

## City begins move toward fair trade

Companies across Madison support producers in underdeveloped nations in lieu of lower costs

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The rainy Saturday morning air holds both the earthy smell of spring and the bitter pinch of winter, a combination that draws a bustling patronage to the doors of State Street's Steep Brew.

One of the patrons is University of Wisconsin junior Maura Foley, who, settling into her chair and cradling her large glass mug, can't help but smile.

"This is my favorite place on State Street — I just love Steep & Brew," Foley said. "And they're fair trade, so you can drink coffee guilt-free."

Fair trade, Foley explained, is a two-pronged movement aimed at helping producers of coffee and other goods in less developed nations to earn a living wage, and it provides transparency in trade for consumers.

As a fair trade campaign coordinator under the Wisconsin Student Public Interest Research Group, Foley is helping lead an initiative to certify Madison as a "Fair Trade Town." With a written resolution, more than 1,000 citizen signatures and the support of Ald. Satya Rhodes-Conway, District 12, Foley said the goal is within a few months' reach.

Whereas businesses traditionally purchase goods from a middleman, fair trade transactions rely on businesses to contact the growers or producers directly to negotiate a purchase.

The price minimum for various fair trade products is set annually in the United States by product certifier TransFair USA. While fair trade prices are several times higher than prices set by traditional commodities brokers, Foley said businesses often end up paying less in the long run.

"The buffer for having to pay more is that you don't have that guy in the middle jacking up the price," Foley said.

That price is often kept relatively low even as it trickles down to the consumer, said Susan Sheldon of SERRV, an all-fair trade goods store on Monroe Street.

"You're not going to find it cheaper at Target or anything," Sheldon said. "You can buy fair trade and spend the same amount of money and know that you are really contributing to the cultures in other countries."

Bouncing between customers perusing the store's fair trade chocolate selection and hand-wrapping bottles of olive oil produced in agreement between Israeli and Palestinian women, it is clear Sheldon believes in the movement.

While she is in favor of a fair trade Madison, Sheldon has not seen a striking demand for fair trade products.

"I'm not seeing that huge support, on the other hand I'm not sure the Madison community knows that we exist," Sheldon said.

To be certified a Fair Trade Town, cities are required to have a certain density of fair trade products and businesses. Madison already meets most of these requirements, Foley said, making the certification process somewhat smoother.

Pending certification, she added, city municipal buildings will gradually purchase fair trade coffee machines and other fair trade food options such as fresh fruit and rice.

Even fair trade-conscious consumers are less than sure about strong support for the movement. Julie Krahn recently purchased a fair trade wall hanging in lush shades of magenta for her office wall.

At her church in Sun Prairie, the congregation drinks fair trade coffee exclusively. Krahn even refuses to shop at Wal-Mart, calling it her "responsibility as a person." Yet when it comes to passing the resolution, Krahn has doubts.

"More people should know what they're consuming and how they're consuming it," Krahn said. "I wish (the campaign) luck. It's probably an uphill battle to get people to be aware of how they're spending."

Before the fair trade campaign brings its resolution to the Common Council, it hopes to gather another 1000 signatures by May 1, International Fair Trade Day. For the occasion, the group will host an event on Library Mall with music from WSUM, raffles and vendors offering fair trade freebies and information.

While Foley is fairly confident the resolution will pass, she acknowledges the possibility it may not.

"In America, there's this sort of culture of 'I wanna pay as little as possible,'" Foley said. "I think there's a stigma against helping people who can't help themselves."

Sheldon said the fair trade economic model mimics traditional American consumerism in many ways, comparing spending money on a fair trade product to spending money for a certain brand name.

"If they paid a premium for fair trade, if they're willing to pay it to guarantee that the process was done in a certain way, isn't that the essence of capitalism?" Sheldon said.

While some critics of the movement charge that fair trade is a sort of regulated government handout, Foley argues it offers a practical solution.

"We at fair trade think that it is better to foster trade and economics than just give money," Foley said, "because that's not going to solve anything."