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Commentary: The U.S. Sustain Green Exchange

By Willi Paul (07-03-07)

I was happy to have attended a chapter lunch meeting of BNI in San Francisco last week. About 20 professional people were there— passing business cards and working a vibrant prospect referral system. On their website BNI states that they are the largest business networking organization in the world that offers their members the opportunity to share ideas, contacts and business referrals—opportunities that the sustainability/green community needs more of and fast!

Of course, there are other business groups in this town—including the Rotary and the Chamber of Commerce. But what are these groups doing to tackle sustainability and environmental justice issues?

Plenty! The Berkeley Rotary Club, founded in 1916, is working on a series of community service projects (www.berkeleyrotary.org/projects.htm) while the local Berkeley Chamber (www.berkeleychamber.com) is now Certified Green and is working with Sustainable Berkeley (sustainableberkeley.org).

Across the country, other business networking groups are popping up. I recently clicked-up a discussion on Coop America's (www.coopamerica.org/cabn) listserv concerning a "Green Chamber of Commerce." But this thread proved to be off the mark.

What can we learn from other sustainable/green business networking groups?

BALLE (www.livingeconomies.org) envisions a sustainable global economy made up of local living economies that build long-term economic empowerment and prosperity through local business ownership, economic justice, cultural diversity, and environmental stewardship.

Sustainable Business Alliance (www.sustainablebiz.org) is an East Bay membership organization for companies who are committed to greater sustainability in their business policies and practices.

Boulder Green Building Guild (www.bgbg.org) is an association of building professionals dedicated to promoting

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healthier, resource-efficient homes and work places. They strive to advance the craft of green building; support environmentally-responsibility; and provide effective volunteer opportunities. Their vision is to empower people to build healthy, resource-efficient communities.

Chicago Sustainable Business Alliance (www.sustainablechicago.biz/about) is a network of enterprises and organizations dedicated to realizing the benefits of incorporating sustainability principles into their products, services, and practices. The Alliance provides the necessary resources, connections, and support for member companies to thrive.

What we need is a hybrid organization—let's call it the U.S. SustainGreen Exchange for now—that provides a green business networking/referral opportunity—not another educational lunch or activist shout. A business to business, member-driven vehicle to unite the old guard with the emerging sustainable business movement.

Not a website/listerv e-mail thing but a face to face, "swap cards and referrals," program that makes everybody money in the new economy. I am surely missing BNI's old fashioned face time and relationship building as I sit in front of my monitor and wait for customer e-mail in the hills.

The U.S. SustainGreen Exchange could be an incubator for mentors and trainees alike—a green egg chamber for the sustainability set.

We are the new old green guard. Can I get your business card?

Willi Paul is a Berkeley resident.

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