



A Community-Enrichment Plan: Print Your Own Money

by Donella Meadows

Most of you are probably familiar with the bumper sticker, "Think Globally, Act Locally." In this article, Donella Meadows describes a community that did just that, by creating a local money system that allows townspeople to become more aware of the way monetary values are attached to goods and services.

I just got a thick envelope in the mail, and when I opened it, money fell out.

Four bills, to be exact, along with four newsletters. The bills are denominated in "Ithaca Hours." On one side they say, "IN ITHACA WE TRUST." The other side reads, "This note entitles the bearer to receive one (two, one-half, or whatever) hour labor or its negotiated value in goods or services."

The newsletter, which comes out six times a year, contains listings of 1,200 individuals and businesses in Ithaca, NY, that will accept Ithaca Hours (in Ithaca, and henceforth here, called Hours). Here are just a few of the things you can buy with Hours: book-keeping, bowling, brick-laying, building materials, bush-hogging, business consulting, cake decorating, calligraphy lessons, camera repair, candles, canoes, car repair, carpentry, child care—and that's just a few of the Bs and Cs.

Many Ithaca restaurants accept Hours. So do movie theaters, locally owned grocery stores, and farmers markets. Four lawyers take payments in Hours, nine electricians, five roofers, three tax preparers, and quite a few landlords. An electronics store has computers in the window priced at 50, 68, and 90 Hours.

One Hour is worth \$10.00. That's roughly the average wage in Tompkins County, NY. The idea is that one person's time is as valuable as anyone else's, so an Hour can be exchanged for

an hour's work, whether that work is farm labor or dentistry.

There's nothing to prevent professionals from charging several Hours per hour, of course, and a baby-sitter might accept a quarter-Hour per hour. But Hours are a leveling force, raising the minimum wage, allowing people to buy things they couldn't afford before, and stimulating everyone's business.

Anyone who is willing to accept Ithaca Money in exchange for goods or services is paid two Hours and a listing in the newsletter. An additional two Hours can be earned every eight months by sending in a coupon affirming that the phone number is current. That keeps the listings accurate and gradually expands the money supply. Decisions about the management of the system (how much money to print, how much to donate to community organizations) are made by the "Municipal Reserve Board," which consists of anyone who shows up at bimonthly Barter Potlucks.

The newsletter is full of stories about how people get and use Hours. One woman earns them giving haircuts and spends them on video rentals. A bookstore owner accepts Hours and uses them for food, jewelry, and her mortgage at the local credit union. The Sciencenter sells memberships and admissions for Hours and uses them to hire a book cataloguer. The cataloguer spends them on Spanish lessons. The Spanish teacher uses them at the farmers' market. A craftsman who makes fine paper out of cattails earns Hours by providing the paper for the two-Hour note.

In Ithaca, \$46,000 worth of Hours are circulating, contributing to what the system's founder, Paul Glover, calls the Grassroots National Product. "We

printed our own money because we watched federal dollars come to town, shake a few hands, then leave to buy rainforest lumber and fight wars," says Glover. Ithaca Money encourages local spending, it supports neighborhood entrepreneurs, and it creates a web of friendships.

"It has enriched my family's life and taught me the meaning of community," says one user. "Ithaca Money is wonderful," says another. "It hooks people up you wouldn't normally interact with." A man who makes drums and sells them for Hours says, "They let my wife and me eat out more often, which is good for us parents. We get more time together." A piano teacher says, "Hours are steadily building people's trust, especially as people learn that dollars are funny money and inflationary. Hours are something you can get a handle on."

One of the most impressive results of the Ithaca Money system is the bi-monthly list of local goods and services. It goes beyond the Yellow Pages in compiling the many contributions that individuals and businesses have to offer. The community can see how rich it is in human resources, and how many of its own needs it can meet—something that too few towns, valuing themselves in terms defined by federal money and multinational corporations, appreciate about themselves.

Any community can have its own money; in Ithaca, kids seem to assume that every community does. A student recently moved to town, earned some Hours, and gave them to his landlord for rent. Her 7-year-old daughter watched the transaction and asked him what his home city's money looks like.

It is perfectly legal to create a local money system, but it takes work and responsibility. Ithaca Money sells a Hometown Money Starter Kit that explains how to do it. Send \$25 (2.5 Ithaca Hours) to Ithaca Money, Box 6578, Ithaca, NY, 14851. ☐

Donella Meadows is a system dynamicist and an adjunct professor of environmental and policy studies at Dartmouth College. She writes "The Global Citizen" for the Plainfield, NH, Valley News.