



# Times-News

## Rebuilding A Sustainable Community

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David Weintraub  
ECO NOTES



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A couple of weeks ago, my family and I joined the Family Farm Tour coordinated by the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP.) It was a great experience meeting the farmers who produce our food and to learn about their sustainable practices. We met a cattle farmer who rotated his fields so that the grass could recover while insuring that the cows enjoyed a highly nutritious meal. Another used no chemical pesticides on his berry and vegetable farm. Still another grew his produce totally organically which included rotating crops each year, as farmers did a generation ago to allow the land to rejuvenate.

As exciting as it was to connect with our local farmers and enjoy the fruits of their labor, I was surprised to learn that little of our locally grown food is eaten by WNCers. According to Peter Marks, coordinator of ASAP's Local Foods program, only 6% of the food grown in WNC stays in WNC. The problem works both ways. Consumers too often buy their food from big boxes whose claim of "locally grown food" is more a bait and switch than a reality. On the other hand, I've spoken with more than one camp director who has told me their frustrations with trying to get local veggies for their campers. They ended up buying non-local produce because the local farmers they spoke with had already pledged theirs for cross-country shipping.

We have a wealth of tailgate markets and CSAs, but how do we incorporate more of our agriculture into the daily diet of *our* community. WNC and our nation have entered a period of sustained economic malaise with little end in sight. In addition to daily gloomy economic forecasts, energy costs are expected to rise steadily as decreasing supplies of oil and other fossil fuels become more costly to access. Since farmers who ship nationally and globally tend to use more pesticides, herbicides and fungicides which takes its toll on our water supply, it would seem to make sense to find a less expensive, healthier alternative.

I remember reading stories from the Great Depression of dairy farmers dumping milk in their fields and row farmers letting their crops rot in the fields because prices had dropped too low, meanwhile, homeless families just down the road were starving. Given our economic circumstances today, doesn't it make sense to find ways to unite farmer, family and community in a stronger bond? The jobs we save, the health we gain, the farms and environment we protect, might be our own.

The same problem can be seen in our downtown community. Many local businesses sell fine products produced by local artists and artisans, that cannot be found in malls and big box stores. However it's also true that prices downtown seem to cater to a wealthier clientele than the folks who live here. Part of the reason for these prices is that downtown landlords charge rents that harken back to better economic times. As the economy continues to falter and gas prices inevitably rise to new heights, one need not own a crystal ball to know that the tourist trade, particularly from beyond our region, will continue to take a beating. Is there a way to not only sell local products downtown, but sell them *to* locals?

Creating a community dialogue that ties together our economic necessities, our environmental needs and our future energy requirements in a world of shrinking resources is something we need to inspire between farmers, local storeowners and community residents.

Perhaps the greatest wealth our community possesses are our people. WNC has a rich agricultural history, a highly skilled workforce and a retiree base that includes some of the finest minds in the nation. There is nothing we can't create, produce or build. How do we put our minds to possibly our greatest challenge of all, to recreate a prosperous, self reliant community that can endure despite economic downturns and energy shortfalls? How we answer these questions could well shape our future for many years to come.

*David Weintraub is Executive Director of ECO, the Environmental and Conservation Organization, which is dedicated to protecting the mountain region's natural heritage. ECO can be reached at (828) 692-0385 or online at [www.eco-wnc.org](http://www.eco-wnc.org).*