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Andrew Hoffman

BerkShares: Resisting Big-Box Retailers and Creating Economic Self-Sufficiency through Local Currency and Entrepreneurship

We need to confront honestly the issue of scale. Bigness has a charm and a drama that are seductive, especially to politicians and financiers; but bigness promotes greed, indifference, and damage, and often bigness is not necessary. You may need a large corporation to run an airline or to manufacture cars, but you don't need a large corporation to raise a chicken or a hog. You don't need a large corporation to process local food or local timber and market it locally.

Wendell Berry¹

Built in 1887, Dewey Hall is a modest concert venue in Sheffield, Massachusetts. It is not a place where you might expect the “bright lights, big stage” atmosphere of a pitch competition for startup ventures. But in 2017, the voices of new business ideas echoed through the hall and the palpable energy in the room might have fooled even a big city banker.² Young, ambitious entrepreneurs were donned in jackets and ties, but instead of pitching to Wall Street, they were quite literally pitching to Main Street. While the contemporary aspiration of many young startups has been “unicorn” status—gaining favor with venture capitalists, closing million-dollar funding rounds and propelling towards a lucrative Initial Public Offering (IPO)—these burgeoning businesspeople aspired to thriving local economies in their hometowns and economic self-sufficiency in the Berkshire region where they grew up. In place of demanding investors, they sought community mentors and the support of their neighbors. Success was as much about making an intentional, tangible contribution to the fabric of their local community as it was about making a profit.

Dewey Hall's 130 year-old marble and fieldstone facade sits cozily on Main Street in Sheffield, a town of 3,300 people in Berkshire County that lies within the Appalachian Mountains on the western side of Massachusetts (see **Exhibit 1**). A county with just under 130,000 residents and a proud history, the Berkshires was now home to what the *New York Times* called a “great socioeconomic experiment.”³ Proposing ideas like local goat landscaping and coffee kiosks, youths aged 14 to 25 presented business plans as part

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