

green house

by leigh melander

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To Market, To Market: Where Do My Dollars Go? *The Power of Buying Locally*

Buying local. What does this mean? The simple definition is spending my hard-earned bucks at the little guy's store down the street rather than the enormo-mongo-super store down the highway. It's about buying nails at the local hardware store, oranges from the local grower at the farmer's market, and getting my car repaired by the independent body shop around the corner from my house.

Why is it important? It may feel good, but if I trek down to the big box, I can save a whole \$1.37 on the gizmo that I can't live without. That may not seem like much, but it adds up. The only problem is that I'm not actually saving that buck pluså. None of us are.

Don't believe me? Then let me tell you a story.

I live in the Ojai Valley. Love it or hate it, Ojai has valley-wide done a relatively vigilant job of not paving the way (both literally and metaphorically) for the big box chains that have landed like enormous meteorites all over the US countryside.

We've got a pretty cool assemblage of small shops and restaurants up here, coupled with an iconoclasm that some would say borders on the absurd, and a strong entrepreneurial spirit. But we've got issues as well.

A couple of days ago I was speaking with a Ventura County staff member who was phone surveying residents of the valley on their perceptions of how things were going up here around sustainability issues. He mentioned that the biggest complaint he was hearing was about traffic – too many tourists were making the roads a nightmare.

Yup, the traffic is horrible. But the irony here is that the tourists aren't the problem. In the immortal words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy and it is us."

Traffic patterns in and out of the Ojai Valley indicate that most of the bazillions of cars (that's a rough number) that zoom up and down the hill are those of us who live here. We travel out to work, to play, and to shop.

Sure, the tourists add some to the chaos. But according to local business owners, who spend lots of time vying for tourist dollars, it's because they're the folks who are plunking down the vast majority of the dollars in our restaurants and stores. (In another moment of irony, those tourists trekked up here to escape the blandness of the chains in their own communities.)

But we, in our infinite wisdom, drive down the hill to buy our lumber and shoes and tools at the super stores. We've kept them out, but we need our fix.

So we help condemn other communities in Ventura County to sprawl, an ever-heightening battle over the use of open space, a tax base that ends up duplicating roads, sewers, police services, and so on. All in the land of the car: a typical big box store requires a thousand parking spaces and generates an average of ten thousand car trips a day.

That \$1.37 you saved? If it hasn't disappeared into the cost of gas, it will disappear into the cost of doing business with the chains. Enormous tax incentives are given to chains by municipalities and counties to attract them in the mistaken logic that they'll boost the economy by creating more minimum wage jobs – those are our dollars. Infrastructure costs, especially highways, explode so people and goods can get moved quickly in large numbers. Those are our dollars too.

And it forces us to commute to work. A study done in Austin several years ago tracked what happened to dollars that were spent at a book store chain versus a local store. At the chain, for every hundred dollars spent, only thirteen bucks stayed in the community. At the local independent, for every hundred dollars spent, \$50 stayed local. So what, you say? Well, each of those dollars that stay local get spent again in your economy – empowering other businesses, the tax base, employers and employees. If our money stayed local, we wouldn't all need to travel so far to work, for there would be business and employment opportunities in our literal back yards.

What does this have to do with greening your house? First, are you really building green if you're not supporting your local businesses? You can proudly point at your renewable resource flooring and your energy-efficient windows, but if you've bought everything at the discount chain, you've missed a wonderful opportunity to spread green locally – both greenbacks and green philosophy. And, ultimately, if your house is green in a howling wasteland of blacktop and megastores, are you really living how you want?

Some resources for you to check out:

Business Alliance for Local Living Economies:
www.livingeconomies.org

Going Local: Creating Self-Reliant Communities in the Global Age by Michael Shuman

The Home Town Advantage: How to Defend Your Main Street Against Chain Stores and Why It Matters by Stacy Mitchell
www.newrules.org

(Leigh Melander is a member of the Sustainability Council of Ventura County. You can find out more about their activities on their website, www.sustainabilitycouncil.org)