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Buy Local Group: Think Before You Shop

The Capital Times :: BUSINESS :: 8B

Wednesday, November 16, 2005
By Lynn Welch The Capital Times

Forget the deep discounts and door busters. A coalition of locally owned businesses is asking for more than your money this upcoming holiday gifting season.

They're asking you to think.

"It's more than just dollars," said Rick Brooks, a University of Wisconsin-Madison program manager and co-founder in the Dane County Buy Local Initiative. "Following the dollars is what it's all about."

To promote independent merchants -- those at least 51 percent locally owned -- and the business districts where they cluster, the group of some 60 firms will gather at 9:30 a.m. Thursday at Johnny Delmonico's. There, they'll kick off their first holiday shopping promotion with speakers as well as music and pie. The public is invited.



"I think there are a lot of people who appreciate the idea, but don't necessarily know what is locally owned," said coalition member Peg Scholtes, owner of Capitol Kids on Carroll Street. "If they understood the impact, they would make a choice to buy locally."

The awareness-raising campaign will give local merchants more marketing pull this season. The buy local group will collectively publicize under the slogan, "Friendly Faces, Neighborhood Places" with window posters and other ads. The group itself also acts as a sort of independent business think tank, where members can network and share ideas.

"One of the things local organizations struggle with is their brand and how to present themselves to the marketplace," said coalition member Jim Bradley, president of Home Savings Bank downtown. "What a local business has is that sense of local flavor."

Madison is a perfect place for such a "buy local" campaign, Scholtes said because it's a place where people will think about where they buy things rather than always going for the deal at Wal-Mart. Similar efforts exist around the country promoting local commerce in Reno, Nev.; Austin, Texas, and in Michigan and Utah.

This push focuses on businesses throughout Dane County and seeks to educate people about how to maintain the area's economic vitality.

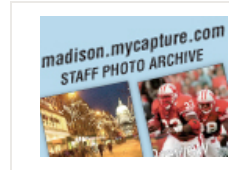
Here's their pitch: Each purchase made at a chain sends profits away from the community. When consumers choose to buy, bank, invest and work at local businesses, profits circulate around the community three to five times more than those acquired at chains.

That means a local shop will invest in the community more by doing business with other independents here. They're also more apt to give to charity, the group asserts.

Other benefits include creating a diverse business base that contributes to the sense of place here and reducing transportation-related environmental impact.

These factors have been documented by certain research done in communities by analysts at Chicago-based Civil Economics and explained by Michael Shuman in his 1998 book, "Going Local: Creating Self Reliant Communities in a Global Age."

When they get funding, Brooks said the Dane County group hopes to do a study with Shuman of buying local here. The author



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spoke last month to the group here, further forwarding their point that engaging in local commerce makes sense.

The message isn't necessarily that chains are bad.

"It's good to strike a balance between the two, because I think they can help each other," said Kris Grutzner, vice president of Downtown Madison Inc., explaining that in the downtown area, a chain store such as The Gap complements a locally-owned store like Little Luxuries.

For more information on the Dane County Buy Local Initiative, go to www.danebuylocal.com.

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