



Transition Boulder County...

THE PEOPLE BEHIND BOULDER'S TRANSITION MOVEMENT



By Ellen Mahoney

In 2005 Michael Brownlee and Lynette Marie Hanthorn heeded the alarms of peak oil and global warming and cofounded Boulder County Going Local, a nonprofit alliance designed to create more resilient, self-sufficient and healthier communities.

"Having had our "peak oil moment" through an intense period of background study, Lynette Marie and I realized that it wasn't sufficient to make changes in our own lives," Brownlee said. "We realized our local communities were highly vulnerable and needed to be prepared as well."

Brownlee and Hanthorn launched Boulder County Going Local (originally Boulder Valley Relocalization), one of the first relocalization groups in the U.S. The goals behind relocalization have been to tap into the local production of food and energy and to strengthen the local economy, rather than depending on carbon-based fuels and the global economy.

Over the years, the organization has been very active in Boulder, providing numerous workshops, presentations, and film screenings. They also produced a three-day festival/conference/expo in Lyons, CO, in 2007 called "A Renaissance of Local," that featured prominent speakers and topics such as a local living economy, post-carbon cities, local sustainability and slow food.

This summer Brownlee traveled to the U.K. and met with Rob Hopkins, the founder of the Transition movement and attended a two-day training program so he could bring back vital, inspirational concepts to Boulder County to help revitalize the relocalization work there and define Boulder County Going Local as the first Transition Initiative in North America. He also visited the original Transition Town of Totnes, England.

"The term Transition essentially means getting an entire community to take on the challenge of transitioning away from fossil fuels and becoming more resilient to shocks in oil prices, food prices, and economic instability," he said. "It strives to build greater community self-reliance, particularly with regard to food, energy, economy, transportation, and systems of care."

Brownlee said there is some sense of urgency around Transition Boulder County because peak oil is arriving far more quickly than government or industry had anticipated. The good news is that a great deal of work is being done right now in Boulder County. The remainder of this article profiles the people behind Boulder County's Transition movement—people who are making local energy, local food, and local currency a reality.

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Jim Welch Leads the Way for Local Energy

Jim Welch is a pioneer of positive energy. He is president of the Louisville-based Bella Energy, one of Colorado's original solar companies, and president of the Colorado Solar Energy Industries Association (CoSEIA), which represents the state's solar industry professionals and renewable-energy users.

As a leader in solar energy for nearly 30 years, he remembers the early days of the industry as a "back to the land," "counterculture" movement. Today his company is thriving and offers clean solar electricity, solar heating, and wind power energy solutions. During the past year, Bella Energy has installed more than 825 kW of photovoltaic panels that produce 1,238,031 kWh of clean, green electricity each year.

"Solar isn't cheap, but it isn't expensive. There's a certain amount of energy consumed in the manufacturing process, but typically that energy is paid off in the first year or two, so it creates more energy than is used to manufacture it," Welch said. He added that solar panels have no moving parts, so a fifty-year power source should require little maintenance.

With some 300 days of annual sunlight in Colorado, solar makes sense. But Welch points out that with the abundance of local coal, Colorado has some of the cheapest electricity bills in the world. "We're very close to the Wyoming coal fields, and Wyoming produces a quarter of all the coal consumed in the U.S.," he said. "Fifty trains of coal, 100 cars each, leave Wyoming every day."

Solar is a more competitive power source where carbon-based electricity is costly and there are no subsidies. Welch explains the Japanese pay 2 to 3 times more for electricity than we do in Colorado. "Solar competes on its own merits there." Here in Colorado, Welch says that utility rebates, renewable energy tax credits, and incentives help balance the equation so that consumers (residential and commercial) continue to turn to solar to help reduce dependence on fossil fuels.

Welch adds that most solar panels are currently produced in Germany and Japan, but he is encouraged with companies like the Fort Collins-based AVA Solar that work to produce solar panels locally at about one-third of the cost. He also sees promise with SmartGrid concepts and plug-in hybrid vehicles that work to optimize energy. "All the different power systems have to work in synergy," Welch said.



Jim Welch getting his hands dirty with a PV installation back in the day.



Sandy Cruz in her backyard garden.



Sandy Cruz—Local Food Pioneer

The 100-mile diet is even closer to home, thanks to the work of permaculture teacher Sandy Cruz, who created High Altitude Permaculture, a demonstration site located west of Boulder at 9,200 feet. Sandy teaches classes and workshops and provides solar greenhouse-design consulting; in 2003 she received the Boulder County Land Conservation Award for her work in the preservation of open space.

In 1994 Cruz earned a diploma of Permaculture Design from Australian naturalist Bill Mollison, who coined the term "permaculture" with colleague, David Holmgren during the '70s. The term synthesized permanent agriculture and permanent culture and became an approach to designing perennial ecosystems that mimic nature. "Permaculture is a great approach," Cruz said. "It's about observing nature so that we can understand and imitate nature, which can provide incredible abundance."

Cruz emphasizes the importance of creating sustainable, natural ecosystems that provide for the essential human needs of food, fuel, and fiber. "When we have these constructed ecosystems," she said, "we can leave a lot of nature in the wild. We want to add life rather than taking life, which is the current model."

Cruz lives on a steep, formerly eroded hillside. Over the years she created soil for a series of cascading terrace gardens that produce a wide assortment of vegetables, berries, herbs, and ground covers. She also built a small greenhouse that wraps around the southeast and southwest sides of her home, in what she calls a "bubble of warm air." There she grows an abundance of greens, two varieties of figs, and plants such as Cherimoya, a subtropical fruit, and yacon, a Bolivian, high-fiber tuber that helps regulate blood sugar. In addition, she keeps bees, drinks Rocky Mountain spring water from her tap, makes teas from local herbs, and dries many foods (especially peaches and greens) in her car, which she creatively uses as a solar food-dryer.

Cruz believes in the importance of local transitioning. "Right now, it's as if we live in a big feedlot," she said. "The water is provided from the tap; the food comes to the store. We just expect it to arrive, and it's disempowering." She added that humans aren't good at everything—and don't need to be—but they can be more self-reliant and depend on one another for help.

Recently Cruz was appointed to the Boulder County Food and Agriculture Policy Council. "My hope is that people will become more empowered with regard to food and this council will help them foster that," she said. "The next 3 or 4 years will be really crucial, and I still hold the vision that humans can enhance the planet. We can still use our intelligence to create a place where we and other species will thrive."



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Mark Menagh Creates a Local Currency

Mark Menagh, the executive director of the Boulder County Farmers' Markets (BCFM), has come up with an innovative and popular form of local currency. "We recognize we're not a cash society anymore," Menagh said. "We're credit and debit card people." But he realized the plastic transaction plan wouldn't work for local farmers who would need to have credit card machines, incur transaction expenses, and deal with paperwork.

"I felt that the Farmers' Markets had the potential to meet 80% of the food needs for people on a weekly basis," Menagh said. "But I feel uncomfortable asking people to bring all this cash to a public market."

Five years ago, he created \$1 coupons called Market Bucks designed to promote the market, attract customers, and increase sales. As the farmers got used to accepting the bucks and depending on reimbursement, Menagh revised the Market Buck value. "I've set my Market Bucks currency in \$20 increments," he said. "You buy a \$20 booklet and there are four \$5 coupons in each." Average transactions are now about \$60, so customers are buying about three \$20 booklets at a time.

The bucks are purchased at the Boulder County Farmers' Market information booth. Customers can buy them with credit and debit cards and then use them at the various stands. They get regular cash back in change from the vendors.

"We've seen people buy \$500 worth of Market Bucks all at once, knowing that they'll be back on a weekly basis," he added. "Every single vendor at both markets, including fine arts and crafts vendors, will accept Market Bucks."

It's also a plus for Menagh, who said he'd lose money if he had to handle a lot of small credit card transactions. "This year we're going to do between \$600,000 and \$700,000 of Market Buck sales and a little under \$4 million in total sales for both markets." With this volume, credit card fees end up being about 3.5% per Market Buck sold.



If you are inspired by these stories and want to learn more about how you can get involved in the Boulder County Transition Movement, contact Boulder County Going Local at 303.494.1521 or info@bouldergoinglocal.com. You can also visit the Boulder County Going Local Web site at www.bouldergoinglocal.com.

Menagh absorbs the Market Buck transaction fees as part of his advertising budget.

"People carry around these Market Bucks with our logo and promotion on them," he said. "They put them in their wallets, and they're like little flyers." He also accepts food stamps and WIC (Women, Infant and Children) coupons at the markets (both available in \$1 increments). He considers them local currency as well.

He says he's thrilled that local restaurants like the Boulder Dushanbe Teahouse and The Kitchen have started to accept Market Bucks, and he's delighted when customers give them as tips. "I believe we need to transition from a global, subsidized redistribution of wealth from a federal standpoint and learn how to redistribute our wealth from a local standpoint," Menagh added. •



Mark Menagh shows off his Market Bucks.

21% of Boulder's greenhouse gas emissions comes from home energy use.



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Want to see what it would take to get all of the City of Boulder's existing homes to net-zero carbon emissions by 2030? So do we! The Boulder Energy Project is a community service of Jim Logan Architects, in collaboration with the National Renewable Energy Lab, the City of Boulder, and the Boulder Green Building Guild. Whether you rent or own in Boulder, we need your Xcel Energy Records and some basic information about your house to help us profile the energy use of Boulder's different house types. If you would like to be part of our statistical sample, or one of our energy retrofit case studies, please visit the website below.

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