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## Merchants buying into 'buy local'

### But some question focus of campaigns

by Kevin James Shay | Staff Writer

Carlos Aulestia, owner of Toy Kingdom in Rockville Town Square, embraces the city's "buy local" campaign that began late last year.

His fellow merchant across the street, Deborah Simon, owner of The Waygoose fine crafts gallery, which also has a shop in Bethesda, has yet to sign up as a paid sponsor. She cited the extra cost — \$25 for individuals who want to sponsor the program and starting at \$250 for businesses with fewer than 10 employees — while saying the initiative is a bit too narrowly focused for her company's needs.

As similar buy local campaigns spread throughout Maryland and the nation, with advocates saying they can help retailers who are struggling to survive during continued sour economic times, the two Rockville

merchants' differences underscore a lingering challenge of such programs.

Despite the recession, Rockville's campaign hasn't had too much trouble raising \$28,000 in the community to match the city's contribution this year, said Jeff Miller, board president of the Rockville Chamber of Commerce and president of the Coalition to Preserve Rockville Neighborhood Businesses. That coalition, comprising business people, property owners, city officials and residents, oversees the Buy Rockville program. The group has raised some \$33,000 from private sources, and the campaign is up to 68 paid sponsors, he said.

"We've had fantastic support," said Miller, who owns a Rockville Action Coach franchise. "In the beginning, we had less of a presence. But since we got the Web site up in June, that has been one of the deliverables we can bring forth. For a relatively small contribution, a business can benefit from a \$60,000 marketing campaign."

Other Maryland communities have launched similar programs in recent years, or plan to. Campaigns in Silver Spring and Wheaton are managed by the nonprofit Latino Economic Development Corp., whose mission includes aiding small businesses. One in Annapolis is a project of the Annapolis Sustainable Business Alliance, while the Baltimore program is under the Chesapeake Sustainable Business Alliance.

All of those campaigns are affiliated with the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, which has a regional office in Takoma Park. Since 2001, the group has helped form 75 networks in the U.S. and Canada, with 25 more in the works, said Alissa Barron, communications and network services director. There is also an affiliated network in France and interest in other nations, she said.

Frederick has long held events that encourage local shopping, such as the monthly First Saturday program. But the Downtown Frederick Partnership plans to launch a formal buy local campaign in November, said Kara Norman, executive director of the group.

Buy local a trend

Such campaigns are useful to retailers, said Janet Wagner, associate chairwoman of marketing and an associate professor at the University of Maryland, College Park.

"However, retailers have to be sensitive to the fact that buy local is a trend," Wagner said. "When it's time, they have to be ready to move on to the next trend."

While advocates cite studies that point to concrete financial benefits for merchants, the jury is likely still out on just how helpful the programs are, said Thomas S. Saquella, president of the Maryland Retailers Association, which supports the local campaigns.

"A number of them popped up last holiday season," Saquella said. "Most of them are an attempt by chambers of commerce and other business groups to help local merchants in a tough situation. ... Rockville has one of the more ambitious ones that I am aware of."

The retail association and other business groups — the Maryland Chamber of Commerce, the Chesapeake Sustainable Business Alliance and the Restaurant Association of Maryland — are supporting a program formed recently by WBAL-TV, the NBC affiliate in Baltimore, called Love Local Maryland. That program uses promotional messages to showcase economic and environmental benefits in supporting local businesses.

Some in the buy local movement view it as a campaign against big-box retailers such as Wal-Mart, though most steer clear of mentioning the big boys. Others note that the campaigns can backfire and prompt out-of-towners to stop frequenting stores in a buy local community.

Wal-Mart, one of the largest private employers in Maryland, has done much in the past two years to turn around its image as a deterrent to Main Street businesses with more community programs, Saquella said.

"People with the large retailers like Wal-Mart will say they employ a lot of people locally and use a lot of local contractors," Saquella said. "They don't see these buy local campaigns as a direct hit at them as much as at the online retailers."

#### Taking a broader view

The Waygoose owner Simon said she likes the broader focus of The 3/50 Project, a national initiative begun early this year by Minneapolis retail consultant Cinda Baxter. That program encourages shoppers to pick three independently owned businesses and spend \$50 a month at them.

"It's been growing by leaps and bounds," Simon said, noting that it is free to join the program.

The Buy Rockville campaign is free to join and be listed in the directory, said Charles Maier, a partner of Maier & Warner Public Relations. The Rockville firm was hired to direct the program's marketing and creative components, which include not just media advertising and the Internet site, but ads on buses, street banners and marketing at festivals. The Waygoose is among more than 800 retailers, restaurants and other businesses listed on the campaign's extensive Web directory.

Paid sponsors, however, get additional benefits, such as enhanced, customized pages on the Web site, participation in a customer loyalty program and promotion as sponsors at events, Maier said. The campaign is gearing up for the city's first Rockville Restaurant Week in early October. The Web site has had more than 350,000 hits since June, and businesses are getting referrals through the site, Maier said.

Not all who haven't joined as paid supporters balk at the sign-up cost or focus, he said. One restaurateur said his business was fine, and he didn't see the need for a campaign.

"Some [businesses] aren't as visible and know they need the marketing," Maier said, adding that recent sponsors

included an auto dealer.

Joining as a paid supporter was worth the investment, Aulestia said.

"They are working hard to increase awareness," he said. "It provides us with good advertising benefits."

But advertising in Rockville is like preaching to the choir, Simon said. Rather than "Buy Rockville," a better slogan would be "Celebrate Rockville," she said.

"Alexandria, Virginia, has a very active campaign, but they are not advertising much in Alexandria," Simon said. "People who live there are already sold on it."

The Waygoose started on Washington Street in downtown Rockville in 1993, but closed in 2004 to make way for the Rockville Town Square development. Simon moved the store to Bethesda and reopened another store in Rockville in 2007. But the Bethesda site has done better than the Rockville store, she said.

"The costs for the lease and everything else are about the same in Rockville as Bethesda," Simon said.

She and other local merchants, including Aulestia, are not happy about Rockville's plan to expand paid parking hours in garages around the square until 10 p.m. on weeknights and even charge to park on Saturdays. Bethesda and other areas in the county do not charge to park in garages on Saturdays, Simon said.

#### Guides, events

Buy Local Silver Spring released its own guide to about 200 local businesses in December, said Paula Sternberg, Local First program manager with the Latino Economic Development Corp., which has an office in Wheaton. There have been events, such as a block party in June that drew several hundred people, she said.

While businesses in downtown Silver Spring were offered a free listing in the first guide, this year's guide will charge nominal fees, Sternberg said.

Local First Wheaton actually started in 2007 in response to politicians who wanted to expand paid parking hours there. The campaign released a guide in May and conducts outreach at events. Some businesses were connected with clean energy buying groups that saved them money on their electric bills, a program the group is continuing this year, Sternberg said. She hopes to see increased visibility among civic groups and participation in more events, such as the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies' National Buy Local Week in early December.

Baltimore's campaign started several years ago and works on similar activities. Memberships cost \$65, and supporters are listed online. The Annapolis program, which costs \$100 for members that are listed in an online directory, began about a year ago.

Rather than simply promoting "buying" local, the larger idea is to become community stewards, Barron said.

"We recognize that we will rarely be able to buy everything we need or use from local independent businesses," she said. "But we are advocating that people first think local — look first for local and locally owned sources of the things they need and want — to maximize the impact of their daily actions and purchasing decisions."

Frederick's campaign plans to kick off with a Get It Downtown Challenge Week in early November, Norman said. The group is not planning a specific directory, but is identifying participants to be listed on the partnership's Web site, she said.

Members of the Rockville campaign have visited cities such as Frederick to learn from programs such as First Saturday, Maier said. First Saturday has attracted as many as 14,500 people to downtown Frederick, with each event generating an average of \$450,000 in sales at local businesses, according to a recent study released by the partnership.

"It took several years for them to build that up," Maier said. "They have a tradition established downtown with the county seat being in Frederick. ... Rockville has a bigger challenge since Montgomery County is more fragmented."

Still, gaining support for Buy Rockville among merchants has been easier than Eric Siegel thought it would be. Siegel is executive vice president of The Cohen Cos. and has helped solicit sponsors. His company owns Phillips Seafood Restaurant and The Legacy Hotel & Meeting Centre, both paid sponsors.

"We've been seeing a good impact," Siegel said.

The Rockville campaign has spurred local contacting opportunities among supporters, Miller said. Rockville Printing & Graphics, a founding member of Buy Rockville, provided the campaign with discounted printed services, and other members started giving the printer more business, Maier said. One business switched from its usual out-of-state printer to the local company and saved money, he said.

"It's helped create an environment where more Rockville businesses are getting orders from other Rockville businesses," Miller said.

'Buy local' Web sites

Buy Rockville, [www.buyrockville.org](http://www.buyrockville.org)

Buy Local Silver Spring, [www.buylocalsilverspring.com](http://www.buylocalsilverspring.com)

Local First Wheaton, [www.localfirstwheaton.org](http://www.localfirstwheaton.org)

Buy Local Annapolis, [www.buylocalannapolis.com](http://www.buylocalannapolis.com)

Buy Local Baltimore, [www.buylocalbaltimore.com](http://www.buylocalbaltimore.com)

Downtown Frederick Partnership, [www.downtownfrederick.org](http://www.downtownfrederick.org)

Love Local Maryland, [www.lovelocalmaryland.com](http://www.lovelocalmaryland.com)

Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, [www.livingeconomies.org](http://www.livingeconomies.org)

The 3/50 Project, [www.the350project.net](http://www.the350project.net)