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CHAINS BEWARE! NEW GROUP ORGANIZES TO PROMOTE LOCAL BUSINESSES (Published Nov. 13, 2004, in the Columbia Business Times) - 11/4/2004

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CHAINS BEWARE! NEW GROUP ORGANIZES TO PROMOTE LOCAL BUSINESSES

COLUMBIA, Mo. – Watch out, WalMart! A new local group aims to curb the lure of chain stores in Columbia.

Columbia Locally Owned Retail and Services, or COLORS, is organizing plans to promote local businesses to compete in a market increasingly controlled by chains from afar. Affiliated with the national American Independent Business Alliance organization, or AMIBA, of Boulder, Colo., COLORS aims to ensure that Columbia doesn't become "Anytown, U.S.A." by educating the public about the economic and social benefits of supporting locally owned businesses.

"Our goal is to create an awareness, an educational program, throughout Columbia -- not just downtown, but through all of Columbia – to really let the public know about the benefits to Columbia as a community of people supporting their local independently owned businesses and how much more that dollar recycles through the community," said Mike Reilly, owner of Grill One 5 and a member of the COLORS membership committee.

To back up its case against big box retailers, AMIBA cites an Iowa State University study, which found that 84 percent of sales at new Wal-Marts simply shifted dollars away from existing local merchants. Local independent businesses put 70 percent of their revenue back into local economies, while chain stores only put in 30 percent, according to Leigh Lockhart, owner of Main Squeeze and co-leader of COLORS, along with Lisa Bartlett of Absolute Vintage.

"A lot of us are really concerned about consumers, how they spend their money, and how they are not educated about why it's important to support a local business, or the local business won't exist anymore," Lockhart said. "The cultural fabric of our town, especially Columbia, is sort of built on the ideas and energies of independent thinkers, people who start their own businesses. The charm of Columbia isn't in our Best Buy, Circuit City and WalMart."

Currently numbering about 25 members, and aiming for about 100 eventually, the group claims that locally owned, independent businesses keep money recycling over and over again in our community instead of migrating to a different location and that their localized economic activity creates a higher quality of life for the community.

"The reason I joined is to bring more of a voice to local and independent business people in Columbia and the surrounding area," said Michelle Wheeler of Home Office Productions, who joined the group in October and became a member of the marketing committee. "Our local businesses offer lots of great products and services and don't always have the wherewithal to promote themselves. I wanted to be connected to these local people and to this nationwide organization."

The group meets every three weeks or so in various locations, and annual dues are \$100 at present, although dues may soon be raised to \$125. The next meeting is at 5 p.m. November 30 at the Ragtag Theater.

To join, a business must be locally owned and independent. Companies cannot own more than seven stores and cannot be franchisees of a national chain. Most of the current members come from Columbia, although some are located in nearby towns. Many of its members are located downtown, according to COLORS members.

Lynn Maloney, owner of Lynn Maloney Acupuncture, recently joined COLORS. "As a recent resident of Columbia, I'm very interested in saving the quality of life downtown," she said. "That's something that really attracted me when I first moved here, and I definitely see a connection between supporting locally owned, independent businesses and the quality of life downtown. I'm also an independent business owner myself and am very interested in having a good way of getting to know other business owners in Columbia."

Maloney said the group's main goals are outreach, marketing and political awareness and said she wants the group to help independent businesses become more visible and effectively communicate with the City Council. To develop that visibility, Wheeler said the group is developing a Web site and advertising and is planning a possible exposition of local, independent businesses. Lockhart said a green yellow pages for independent businesses was also a possibility.

"If we let these corporate businesses and these franchises come in and take over, every town will look like 'Anytown,' meaning they'll all look the exact same," Lockhart said. "And what fun is that?"

