, he's also been heavily involved in the Sustainable Business Network of the Greater Lehigh Valley, actively promoting the value of local independently owned business.

SBN membership, whose mission is to work for community sustainability, fluctuates between 20 and 40 businesses. All are on a mission to build a solid local economy that includes providing secure and fulfilling livelihoods, fostering enjoyable community life, working in harmony with nature, and strengthening the viability of independent local businesses and farms. The network also encourages members and residents to consume food that is whole, locally produced, and grown in ways that sustain and rebuild soil, water, wildlife, and vegetation. Additionally, SBN promotes discussion, education, and understanding of ways to maximize the health of individuals and communities.

Reynard likes walking his talk and circulating his food dollars locally. He shops as much as possible at the Easton farmers' market and Reeder's Farm stand and buys his raw organic milk from Klein Farms. Other than a meal he ate two years ago at a chain restaurant, the former SBN steering committee member eats only at locally owned establishments.

Working for a grassroots organization with no professional staff, Reynard quips, "We're only as successful as our actions and the amount of support from volunteers, members and local residents."

Community Exchange, TimeBank, Lehigh Valley Health Network

The Community Exchange TimeBank, a 12-year old initiative of the Lehigh Valley Health Network of Community Health & Health Studies is a prime example of Korden's explanation of cooperative self-organization and meeting the needs of individuals in a way that simultaneously serves the needs of others and contributes to the life of the whole.

"In Community Exchange (CE) you exchange your skills and services for someone else's skills and services," explains CE Manager Laura Gutierrez, who is also one of 500-plus Community Exchange members. "We look at the community in terms of its assets and what people have to give and we primarily focus on helping people to lead healthier lives and be more connected," she says.

Talents that members are willing to share are recorded in a database to be matched with someone in need. Pulling weeds, pet care, baking cookies or a cake, helping someone clean out their attic, driving someone to an appointment, providing companionship or sending out birthday cards are common requests that allow members who help others to earn “time dollars”, which can be exchanged for services from other members. “Everyone has something to give,” says Gutierrez, who recalls offering the use of her washing machine and home gym to members. “I’ve cashed in my time dollars for a ride to the airport several times,” she says.

People First Credit Union

The original concept of credit unions—people helping people—hasn’t changed since 1844. Although credit union services have evolved to include things such as personal computer access, checking accounts, retirement savings, check cards, ATM cards, bill payer, statements, and safe deposit boxes, people are still achieving a better standard of living for themselves and others by pooling their savings and making loans to neighbors and co-workers.

At People First Credit Union, members have several common bonds: they bank where they own the place; they live, work, play, attend school, and do business in either Lehigh or North Hampton counties; and, the money they deposit gets loaned to neighbors and businesses in their own community. “We serve a small region, so deposits made here fund projects that are no further away than a 20 to 30-minute ride across Route 22,” says Tim Burke, a People First Research Analyst.

In a new economy, People First is a true community-based resource, contributing to the good of the whole “It’s highly likely that members and employees not only run into each other at the grocery store, high school football games, and farmers’ markets, but they also run into the CEO, Jeff Albert, a graduate of DeSales University, who has had deep ties to the Lehigh Valley since childhood,” says Burke, a graduate of Muhlenberg College, who has 20 years experience with the company.

Socially Responsible Investing

The Socially Responsible Investment (SRI) movement began nearly three decades ago among individuals who preferred to invest in alignment with their values and know that their money was working towards a future based on sustainability and the needs of multiple stakeholders, including shareholders, employees, their families and communities. SRI is a process that considers the social and environmental consequences of investments, both positive and negative, within the context of rigorous financial analysis.

Catherine Scheib has been an independent SRI investment advisor for 15 years. A trend-setter rather than a trend-chaser, she cautions those that seek to do business with socially responsible companies and organizations should not heed naysayers who steer investors away because they believe it's not a good financial move. On the contrary, according to Social Investment Forum Foundation's (SIF) 2010 Report on Socially Responsible Investing Trends in the United States, nearly one out of every eight dollars under professional management is involved in SRI, which can produce average to above average returns.

"Investor demand is growing for portfolio opportunities in clean and green technology, alternative and renewable energy, green building and responsible property development, as well as other environmentally driven businesses," says Scheib, who does business within the Lehigh Valley whenever it's practical. "When it's necessary I go outside for individuals who have the skill sets I can't find locally," states Scheib.

"The greater the diversity of the bio-community... the greater the community's resilience in times of crisis, its potential for creativity in the pursuit of new possibilities, and its capacity to adapt to diverse and changing local conditions," explains Korten. It appears that the Lehigh Valley has already begun the transformation.

Greater Lehigh Valley Chapter of Buy Fresh Buy Local, 610-438-3950. Visit BuyLocalPa.org/LehighValley

Sustainable Business Network of the Greater Lehigh Valley, 484-851-3910. Visit SustainLV.org.

The Cosmic Cup Coffee Company, 520 March St., Easton, 610-438-3211. Visit CosmicCupCoffee.com.

Lehigh Valley Health Network Community Exchange, 610-402-CARE. Visit LVHN.org

People's First Federal Credit Union, 2141 Downyflake Lane, Allentown, 610-797-7440. Visit PeopleFirstCu.org.

Catherine Scheib, 800-598-5075 or 570-713-9071.