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## Eric Hartley: Shop local - for Christmas and beyond

Davidsonville

By ERIC HARTLEY Staff writer

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I know, I know. It's so tempting to do all of your Christmas shopping at Target, since they have everything - or, better yet, on [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) so you can browse the offerings in your pajamas and not even leave the house.

But assuming you are going to venture out into the cold and brave the crowds for at least some of your shopping, you might just find that buying from a locally owned store makes you feel a little better.

And you'll probably find cooler presents, too.

Supporting local owners is an appealing idea, and it gets a lot of ink. If you did a poll, very few people would oppose it. So why do most people still seem to end up at the mall?

"So many people seem to value the local businesses in principle, but not in practice," said Janice Holmes, co-owner of the Annapolis Bookstore on Maryland Avenue.

Going to the big stores is the path of least resistance.

"Can it be more time-intensive to shop and make sure that your shopping choices are local? I think, yeah, it can be," said Craig Sewell, owner of A Cook's Cafe in Parole. "But I think the benefits to a community and the sustaining of businesses that are invested locally are quite profound."

Mr. Sewell is president of the Annapolis Sustainable Business Alliance ([annapolisfirst.org](http://annapolisfirst.org)), a 30-member group formed in July that's hoping to encourage people to buy local by demonstrating the benefits in concrete terms.

Mr. Sewell cited a study showing that 58 cents of every dollar spent at a locally-owned store stays in the community, as opposed to 14 cents of a dollar spent in a chain store.

Given the state of the economy, this will be a particularly touchy Christmas season for many local merchants. But "buy local" is a year-round movement.

In Anne Arundel County, downtown Annapolis is the most obvious destination for locally-owned stores. But there are local businesses everywhere, from Severna Park to Jessup to south county. In fact,

Mr. Sewell has been meeting with people from south county interested in starting a similar business group.

It's not that malls or department stores are bad; they have their advantages (like convenience and selection), and the idea of people abandoning them is neither realistic nor desirable. After all, even big malls have some independent merchants.

But if you don't already, you should consider balancing those trips with some to smaller, independent stores.

The Annapolis alliance, an affiliate of the national Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, defines "local" as an establishment at least 51 percent owned by someone who lives within 50 miles and makes all the major purchasing and marketing decisions.

"Local" can have a broader definition when it comes to food, encompassing farmers in Southern Maryland or on the Eastern Shore.

Noting that buying local takes more effort makes it sound like homework, something you're supposed to do. But it's actually fun.

Shopping recently at the Annapolis Bookstore, I found some quirky presents I wouldn't have found anywhere else (I can't say what they are, lest I spoil the surprise), and Ms. Holmes' co-owner, Mary Adams, gave me some advice on books for my nieces.

"We're like the bar that everyone knows your name. We're the bookstore where everyone knows your name," Ms. Holmes said. "People really respond to that, yet we can't afford to compete (on price) with [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) or even Barnes & Noble."

Mr. Sewell said many people find they feel a little jolt of pride when they buy local; they know their dollars are going to people who are more likely to spend locally themselves. And once they start, it becomes a habit.

The seemingly sudden appearance of all these articles about the "local food" or "buy local" movements can make it seem like this is some kind of new fad. But, as Mr. Sewell pointed out, it's just the opposite because it's a return to tradition.

"Shopping locally is the way your grandparents or great-grandparents did it," he said. "It's nothing new. It's just a reconnection with the way things were."