

Reply to "Tear down the trade walls"

Free trade undermines our local economy and long-term security

By Jason Bradford

I want to thank the Willits News for printing the article "Tear down the trade walls" by Sheldon Richman of Fairfax, Virginia. Like a vaudeville villain, he makes the perfect foil for arguments against free trade.

One first has to realize that free trade equals "globalization," meaning the integration of world markets. The symbolism of walls is important here, because as freedom-loving people Americans naturally abhor the idea of being confined. So why should we not open up and trade with everyone? It's only fair, right? And it benefits us too. Who doesn't love those cheap widgets from China and electronic gizmos from Japan and Korea? If it is cheaper, we can afford more, and in our culture more is better. And isn't it great to have so many varieties of products to chose from? Endless variety makes life more interesting, doesn't it?

History has shown that benefits of free trade as described above accrue in the short-term, but cause long-term damage to local economies. Free trade is like an addictive "itch." Scratching it is almost irresistible, but not really a good idea. Local communities that were once relatively stable and self-reliant are now swamped by cheap imports and have lost their economic security, becoming slaves to the whims of a global market.

To understand what I mean, it helps to have some concrete images. Let's imagine a good road to a small village is built, and now cheap bread arrives from a large city bakery. Because it is cheaper and shoppers opt for the short-term benefit of low cost bread, the small town baker goes out of business. However, now the local miller goes out of business too. The local farmer follows this. A downward economic spiral ensues, so people move away and the schools close. So does the post office. A near ghost town develops but there's a great road to it. Since land prices are low, wealthy people from the city buy vacation property. A new service economy forms with low paying jobs. The old, proudly independent and secure community is gone, but for a short while people had a greater variety of bread at a lower price. Processes akin to this have happened and are happening all over the world. The World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the Global Agreement on Tariff and Trade are now rightly despised because these institutions promote policies that have a proven record of failure, over and over again.

Few who read The Willits News are completely unfamiliar with the efforts of Willits Economic Localization (WELL), the goals of which are diametrically opposed to those of Mr. Richman. But I suspect the reasons behind these efforts are unclear to many.

To explain WELL's mission, I must step back and compare the worldview, or assumptions, inherent in the goals of Mr. Richman versus my own. Beyond the negative effects of free trade on locally self-sufficient economies as described above, Mr.

Richman's perspective ignores the environment in two major ways. First, globalization requires an endless supply of resources to be transformed into consumer products and transported anywhere in the world; and second, the waste and pollution caused by these economic activities can be handled with no trouble by the planet's ecosystems. By contrast, anyone aware of the finite supply of fossil fuels, the concept of "Peak Oil," or the now skyrocketing prices of basic raw material commodities in general, realizes the error in assuming no resource limits exist. And anyone familiar with global climate change, mass extinction, mercury contamination of ocean fish, acid rain, thinning of the ozone layer, etc., knows that pollutants from the human economy damage the ecosystems of the Earth in ways that damage the health of people. In Mr. Richman's economy, humans are completely divorced from Natural systems. As a biologist, I see the human economy as imbedded squarely within, and dependent upon, Nature. Therefore, I consider it unwise to "bite the hand that feeds" us, and that "hand" is *not* the "free hand of the market."

Economic localization does not say that markets do not have a role. On the contrary, markets are essential for allocating resources and products. But they must be restrained by social systems that value community stability and understand the basic laws of physics and ecology, especially entropy and food webs.

Economic localization aligns us with our core values. To localize our economy means acting responsibly by lowering our fossil fuel use and producing food and products in ways that don't pollute. To localize our economy means putting our amazing local ingenuity to work, finding "those better ways" and appreciating all the creativity and world-class talent here in Willits. To localize our economy means enhancing our security by ensuring we have a supply of food and energy not dependent upon oil wells in the Middle East or grains from the mid West. And finally, to localize our economy means to strengthen our community by realizing how we are interdependent, not just as friends and neighbors, but also as true economic partners.

If we want a future of freedom and peace, economic localization is the way to get there.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Jason Bradford has a doctorate in biology and is co-founder of Willits Economic Localization. He's a proud Willits resident.