Citizen Dave: Cities are doing it for themselves

by Dave Cieslewicz
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As the federal government continues to spin its wheels and state governments keep struggling with lean budgets, cities are starting to experiment with ideas about how to create local, self-sustaining economies.

That starts with local purchasing, keeping as many dollars in the community as possible. Every dollar spent at a local business recirculates in the community on average seven times before it leaves. Every dollar spent at a national chain leaves overnight.

One of the most effective things to buy locally is food. There's no better way to reduce your carbon footprint than to buy locally produced food because the cost of fossil fuel required to fly your tomato in from California is extraordinary. When you add it up for all the food your family consumes in a given week, eating locally is the single best thing you can do to fight global climate change.

In Chattanooga, Tennessee, a local foods group estimates that if that city were to get just 5 percent of the food it consumes from the local region (compared to only a half of a percent today) it would keep $100 million in the local economy every year. And people would eat healthier, fresher, better tasting food.

In Seattle, they've set a goal of getting 25 percent of their food from the local food shed. We need to do something like this in Madison as a matter of public policy. Already, we're a national leader in farmers' markets, community supported agriculture and community gardens. Now we need to add a community kitchen and a distribution warehouse. Setting a goal like Seattle's would help put individual initiatives in context.

But it shouldn't end with food. An especially exciting idea comes from Cleveland. The Evergreen Cooperatives essentially root jobs in the community by building cooperative, worker-owned businesses tied to large institutions that can't easily move from the city, like hospitals and universities.

One of the Evergreen coops, for example, provides a laundry service for area hospitals. Not only is it the greenest laundry in the area, but its workers are building equity in the business. Through payroll deductions of fifty cents an hour a worker can build a $65,000 stake in the business in eight or nine years.

A good story detailing the project was originally written for The Nation.

It was also the subject of a good discussion at last January's Mayors Innovation Project meeting. The MIP is a group of progressive policy-oriented mayors that was founded by the Center On Wisconsin Strategy's Professor Joel Rogers and myself.

These are only a few ideas of the many we need to build strong, resilient, locally based economies. Cities are perfect laboratories for progressive innovations like these. If the recent debt debacle teaches us anything it's that we can't rely on the feds to solve our problems or fix our economy. Cities need to do it for themselves.