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Five Practices to Help Cities Green their Purchasing

By **NLC Staff** on August 25, 2017

This is a guest post by Arizona State University's Nicole Darnall, Justin M. Stritch, Stuart Bretschneider, Lily Hsueh and Won No.

In the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, city leaders are demonstrating environmental leadership across America. More than 367 U.S. mayors in 44 states have committed to reduce their greenhouse gases (GHGs).

How are they accomplishing environmental progress while serving the needs of constituents? One way is through purchasing.

In the U.S. alone, cities purchase \$1.72 trillion of goods and services annually. These purchases together create a carbon footprint nine times that of buildings and vehicle fleets put together. Purchases include chemicals, electronics, office materials and other items.

GPPs include formal frameworks, resolutions and administrative directives for green purchasing. They also include less formal approaches, such as adding green purchasing language to existing sustainability plans or energy conservation policies.

About one-quarter of U.S. directors in local government report that their city has a GPP. We surveyed 1,825 directors of finance, public works and environment in 791 U.S. cities to learn about what makes cities with GPPs differ from those that don't. More than 600 city directors from nearly 460 cities answered our survey.

In our research, we found five practices that differentiate cities with a GPP from those that don't.

1. Complementary policies and practices

Complementary policies and practices, such as recycling policies, buy local policies and energy conservation policies can reduce a city's cost of adopting GPP. That's because complementary policies and practices require similar internal capabilities to manage them. Complementary policies and practices also create management commitment and shared vision around similar environmental issues.

Directors in cities with GPPs have more complementary policies and practices than cities without GPPs.

Cities that have these policies and practices in place can thus more easily embed green purchasing within their procurement process.

2. Purchasing criteria related to environmental concerns

Purchasing criteria are the factors used when deciding to purchase a good or service. Cities that use criteria in their purchasing decisions related to environmental concerns. These criteria include greenhouse gas emissions, recyclability or reuse, reducing packaging waste and disposal costs.

It may come as no surprise that cities with GPPs are more likely to use environmental criteria in their purchasing decisions than cities that lacked these policies.

However, cities without an GPP still consider environmental issues when making purchasing decisions. For instance, 39 percent of cities that do not have an GPP still consider their disposal costs as part of purchasing and 25 percent consider product recyclability or reuse. These cities may be in a particularly strong position to adopt a GPP.

3. Access to environmental product information

Product information influences even the most basic purchasing decisions. Access to environmental information is important to cities with GPPs. Over half (54 percent) of cities with GPPs have access to product ecolabel/certification information when making purchasing decisions. However, only about a quarter (26 percent) of cities without a GPP have access to ecolabel/certification information.

However, cities do not need to develop extensive databases about the environmental virtues of different products. External resources may assist.

For instance, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency published its Recommendations of Specifications, Standards, and Ecolabels to help purchasers identify and procure environmentally sustainable products and services. Cities without GPPs – and even those that do – may benefit from using these external resources. They may also be critical resources during GPP adoption and implementation.

4. Strong leadership

Leadership and resources are often cited as critical elements that facilitate organization change. The cities in our study report that financial resources are relevant to GPP adoption. However, top-level management support is more important.

More than two-thirds (69 percent) of cities with GPP report that top management facilitates their ability to implement green purchasing. This compares to about one-third (34 percent) of cities that report that financial resources facilitates green purchasing.

Top-level leadership during the adoption GPP helps build momentum and commitment. Cities that wish to implement a successful green purchasing policy should consider seriously the role of leadership and assignment to top-level managers.

5. Collaborative vendor relations

Vendors can serve as important collaborators that can facilitate cities' GPP adoption success. Cities with GPPs tend to work more with their vendors to identify environmentally friendly products/services. Additionally, cities with a GPP engage their vendors more to help them learn about environmentally sustainable purchasing options.

Cities that are willing to collaborate with their vendors to identify green products may thus be in a stronger position to adopt a GPP.

Hundreds of U.S. cities are taking a lead to address global environmental impacts. Green purchasing can help cities demonstrate their leadership by shaping the demand for eco-friendly products, improving environmental conditions and saving taxpayer money.

Arizona State University's (ASU) Sustainable Purchasing Research Initiative (SPRI) provides both actionable advice for practitioners implementing GPP's while advancing public administration research.

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