

Local job crisis? We can change that

Craig Spjut/My Word

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The word “local” can call to mind different things.

Take for example, “Think globally; act locally,” which is about individual action at the community level making a difference at the global level, particularly, when individuals unite with others and act for a common purpose.

In my job, I answer the phone with, “United Association Local 290, Plumber and Steamfitters.” Local in this phrase goes back 110 years when a group of plumbers and steamfitters, living in Humboldt and Del Norte counties, got together and organized a local charter as part of a larger organization that began shortly after modern plumbing was invented. The number 290 represents our jurisdiction, which includes parts of California, Oregon, and Washington.

Recently, I attended a town hall meeting with Sen. Wyden in the Coos Bay area. Sen. Wyden spoke about various topics but was particularly excited to tell the story of a “local” entrepreneur from Coos Bay who now employs 15 people, a brewery facility built by the local people of Coos Bay. As the senator was talking, a contractor, a Local 290 signatory contractor who was standing next to me, whispered to me that his construction business did some of the work on the facility.

After the meeting, I decided to check out this facility. Arriving a few minutes before doors opened at 4 p.m., a local artist was working on a mural for the new building. Once the doors opened, the place filled quickly.

As beer was being poured, I noticed that a number of patrons were not paying for their beer; instead the bartender would check their name against a list. It was explained that the list has 300 names of people who each gave the owner \$100 to help build the brewery. In return, the investor gets to come to the brewery twice a week on Wednesdays and Sundays, for a year, and have a pint of beer. Think of it as “local crowd funding.”

It also was pointed out that everything in the place had been made by the local people -- tables, chairs, and as one person pointed out, “even the concrete.” The Coos Bay people are very proud of their new local brewery, “Seven Devils,” named after a coastal area, located in Cape Arago, just south of Coos Bay.

Contrast this brewery with the new Lost Coast brewery being built at the south end of Eureka. Instead of providing opportunities for local plumbers and steamfitters to work on the project, the owners selected an out of town contractor to do the plumbing.

You might say that because our Local 290 includes members from Oregon and Washington, we really aren't all that local. Here's the difference. Those members from Oregon or Washington who might choose to come to Humboldt to work on a project contribute a portion of their pay to fund local apprenticeship programs and training.

We have 400 apprentices throughout the UA 290 jurisdiction who are earning a living wage. In addition to our craft, training involves public health and sanitary standards and worker safety norms. Currently, we lead in "green technology in the pipe trades." Our members work on every kind of pipe and pipe system imaginable.

Our highly skilled members are invested in our communities. We volunteer in local schools and civic organizations, contribute to community causes, and spend our money where we live -- here!

Living wages for local workers make for strong community economies, which is why we are disappointed in Lost Coast Brewery's choice to outsource local work opportunities.

Support our community economy and local training opportunities by choosing a brew that cares, a brew that supports local construction workers.

Craig Spjut is business agent/assistant training coordinator, Eureka, with UA Local 290. For more information, visit www.ua290.org.