

## Not Your Father's Chamber Of Commerce

The Greater Iowa City Area Chamber of Commerce is essentially a group of old, white businessmen...and their fathers.

That was the general perception when I was growing up in the 1960's, but a lot has changed since then (it even has a <gasp> woman CEO). My current opinion of the Chamber is probably biased - I have been serving on one committee or another continuously since 1980.

Over the years, the Chamber has developed a decision-making process that is driven from the bottom up – almost all of the stances taken by the board of directors originate at the committee level. I've always felt that its positions and actions have consistently been in the best interests of the majority of its members – small businesses.

A good example of this is the Chamber's annual Connections event, which you-all are invited to and will take place this Tuesday at the Coralville Marriott Hotel and Conference Center from 4 – 7 p.m. It's free, and open to the public. It's a mini-trade show that provides an inexpensive way for area businesses to showcase their products and services with the business community and the public.

This year's theme at Connections is "Buy Here," which is an initiative that the Chamber will be kicking off at this event. It's patterned after a successful program in Des Moines that highlights the economic impact of choosing to spend your dollars within your own community. This is not as deathly dull as it sounds.

I'm delighted to be helping with it - I've been banging the Buy Here drum seemingly alone for quite a while. It was the topic of my first column for the Press Citizen's Writers Group (it was called the Contributor's Board back then), published on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1993.

I have written several more columns on the same topic since then, all commiserating that some people feel compelled to purchase from what they perceive to be the least expensive source – no matter where. I affectionately refer to such people as "bottom-feeders," no offense intended. I have previously speculated that these folks would buy a box of shotgun shells from Osama's Online Ammo Dump if they thought they could save a nickel.

As part of the Buy Here campaign, the Chamber will be formally asking businesses and local governments to take a look at their purchasing habits and pledge to shift just five percent of their out-of-area purchases back into the local community.

Some may consider a buy-local campaign to be self-serving (it is!), but I prefer to view it as community-building. Spend a few minutes reviewing the economic impact report, and you'll see that the science behind the theory is compelling. ISU economist Dave Swenson generated the statistics for the greater Des Moines area initiative, and was persuaded to perform one for Johnson County as well.

He estimated that a 5% shift from non-local to local vendors could put over \$95 million (this is not a typo) directly back into our local economy each year. As this money moves through our community it multiplies, and could result in \$149 million in overall economic impact.

That would mean new jobs, business growth and expansion, improved public services, better streets, parks, and schools...even startup businesses based on newly-identified needs. And all of this occurs without having to pay corporate welfare to attract major employers to locate here.

The chamber defines "local businesses" as ones who have facilities here – they pay property taxes and employ your friends and neighbors. For example, I might shop at the Eddie Bauer outlet at the Coral Ridge mall, but I won't order anything from their catalog via an 800 number – dollars you spend that way leave our community forever. Better yet, buy your outdoor stuff from stores like Active Endeavors or Fin & Feather – they're locally owned.

For practical reasons the Chamber doesn't distinguish between local businesses and locally-*owned* businesses, but I do. If a business is locally-owned, its profits end up in the local bank instead of being wire-transferred to God knows where in less time than you can say "guaranteed low prices."

I also prefer in-town businesses to out of town, in-county to out of county and in-state to out of state. Once your dollar hits the Iowa border it ceases to exist, from a local economic impact standpoint.

But don't take my word for it. The complete economic impact study – and more information about the Chamber's Buy Here campaign – can be found at [www.buyherejc.org](http://www.buyherejc.org). Do us all a favor and check it out.