

"Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin" initiative gaining ground

By Jim Rosenberg

The broad topic of "sustainability" is something that is coming up often as people look for ways to protect the environment, use less energy and pay attention to the positive and negative impacts of their everyday activities on the communities they live in and beyond.

One area that is getting more attention is locally produced food. Billions of dollars are spent directly on groceries to feed more than 5.5 million people who call Wisconsin home, along with thousands of restaurants, schools, health care facilities and other venues where food is consumed. Most of that money leaves the state to food production facilities and areas far away from home. Retaining the value of that huge amount of economic activity is something that has caught the eye of some central Wisconsin legislators, including Stevens Point area Sen. Julie Lassa.

"The Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin initiative will shift 10 percent of the state's consumer and business food expenditures to foods grown by Wisconsin's producers," Sen. Lassa said. "Our goal is to improve Wisconsin's economy and consumer access to fresh, healthy food. The Buy Local, Buy

Wisconsin initiative will reduce the distance from farm to table as a result of individuals, local businesses, schools and other institutions purchasing more foods directly from Wisconsin farms." SB 89 has already earned unanimous approval in committee and a healthy list of state legislators from both houses and both parties have signed on.

One example of developing an effective distribution channel for locally produced food can be found in Wausau's Downtown Grocery, which has a strong connection to a local producer who co-owns the store. Moonshadow Farm is a family owned farm founded in 1990 and it has been certified organic since 1997. They grow 20 acres of 18 varieties of medicinal herbs and 10 acres of mixed vegetables. There are two large greenhouses for production of early tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers and summer squash. Harvesting of those items generally begins in May, but they also grow winter salad greens from October through April in the greenhouse. Moonshadow operates under something called Community Supported Agriculture. CSA is a social model designed to connect people to their



Wausau's Downtown Grocery is affiliated with a local organic farm that provides the freshest possible produce to its customers.

food, the land and those that tend the soil. Just like a summer farmers market, CSA allows consumer to place their food dollar directly in the hands of a family farm.

When local farmers sell directly to local consumers, they make more money because costs entering the system in between the farm and the buyer are greatly reduced or eliminated. Consumers get food that is fresher without the preservatives required when food has to work its way through a long distribution system, consuming energy and adding transportation costs along the way that don't add value to the products and can even detract. The bottom line is that buying local holds the potential to support the local economy more effectively instead than just leaving pennies on the dollar in the local community through the more common, large-scale distribution systems, according to people who are trying to encourage it. From honey produced by bees buzzing around your own county to maple syrup to meat, dairy, vegetables and more, it's a theme that is likely to get even more discussion going forward.



Economic studies show that by increasing the use of locally produced food items to only 10 percent in the state, Wisconsin could reap a windfall of benefits from increasing farm income to improving the environment.



Honey is one of many locally produced items that are available at summer farmers markets. Buying local keeps money in the local economy to be recirculated instead of sending it elsewhere.

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