

Fair trade no slam-dunk in Gimli

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How fair is 'fair' trade? Fair trade is a business model that seeks to put more money in the hands of primary producers. The people who grow and harvest coffee, for instance, get a better return when fair trade distributors step in.

Fair trade is a relatively new idea in North America, where consumers are increasingly being urged to buy products that are registered as fair trade.

Gimli Coun. Brian McKenzie likes the idea well enough, but says wholesalers and middlemen take out profit that the primary producers never see.

"The cash grab comes from the middleman," McKenzie, owner of Kaffe Haus Cappuccino Bar on Centre St., said after a presentation about fair trade at a regular meeting of council Wednesday. "I believe in the good intentions of the fair trade concept. But the fact that it doesn't play out does pay lip service to it; it sort of dampens the impact."

McKenzie was reacting to a presentation by Zack Gross, who spoke about moving Gimli toward becoming a 'fair trade town'. Gross works with the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation (MCIC). There are two officially-designated fair trade towns in Canada —Wolfville, Nova Scotia and La Peche, Que. — while 30 towns are working toward obtaining status as free trade towns.

Gross wants Gimli council to pass a resolution supporting the move to becoming a free trade town. Such a resolution has already been passed by the Evergreen School Division and Community Futures East Interlake.

"Gimli Youth Community Partners has been supporting the idea of free trade and ethical purchasing," noted youth council member Bradley Johnson. "I think it would be a great idea for the municipality to consider passing this resolution."

There was some reluctance to sign on completely, though council did endorse a statement in principle supporting the concept.

"I wouldn't want us to be just providing lip service," said Coun. Ross Bailey who noted that the mechanics of having fair trade products in all municipal facilities needs to be considered first.

Gross noted that the idea is to begin with two products — tea and coffee — then add products each year.

On the coffee side of the equation, McKenzie said there's a gap between the theory of fair trade and the practice. "The people who are getting the greatest benefit are the wholesalers," he said. "It's certainly not the producer you would like see getting the benefit."

Gross acknowledged that there are "struggles" as grassroots fair-trade facilitators work to create more direct links with, say, the people who grow and harvest coffee. "What we're trying to do is create more direct relationships and bypass the middleman," he said.

The Canadian Federation of Students, for instance, purchased 40,000 T-shirts from a primary producer in El Salvador. The federation paid what was deemed a 'fair' price for the shirts, and eliminated the people in the middle of supply chain.

Mayor Tammy Axelsson brought the fair trade resolution forward for council's consideration. She acknowledged that the municipality has to be "financially responsible", but believes a fair trade push at municipal facilities will send the bigger message. She noted Gimli is working to become the template for environmental friendliness.

Caring for the environment and working to ensure fair treatment of people a world away producing many of North America's cherished consumer products are intimately tied, she suggested. "It's about ethics," she said. "It's about sustainable consumption. It's about striving to make the right choices."

"If we take the step and work toward poverty alleviation, fair trade, improving the environment we get closer to

the overall goal, which involves all forms of sustainable consumption and ethical purchasing. We're trying to make the right choices for the environment, for instance. It's certainly far from perfect, but we're going to keep trying."

Administration will contact senior staff to get a grasp of the mechanics of getting fully on-board as a fair trade town. Bailey noted that endorsing the concept would mean all facilities and programs from the race track to the air cadet program would have to provide a fair trade alternative.

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