

## New programs promote local buying



Joshua McKerrow — The Capital

At A Cook's Cafe in Parole, Anne Pershall picks up a box full of locally grown goods from cafe owner Craig Sewell and his daughter, Sarah.

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Chain stores are plentiful in Annapolis these days.

But for those committed to buying local, there are a couple of new options to buy fresh fruits, veggies and other goods.

Following a growing national trend, a group of 20 area businesses has joined forces in the Annapolis Sustainable Business Alliance to promote the idea of buying local first.

The group recently launched a Buy Local campaign to tout the benefits of buying close to home, which they said keeps money invested in the community, helps the environment and emphasizes what's unique about the region.

Merchants participating in the effort will have a window decal posted on their stores within the next two weeks, organizers said.

Separately, A Cook's Cafe off Bestgate Road

recently launched an initiative to link area residents with some of the best farm products the region has to offer.

Customers can purchase baskets full of locally raised and grown food through the market basket program started by the shop in April.

"It's truly recognizing the sustainability of our food systems," said A Cook's Cafe Owner Craig Sewell, who also serves as the alliance's president. "We need to start eating closer to home."

To join, customers pay a \$110 administrative fee. After that, you pay \$380 for 21 weeks of fresh veggies and fruits directly from a local farm.

The produce comes from the basket initiative's community supported agriculture program.

Mr. Sewell said the baskets are filled with enough food to feed two people and can be picked up on Monday or Saturday afternoons. They also come with recipes with helpful tips on how to prepare items such as locally grown beets.

Locally produced eggs, cheeses and pasture-raised chicken can be added to the baskets for an additional fee. Customers can pick from 50 items listed in an updated e-mail Mr. Sewell sends out each week. Pasture-raised veal - not the kind raised in a cage - also is available along with special seasonal deals on items such as apples and peaches.

Mr. Sewell said 100 families currently are signed up for the market basket program. He's also starting sign-ups for next season's basket program that begins Dec. 8. Customers must be enrolled by Oct. 1.

Mr. Sewell said he expects to increase the market basket program to 200 families.

The alliance and basket programs are taking root as the buy-local movement continues to grow.

Anne Arundel Medical Center and the Baltimore Washington Medical Center are also featuring local food in their hospitals through Sunday.

"It's not just here, it's all around the country," said Tom Saquella, president of the Maryland Retailers Association, said of the trend.

Local merchants are taking advantage of that trend as concern for the environment grows, he said.

"It's really marketing 101," he said.

The Annapolis Sustainable Business Alliance is the 61st network of the San Francisco-based Business Alliance for Local Living Economies started in 2001. Mr. Sewell said his group applied to become a new network, formed a 501(c)3 organization and began meeting in a back room at the Tsunami sushi restaurant in Annapolis.

The group now meets at a conference room in Maryland Hall, Mr. Sewell said. An alliance Web site also is up and running. The group is planning to increase membership to 100 businesses this year, he said.

To join, alliance business members must be at least 51 percent owned by someone who lives within 50 miles of their business, Mr. Sewell said.

Organizers said the alliance is especially important at a time when the Annapolis mall is expanding and the new Annapolis Towne Centre at Parole complex is set to open this fall.

"We need as a group to be able to emphasize to our customers and all potential customers, that local business ... is actually the fabric of this society," Mr. Sewell said.

Cathy Durkan, alliance vice president and owner of Mixed Greens, a downtown store that carries recycled goods, said the group's goal is to encourage local purchasing, which supports local jobs and cuts down on transportation and packaging.

Small towns used to be the economic hub of an area, she said.

"If you had a farm, you would come in and buy your clothes," she said, adding that today that is no longer the case. "People don't think twice about driving to the mall."

The purchasing of local goods can increase traffic to the Annapolis area, providing more business for locally owned stores and chain stores alike, she said.

Mr. Sewell became involved in the buy-local movement after a tainted spinach scare struck the nation three years ago.

"It made me actually realize, despite buying organic or whatever, that we have seriously lost control of our food chain in this country," Mr. Sewell said.

Today, he said he has business arrangements to purchase goods from local farms such as Springfield Farm in northern Baltimore County, and Eastern Shore farm Davon Crest, the produce provider for his market-basket program.

Mr. Sewell said the local produce and meat brings back the way food tasted a couple generations ago.

"The American palette in my opinion has been dumbed down over a number of years," he said. "They've forgotten what a real carrot tastes like."