

HOME

By DANIEL STURM

It's Christmas Eve in downtown Lansing and Randy Glumm, owner of Way Station Books & Stuff, had expected to see dozens of last-minute shoppers. Like always, since opening his new and used bookstore on South Washington Square last October, there are free cookies and coffee on the table. Holiday jazz pipes through the stereo and the air is inspired by a light smell of incense. But although one can find the complete stories of Edgar Allen Poe and everything from poetry, sports and erotica to the history of Michigan's Finnish immigrants, at 10:30 a.m. I'm the only customer. Lansing's downtown shopping district looks like a ghost town. "Some shops aren't even open," Glumm says disappointedly. "I didn't expect this."

Daniel Sturm/City Pulse

Above: Randy Glumm, proprietor of Way Station Books and Stuff.

Below: Eastwood Towne Center Mall.

An hour later I am at the newly completed Eastwood Towne Center, at the intersection of I-127 and Lake Lansing Road. There's music here, too. Christmas carols hum over the mall loudspeakers, spreading a festive warmth into stores like the GAP, Starbucks, and Schuler Books and Music. The center's "new village-style setting" is the final touch, bidding shoppers to reject the phrase "chain store." In Michigan, there are only two other such "lifestyle and power centers." The idea was to create a shopping center that would attract anyone within a 50-mile radius, letting them exit the highway to buy whatever they wanted. "It will definitely be a boost for this area," Lansing Township Clerk Susan Aten claimed last summer, when the new mall was still under construction.

It's part of a trend American cities have been struggling with since the late '60s, some more successfully than others: Downtown local

businesses empty out, while national chains expand their thriving businesses outside of city limits. Residents begin driving their cars 60 miles or more to go shopping, environmentalists worry about increasing air pollution, City Council members worry about decreased tax dollars, and regional planners face an almost hopeless situation of urban sprawl. "I honestly think something really drastic has to change in the layout of the city, which hasn't been changed since the 1860s, before it will encourage, or act as a magnet, for more businesses and the arts," said Glumm. David Wiener, the assistant to Lansing Mayor David Hollister, admitted that the creation of another mall contradicted the proposed downtown revitalization. "However, this was the Lansing Township's decision, so this was out of our jurisdiction."

Some Lansing-area business owners would like to see the homogenizing tide of corporate consumption turned, and believe "going local" may be the answer. As the phrase implies, this counter-trend is about nurturing locally owned businesses who use local resources in a sustainable manner, employing local workers at decent wages, and serving primarily local consumers. "It means becoming more self-sufficient, and less dependent on imports. Control moves from the boardrooms of distant corporations and back to the community," Michael H. Shuman writes in his 2000 book, "Going Local: Creating Self-Reliant Communities in a Global Age."

There are signs that sustainable growth could be a growing trend for Lansing-East Lansing area businesses.

What is sustainability?

Shuman argues that increasingly, governance is driven not by any consensus within a community but by the region's most powerful corporations. "The City of Atlanta follows the lead of Coca-Cola, Houston accommodates Shell, Seattle is beholden to Microsoft. More and more communities in America have become Company Towns," he writes. For Mid-Michigan residents, this is a statement that sounds familiar.

Sustainable contacts

Residents

Shop organically

- East Lansing Food Co-Operative, Kerry Bair (517) 337.1266
- Foods For Living, John & Wilma Snyder, (517) 324.9010
- The Better Health Store, (517) 332.6892
- Growing in Place Community Farm, Roberta Miller, (517) 487-6467, www.geocities.com/siferry1/gip.htm
- Owosso Organics, Pooh Stevenson, (989) 725.3151

- Urban Options, Patrick Hudson, Energy Fitness Program (517) 337.0422,
- Capital Area Community Services, Weatherization Service, Dwane Griffus, (517) 393.7077

Business Owners

Join a sustainable network

- Business Alliance for Living Economies, Patricia Wood (517) 351.7033, (East Lansing)
 - Central Sustainable Business Forum, Eugene Townsend, (517) 204.4252, (Central Michigan)
- Buy Green Power, Energy Star
- Michigan Small Business Association, Mark Clevey, (517) 482.8788,
 - Urban Options (see above)

Links

- Michigan State University Office of Campus Sustainability, Terry Link, (517) 355.1751
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Enforcement and Compliance History Online
- U.S. Green Building Council, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification
- Sustainable Seattle, 40 Indicators
- Smartgrowthamerica, sustainable regional planning

New U.S. think tanks, such as Redefining Progress in San Francisco, are pressing to draw the measure of economic success away from such abstract indicators as the Gross Domestic Product, and in recent years governments throughout the world have begun to advocate “sustainable development.” The term was coined from the World Commission on Environment and Development, who in 1987 claimed it to be the new global goal for economic progress, defining sustainability as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Leading by example, Seattle’s Mayor Norm Rice took the idea of sustainability seriously when he entered office in 1994, advocating a Seattle Comprehensive Plan to manage the city’s growth over the next 20 years. “Sustainable Seattle,” which had begun as a volunteer network, developed a report of 40 indicators to measure the community’s long-term cultural, economic and environmental health. Aiming for a picture of the city’s overall well-being, the report included measures such as ethnic diversity, high school graduation rates, health care costs, and voter participation. The sustainability network organized workshops to train neighborhoods in the ideas and principles of sustainability. An Office of Environmental Management was organized for City Hall to internally

monitor its progress in areas like water usage, waste reduction, pesticide reduction, and energy conservation.

Community-friendly businesses

Lansing's largest industrial employer is General Motors. In 1973 there were 22,800 GM jobs. This number decreased to 20,000 in 1988 and sank to 10,500 jobs, where it remains today. Lansing's relationship to General Motors could be best expressed by a long list of tax breaks, benefit-packages, grants, and subsidies. In 2002, General Motors received \$140 million in tax abatements for its new factory. Founded in 1998, Mayor David Hollister's Blue Ribbon Committee has been praised as a success, but critics say catering to an international automobile corporation left the administration to often ignore the needs of local businesses.

What happens in Lansing is no exception. Today, more than 40 states offer property-tax abatements, loans for machinery and equipment, state revenue bond financing, accelerated depreciation, and special funds as incentives to keep big business.

Such a relationship forces municipal governments to place all of their eggs in one basket. The holistic concerns raised by a community sustainability network are placed on the back burner. Take for instance the issue of environment: Lansing's relationship to GM could be described as one of poisonous emissions. A new U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Web site, the Enforcement and Compliance History Online, allows citizens to find out which out of 62 listed industrial facilities are breaking environmental laws. The agency lists two Lansing facilities as a High Priority Violator under the Clean Air Act, one of which is the General Motors Lansing Car Assembly on Verlinden Avenue. The second is the Lansing Board Water and Light Eckert Station on Island Avenue.

Nearly 89,000 people live in a surrounding radius of three miles of the dirty GM automobile plant, and roughly 4,000 households have suffered from solvent odors, a diminished quality of life, and poorer physical health for decades. Westside neighborhood residents have been complaining about plant emissions, despite the fact that Hollister's Westside Air Quality Task Force's recently released reports that in essence called the odors "harmless." Recognizing the concept of sustainability would enable City Hall to retire this at times hostile relationship with community needs.

Offering ever-larger incentives for corporations is no solution, as Shuman argues in "Going Local." "In a new global economy, any community that attempts to hold onto corporations may have to pay a steep price. Notwithstanding the subsidies and tax abatements that fleece the local treasury, it must cope with the deterioration of

the local quality of life, as unions are busted and pollution laws are suspended to keep jobs in towns.”

Join City Pulse lunch on Going Local

Want to learn more about Going Local and how to create a more self-sufficient economy in Lansing? Join Berl Schwartz, the editor and publisher of City Pulse, for lunch (you'll order from the menu; sorry, there's no such thing as a free lunch) at Tripper's in Frandor at noon Thursday, Jan. 23. Schwartz will moderate a panel that will include Mark Clevey, vice president of the Small Business Association of Michigan; Patrick Hudson, director of Urban Options; Julie Sawaya, general manager of Woody's Oasis Bar and Grill; and Daniel Sturm, author of this article. Bake'N'Cakes, 3003 E. Kalamazoo St.. Lansing, is co-sponsoring this forum.

The River Rouge Ford plant in Dearborn, MI, is the first of its kind to utilize “green roof” technology.

GM's new investment, the proposed Delta Township plant a few miles west of Lansing, which is supposed to open in 2005 and bring some \$1 billion into the region, will receive tax cuts but will not become a major job engine. John Pearson, in charge of economic development at the Lansing Regional Chamber of Commerce, confirmed last summer: “It may not be 2,500 brand new jobs to the region. I think people employed by GM will move around within the system.” Last fall, the automobile company even announced the delay of its \$1 billion Delta plant until 2006.

In September 2002, the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission released its annual report, a quite pessimistic analysis of the region's economic status:

“There have been some nominal successes in attracting and retaining large regional employers, but that has barely made a dent in the steady drain of high quality jobs lost over the past ten years. Low unemployment, like that enjoyed by much of the country in the past, is not being compensated for with increased wages and the unemployment numbers are growing. ... Residential development frequently conflicts with commercial and industrial development.”

Chris Hnatiw, a Tri-County economic planner and co-author of the report, said that diversifying the economy was the biggest challenge for the region. She said she personally was very much in favor of a new sustainable master plan but believes the region has the reputation of being more reluctant to agree with concepts of a sustainable economy because of its strong emphasis on the manufacturing sector. “Sustainability is not a top priority — in any of the region's local governments.”

But there are new projects underway in the area, such as the initiative started by East Lansing resident Patricia Wood. Last summer Wood felt she needed to do something and co-organized a forum at Michigan State University's Center for Urban Affairs on the theme of "Turbulent Times." "I thought of the area businesses' struggle with a lot of the publicly held businesses and of how they were trying to get a foothold." Wood contacted activists from the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, a network operating in 18 cities in the United States, in support of "a living economy that works in harmony with natural systems, supports both biological and cultural diversity, and fosters fulfilling and enjoyable community life for all peoples."

A demonstration house for solar energy located in E. Lansing, MI.

The flier she distributed in downtown East Lansing attracted 15 local business owners to join in the first meeting. The flyer read: "[Sustainable] projects take many forms, from direct challenges to big box outlets to ambitious plans for an alternative stock market, but together they offer hope that we can overcome current development trends that suck all the resources out of our local communities and despoil the environment." One of the first people Wood talked to was Julie Sawaya, the general manager at Woody's Oasis Bar and Grill on Grand River in East Lansing, who's now a member of the steering committee. "I find that her business is very socially responsible and locally minded," said Wood. She pointed out that the franchise style was interesting, because it focused on business ethics in a unique way.

"We teach our own employees everything we know, and then franchise them out," said Sawaya. She herself left Woody's Trowbridge Road location in East Lansing, which opened in 1984, to start her own franchise in August 2001. And the franchise owner of the new Woody's in Okemos used to be Sawaya's kitchen manager. She said that so many times businesses lose quality when they expanded. "This way we can keep the quality and the standards."

Waste reduction, energy efficiency

For Mark H. Clevey, vice president of the Small Business Association of Michigan, sustainability is a clear economic goal: "If you are wasting dollars in pollution then you are not sustainable and are a bad investment." If the United States were as energy efficient as its Western European competitors, it could save about \$200 billion annually — that adds up to much more than the federal deficit.

Clevey suggests replacing plastic with bio materials rather than subsidizing old and “dirty” industries with taxes. “This would stimulate the agricultural economy in Michigan, and it would also make our products greener, and reduce costs” He believes local government should provide tax breaks for sustainable businesses, such as Lansing’s KTM Industries, which produces edible children’s arts and craft (so-called “magic noodles”) and corn-starch bio packaging. That would enable the city to attract new sustainable businesses and reduce waste. Currently, KTM’s natural toys are sold in 12 countries. “Watertown Township gave us a tax abatement to induce us to stay in the area,” said its president, Tim Colonnese. He said that no local government in the area offers a specific tax-break for sustainable businesses. When asked for ideas on strengthening sustainability in the area, Colonnese said the city or state could easily pass green taxes on plastic materials. The Canadian province of Ontario has a 10-cent levy on non-refillable beverage containers, and Finland, Norway, Denmark, and Belgium have successfully used eco-taxes since the 1970s for this purpose. “Right now we’re working with state Sen. Virg Bernero (D) to get some legislation done in Michigan,” said Colonnese.

Clevey helps churches throughout Michigan to find places where they can buy green power and energy efficient office equipment. “The issue is aggregation. The bigger the purchase, the more you can afford to pay for the more expensive green products.” Clevey assists getting smaller companies together with larger organizations, such as Michigan State University, to make joint purchases in order to reduce costs and waste.

Pat Hudson of Urban Options

The Small Business Association of Michigan also provides information on a federal program called Energy Star that is able to make homes 30 percent more energy efficient than a comparable home by following the Model Energy Code. Clevey said that today there is not a single Energy Star-rated building in Lansing. He said the city hasn’t adopted state-of-the-art energy conservation practices yet, Clevey said: “It’s lacking knowledge, has other priorities, and there doesn’t seem to be a clamor of citizens.”

In order to assess how much waste is produced, Clevey suggests implementing a mapping process called “ecological foot print,” which would study the environmental outputs of the local economy, land, air and water pollution. It would also analyze city permits and taxing policies, and find out whether the municipality encourages the destruction or restoration of the environment. “Nobody has done this yet, but the City of Lansing could easily do it,” said Clevey.

In the last three years, the 7,000-member organization, with its headquarters in Lansing, provided \$20,000 to explore sustainable business activities in the region. As a result of a conference in October, attended by 260 Lansing area businesses, a new group is forming called the Central Michigan Sustainable Business Forum. "There will be information available to Lansing area businesses on how to improve profitability by adopting sustainability practices," said Clevey. The group is following in the footsteps of similar organizations in Grand Rapids, Saginaw, and Southeast Michigan.

Did you know that a typical U.S. toilet, for example, uses five gallons per flush, while common new models in Germany use half as much, and those in Scandinavia one third? For private homes, the East Lansing-based nonprofit organization Urban Options offers what they call an Energy Fitness Program. For the last 12 years, they've remodeled the homes of 2,500 residents with lower and moderate incomes throughout Lansing to make them more energy efficient. In 2002, Urban Options fixed 237 houses, an achievement made possible by a grant from the City of Lansing's Planning Department. The results are impressive: Every household saves \$33.80 monthly just by insulating windows, doors, implementing water flow controls and exchanging light bulbs. The calculated water savings for all homes per year is 13,142 gallons, energy savings is 1,145,080 kWh, and there are 152 tons fewer carbon-dioxide emissions. "It's as if there were 85 fewer SUV trucks in Lansing now," said Patrick Hudson, who directs Urban Options. The organization's office building at 405 Grove St. hosts a library on sustainable issues. Moreover, it serves as a demonstration house for solar energy and environmental protection.

Organic foods, community gardens, local purchasing

Kerry Bair, the general manager of the East Lansing Food Co-Operative, moved from Seattle to Lansing area in 1987. "It was very hard for me to adjust to this landscape, because it was so flat and so exposed. It was so disconcerting to me that for a long time I felt very afraid, because there was no place to go. So I learned where every single place was with trees, within five miles distance."

Kerry Bair and Melissa Robbins of the East Lansing Food Co-Op
Bair said she took a job at the food co-op because she felt it was a crossing-point for people who shared similar values, and in 1992 she became the general manager. In Seattle she'd been a member of a meditation group and had also been involved in cooperative pre-schools and co-op food groups. She grew up in Colorado Springs, Colo., another hot bed of thoughtful regional planning. "I looked at

Pikes Peak every single day. I didn't even have to walk out of the house." It is probably no coincidence that sustainable planning originated in places where "you're so close to things that are too amazing on a physical level to not appreciate it," she said. But sustainable ideas were just beginning to spread in the Midwest.

After living in the Lansing area a few years, she'd located the best green places to walk in, realizing at the same time that tremendous expansion was still taking place. Especially in Meridian Township, a lot of new commercial developments were springing up. "I wasn't happy with this." She was amazed when she compared Lansing area developments with those in Seattle, a city whose face had changed little though its population had grown enormously. "Now I expected to go back and see that the things I care about were torn, ripped out, and had disappeared, but instead you see people living creatively and using space differently."

The East Lansing Food Co-Operative is owned by the people that shop there, today 3,000 members. "The idea is that people doing something jointly can do it in a better way than they'd be able to by themselves, individually," said Bair. Following this logic, no one benefits unless everyone does. In comparison with a firm owned by a small number of individuals, a community held corporation is arguably more responsive to the common good. There are more than 47,000 cooperatives in the United States, including 4,000 consumer co-ops, 6,500 housing co-ops, 12,600 credit unions, 1,200 rural cooperative utilities, 115 telecommunications and cable co-ops, and more than 100 cooperative insurance companies.

"Last year we bought a third of our produce from local farmers, which is pretty substantial considering that many of the stores around here buy one sixteenth from local farmers," said food co-op manager Melissa Robbins. She said that the co-op is committed to buying from local organic farmers as far into the fall as possible. Aside from fruit, during the summer months 90 percent of their produce is purchased from local farmers. The food comes from local growers within a 50-mile radius of Lansing.

Few communities in the United States today are self-reliant. We require oil that is brought in by truck, coal by train, natural gas by pipeline, and electricity that travels through expansive power grids. Food typically travels 1,300 miles before reaching the dinner table. The idea of a sustainable economy is to save resources through local production, distribution, and marketing.

Bair says more people today are aware of food and food sources, which she considers an educational success. But she thinks there is more work to be done. "The biggest risk we have now is that the last

small natural foods manufacturers are being bought up by major food corporations in this country.” Bair said that in this situation food co-ops are even more important, because “we’re small enough that we can actually buy from several different local farmers, whereas larger stores can’t.”

Pooh Stevenson

Richard Tylor

Pooh Stevenson and Richard Tylor, who run a certified organic farm in Owosso, in Shiawassee County, are two of 10 organic farmers who collaborate with the East Lansing Food Co-Operative. They have 12 acres of certified organic tomatoes, squash, cauliflower, broccoli, Swiss char, kale and peppers. In their winter production green house they grow spinach, spicy greens, Swiss char. “The greenhouses are unheated, it’s very low tech and we were one of the first people to do it,” said Tylor.

Urban farming is another concept increasingly endorsed by communities throughout the United States. Over the past 20 years, New York City has opened a thousand community gardens on public land and 18 public markets to sell their produce. In Lansing there’s a community gardening project run by the Mason non-profit organization, Growing In Place Community Farm. “They essentially provide anything that a home gardener would need to grow and raise their own food,” such as the seed, seedlings, hoses, tools, organic fertilizers, the space and the tilling, says Robbins, a volunteer. “They work with people who don’t have enough money to go to have the luxury of buying it.” There’s about 20 different gardens throughout the Lansing and East Lansing area, and people are assigned plots as close as possible to their neighborhoods.

Beyond self-production, one way to encourage eco-friendly consumption is to avoid plastic wrapping, containers, and bags. Goodrich’s Shop-Rite supermarket in Trowbrige Plaza in East Lansing offers a five-cent credit for every bag not used, a policy that encourages consumers to bring their own cloth bags or buy tote bags available near the counter. Unfortunately, this simple act is one most shoppers don’t consider, and not even all cashiers at Goodrich were familiar with the store’s bag credit policy.

As seen through the example of Seattle, city governments can support local purchasing. Lansing, like many other cities, has an ordinance stating a “preference for local bidders” who can offer an equal price. This policy has become the mantra of politicians wishing to support regional businesses. But for others, the point is missed. In March 2001, for instance, Mayor Hollister signed the Finance Department’s recommendation to buy most of the city’s coffee at

Interstate Gourmet Coffee Roasters in South Easton, Mass., replacing much of their purchase from the local Lansing roaster, Paramount, located on Larch Street across from Oldsmobile Park.

For a savings of roughly \$1,500 per year (just 3 cents per package), City Hall would let employees sip “Boston’s Best” rather than its own homebrew coffee and would ignore a local coffee roaster that has been in business since 1935, employing about 100 Lansing-area residents. Councilman Harold Leeman hadn’t found the city’s decision palatable. “We should do everything we can to purchase locally,” Leeman said. “It is sending the wrong message when we’re buying our coffee outside of state.”

Green building instead of Urban Sprawl

Back at Way Station Books & Stuff, Glumm is reflecting on mall culture in Lansing, a phenomenon that apparently contradicts all efforts to revitalize the downtown area. “Potential customers don’t realize that they park at the mall and walk miles sometimes from one end to the other. But here they can get within four square blocks,” he mulls.

Gene Townsend

Gene Townsend, called a “green builder” because he builds environmentally friendly homes, has a theory for why decisions are so often made in favor of urban sprawl. “One of the really characteristic things about Lansing is that people live fairly isolated lives for reasons that are maybe historical. It’s just the way it’s always been done here, just as people in Grand Rapids have always devoted more time to community activities,” said Townsend who contracts for Coulter builders in Okemos and is president of the Mid-Michigan Environmental Action Council.

In 2001, Grand Rapids embraced new planning principles by rewriting its Master Plan. The city held more than 100 public meetings to solicit comments, ideas, and opinions from local residents about planning, sprawl, and how land use could be improved. Among the ideas people recognized the right to exist in a healthy, supportive, diverse, and sustainable environment. Other participants stressed the need to design buildings and communities that have long-term value.

“They really identified the problem. Grand Rapids has the same advantages of Portland, Atlanta, and other places that have kept their downtown areas vital,” said Townsend. The green builder said he had a desire to find similar ways of knitting together communities of Lansing and East Lansing. Today, he is a board member

for the East Lansing Food Co-Operative and is a major actor in forming the Central Michigan Sustainable Business Forum. Townsend said a kick-off event is scheduled for February.

Hearing the award-winning Virginia-based architect William McDonough speak at last year's sustainable business conference in October at Michigan State University's Kellogg Center was a great incentive for him, the builder said. Last October, work began on McDonough's design for the green roof of Ford's new truck assembly plant in Dearborn. The first thin rolls of sedum, a water and heat-absorbing, low-growing ground cover, were being installed on a project scheduled to open in 2004: called the world's largest "living" roof, McDonough's design is said to cost roughly the same as a conventional roof but will last twice as long because it won't expand during the heat of the day and shrink at night. It will store 4 million gallons of rainwater, while eliminating pollutants that would ordinarily pour off the rooftop into the river. Skylights will fill the new vehicle plant with so much natural light that Ford engineers anticipate being able to turn off half of the interior electric lights during the day, saving nearly \$50,000 annually in energy costs.

"I think it's conceivable that General Motors could do something similar in Lansing, but it's not very probable to happen in the coming years," said Townsend. He believes that even larger area businesses will soon find "ways to do well by doing good," because increasingly only those who are very good at waste management, worker retention, and energy utilization will be profitable.

Townsend argues that endorsing sustainable development isn't difficult at all. The city of Seattle now develops all of its buildings with Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification, a green building standard set by the U.S. Green Building Council. The program focuses on five criteria: sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials selection and indoor environmental quality. It's just a matter of political choice: "Seattle has just decided to go in this direction, forward-looking, and accepting some increased initial costs. But typically, the paybacks on these investments are pretty quick."

Like many other local community developers, the green builder said it's regrettable that none of the area's city governments have adopted these state-of-the-art programs so far and says he won't go shopping at the new Lansing mall: "It's a horrible waste of the existing natural environment." Townsend suggests more deliberate decisions for Lansing's future, so that sustainable projects have a chance to grow: "The solution to all this is regional planning. There are places in this country that are a decade ahead of

Mid-Michigan in this regard. This means that individual townships are not competing with each other for development, that there's a master plan for the entire urban area, and that people really stick to it. It takes an incredible amount of political will to do that.”

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