

Localism or Yokelism?

Written by Laura Von Harten

As others before me have pointed out, shift happens.



Sometimes shift happens on its own, and sometimes people make shift happen. And if you can get enough people to go along with you – get their shift together, you might say – you can end up with some serious shift.

In the case of Charleston, people are trying to make some serious shift happen in the local economy. Specifically, they are attempting to generate a 10% shift toward local spending.

In other words, for every \$10 that you spend, they encourage you to make sure \$1 gets spent at a local business.

“They” includes an not-for-profit organization called Lowcountry Local First, which is affiliated with BALLE -- the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies. As ironic as it sounds, BALLE is an international network that promotes the enhancement of local economies.

Actually most of the BALLE network is in the U.S. The only reason you can call it international is that it includes some places in Canada.

Contrary to uninformed opinion, it’s not a fanatical fringe group whose members are all committed to exclusive localism (although some of them may be). Thousands of its members enjoy their morning cup of coffee courtesy of globalization. Although the coffee is likely to be the kinds that is organic, fair-trade, shade-grown and songbird friendly, which helps economies in other places.

So anyway, Lowcountry Local First is kind of like an alternative chamber of commerce.

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“They” also includes Charleston County Council, which has passed a resolution urging shift to happen. Here is a summary of what it says, minus all the whereases:

- A 10% local shift will create \$140 million in new economic activity
- A 10% local shift will create 1,600 new jobs and \$50 million in new wages
- A 10% local shift will create a multiplier effect, so \$3 will continue to circulate in the local economy for each \$1 spent locally.

The math on the last one is confusing, but pretty much it means that instead of hemorrhaging cash, we have a healthy local economic circulatory system.

Another reason Charleston wants shift to happen: Studies show that nonprofits get 350% more support from local businesses than from national entities.

Now you may ask, where do these numbers come from? And that’s legitimate, because a lot of these local economy studies come from places like San Francisco and Austin – places that are very, very different from the Lowcountry in terms of wages, educational levels, industrial development, politics, you name it.

The beauty of the numbers that are quoted up in Charleston is that they come from western Michigan.

West Michigan is also very, very different from the Lowcountry, but not as different as San Francisco and Austin are. West Michigan, according to some localists, is the epitome of middle America. It’s more like South Carolina and less like San Francisco when it comes to things like attitudes toward childbearing, churchgoing, coffee-sourcing and conservatism (social, ecological and fiscal).

So the numbers come from a highly-revered study that was commissioned by BALLE affiliate Local First Grand Rapids, and conducted by an entity called Civic Economics.

Local First Grand Rapids is a sister organization to Lowcountry Local First, and the study, Local Works! Examining the Impact of Local Business on the West Michigan Economy (September 2008) has become the go-to place for localism stats.

Civic Economics had already done some landmark studies – in “liberal” places – but after publishing the Michigan report Civic Economics they achieved some degree of international celebrity. They are frequently cited and, based on their list of works-in-progress, business for their consultancy seems to be booming. This despite the fact that for most of their clients, in what is yet another irony in this scenario, the contract with Civic Economics is not exactly a locally purchase.

So they are getting pretty popular. It's not at a point yet where there are tabloid photos revealing how much cellulite Civic Economics has when it wears a swim suit, of course, but this past summer they were the focus of an article in The Economist, Keeping it Local: A Rising Vogue for Shopping Near Home. Who knows what's next for them?

I for one would like to see them get a contract to do a study in the Lowcountry. Cellulite or not, they can bring their swimsuits. We will distract the paparazzi with delicious local shrimp.

But is localism overrated? Is it overly protectionist? Is it just another phase in the evolution of middle class consumerism? Are we going to end up being a bunch of local yokels who get fixated on our own precious region and shut out the rest of the world?

I don't think so. Many of us are well aware of our role in the global economy, and we recognize that there are some things that we desperately want that cannot be produced locally. Like coffee, chocolate, and the cheap, colorful consumer goods that are stuffed like candy into container-ship pinatas by our amigos in China.

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Yes, in this analogy American consumers are the ones wearing the blindfold and swinging the stick, but it's all in fun, right?

If capitalism in its current incarnation puts shopping malls, parties, home decorating and fashion up on a podium alongside factories, hard work, wisdom and thrift, it certainly can be further transformed to accommodate mindful consumerism without upsetting the apple cart.

About that apple cart: In keeping with this new globalism/localism ethos, the cart itself may be manufactured overseas -- but filled with local apples (or in the case of the Lowcountry, scuppernong grapes).

Because shift happens.

For more information on local economies, visit www.lowcountrylocalfirst.org.