

Fair Trade Towns:

Communities with vision

BY SARA STENDER AND DAVID FUNKHOUSER



In the small town of Media, Pa., the idea of “making a difference” has long been cultivated. In July 2006, Media declared itself the first Fair Trade Town in America, committing to promote and expand the model of fair trade throughout its community of some 7,000 citizens. The local food co-op has been a leader in Media’s fair trade campaign, and fair trade certified cocoa, coffee, tea, bananas, and many other products with fair trade certified ingredients have been steadily rolling on and off the shelves.

Meanwhile, the concept of fair trade is spreading through local businesses and organizations, all with the strong support of the Borough Council. Several new businesses have opened, one a fair trade coffee shop and the other a fair trade retailer selling artisan crafts and gifts. Awareness of fair trade has multiplied, and in September 2008 the Fair Trade Town Committee will sponsor the first grand fair trade concert of local and international musicians, intended to become an annual event.

Following the example of Media, six other cities in the U.S. have gained fair trade status: Brattleboro, Vt.; Amherst, Mass.; Northampton, Mass.; Milwaukee, Wis.; Taos, N.M.; and San Francisco, Calif.

How did the Fair Trade Towns movement begin?

It was the small town of Garstang, England, the world’s first Fair Trade Town, that inspired the initiative in 2004. Today, more than 350 towns have earned the title in the U.K. alone, while Wales has advanced to become a Fair Trade Nation. There are nearly 500 Fair Trade Towns throughout the world, with a total of seventeen nations participating in this innovative and exciting international movement. In October 2007, Fair Trade organizations and activists in the U.S. developed a formal way of recognizing the achievements involved in becoming a Fair Trade Town by officially launching the campaign known as Fair Trade Towns USA. Fair Trade Towns seeks to mobilize local communities to create a deep commitment to fair trade by promoting consumer involvement in fair trade, educating children and adults about the producers who grow and make the things we buy, and

encouraging local governments, businesses, schools, faith-based groups, and other organizations to adopt and support fair trade.

What is required to become a Fair Trade Town?

In the U.S., becoming a Fair Trade Town, City or Community represents five accomplishments:

- A local diverse group of advocates launches the initiative and carries it forward, serving as a steering committee.
- The local government body supports the effort officially by adopting a resolution, ideally including a procurement policy.
- Local businesses offer a range of fair trade products for sale, including products certified by TransFair USA and products sold by members of the Fair Trade Federation.
- Local organizations (e.g., educational, faith-based) serve and/or sell fair trade products.
- Local media coverage serves to represent public recognition and support of the effort.

Once the goals have been met, a town or city can be designated a Fair Trade Town (or City), and this often serves as an effective platform from which to increase education and awareness. More information is available at www.FairTradeTownsUSA.org.

Some Fair Trade Towns committees have chosen to include procurement policies in the resolutions they propose and to promote values that they hold regarding conscious consuming and ethical purchasing in addition to fair trade. Many fair trade activists support organically and locally grown products and have partnered with local co-ops and farmer’s markets to sponsor awareness-raising events and promote fair trade products. Some campaigns, such as those in Brattleboro, Northampton, and Media, are even using the motto “Buy Local and Buy Fair,” emphasizing that their work is about supporting both international and local producers.

How can cooperatives and other businesses get involved?

In addition to the seven Fair Trade Towns in the U.S., there are close to 40 other local initiatives and groups working to grow fair trade and educate their communities. The first step to starting

a campaign is to form a steering committee, ideally representing the community, coming from the following sectors: business, education, faith-based, government and non-profit.

A cooperative plays an important role wherever it is located and is well-positioned as a community hub to educate consumers to choose wisely. It is a place where events might be held for shoppers, such as tastings and informational tables. The Brattleboro Food Co-op features producers-of-the-month (one local and one from a fair trade community in another country), includes an article provided by the local Fair Trade Towns committee in its monthly newsletter, and sponsors weekend tables with information and samples of the products that come from the featured producers. The co-op also is represented on the committee by an employee who attends the monthly meetings and participates in outreach and events.

Where are we headed?

Fair trade products have made great market inroads in the U.S. during the past five years, and cooperative stores and businesses have played a key role in bringing that about. Consumers who think about their purchases (Where did this item come from? Who harvested it? How was it grown?) are participants in a growing movement of “conscious purchasing,” and fair trade plays an increasingly important role in that movement.

But getting products on and off the shelf is only part of the picture. Fair trade offers an opportunity for consumers not only to change consumption patterns but also to make a difference in the lives of farming families and workers around the world. The benefits of fair trade mean improved living and working conditions for producers and workers, more opportunities for education and training, better care of the land and environment, and greater dignity and pride. The goal of the Fair Trade Towns Campaign is to make *fair trade* a household word, to motivate consumers to use their buying power to help change the world, and to build the global and local connections that inspire individuals and communities to care for each other and for the earth. ■