
Want a Successful Sustainable Purchasing Policy?

Six Policy Elements That Cities Should Know

by Caitlin Burwell and Nicole Darnall

As the U.S. federal government distances itself from global climate change initiatives, cities are filling the leadership void by reducing their greenhouse gas impacts. Indeed, more than 380 US mayors have pledged to meet the Paris Climate Agreement goals¹.

How can cities meet their climate goals? One way is through adopting a sustainable purchasing policy (SPP).

Cities purchase \$1.72 trillion of goods annually². SPPs encourage cities to procure eco-friendly products and services. In addition to reducing climate impacts, purchasing sustainable products can reduce waste and consumption, support the development and expansion of green markets, and generate cost savings. For instance, the City of Phoenix is saving over \$1 million per year in energy costs and reducing its greenhouse gas emissions simply by using more energy efficient streetlights³.

However, new research by Arizona State University's (ASU's) Sustainable Purchasing Research Initiative indicates implementing an SPP isn't easy. While numerous cities have adopted them, about 42 percent report that their policies are unsuccessful⁴.

Why? To learn more we obtained the SPPs of cities that rate their SPP as being either very successful or very unsuccessful. We then compared these SPPs and identified six specific policy elements associated with very successful policies:

1.) Mandatory requirements for sustainable purchasing

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of cities with very successful SPPs have mandatory (as opposed to voluntary) requirements for sustainable purchasing. By comparison, only one-quarter (25%) of very unsuccessful SPPs have this requirement.

Mandatory SPPs promote accountability and compliance. They also encourage cities to put systems in place to monitor SPP performance. Voluntary approaches rely on internal guidelines and standards and lack provisions for noncompliance. Cities that do not have an SPP, but have developed

complimentary programs, such as climate action plans, environmental teams, and alternative energy plans are especially poised to extend these programs by adopting a mandatory SPP⁴.

2.) Tracking, measuring and reporting on SPP implementation

It's no surprise then that cities that measure and track their spending related to sustainable purchasing report having higher SPP success. More than half (55%) of cities with very successful SPPs have formal green purchasing audits or reviews that track their spending related to sustainable purchases. By contrast one-quarter (25%) of cities with very unsuccessful SPPs track their progress.

Measuring policy progress and its financial benefits can help build momentum and support to justify more extensive SPP implementation. Tracking SPP spending also helps cities identify opportunities for continual improvement and qualify for external sustainability awards and grants.

3.) Collaborative information sharing networks

Almost all (91%) cities with very successful SPPs have policy provisions to participate in some type of information sharing network with other cities or their state. By contrast, 38% of cities with very unsuccessful policies were part of such a network.

Networks facilitate information sharing and learning that can lead to innovation. For example, rural towns can collaborate with their urban counterparts to develop larger-scale green purchasing programs or with national government purchasing cooperatives, such as US Communities. Cities can also collaborate with their states. Collaborations can lead to larger purchasing contracts that offer better prices on products and services and a simplified contracting process. They also provide a vehicle to share best practices.

Other networks operate globally. C40 is a network of more than 90 megacities worldwide representing a quarter of the global economy. It seeks to improve the scale and speed of

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climate action, including sustainable purchasing, with through city-to-city collaboration and information sharing.

4.) Sustainability criteria in vendor contracts

Sustainable product options often are limited and they can be difficult to find. While vendors typically have access to vital information about the environmental impact of their products, cities generally do not have access to it. They have to ask.

Cities with very successful SPPs require purchasing employees to incorporate sustainability criteria in vendor contracts. Almost two-thirds (64%) of cities with very successful policies include sustainability criteria in contracts, whereas only 13% of cities with very unsuccessful policies do so. Sustainability criteria might include minimum product standards for recycled content or carbon emissions.

5.) SPP advocates

SPPs are more successful when cities designate a policy advocate. More than half (55%) of cities with very successful SPPs assign formal advocates for their policies, while only 13% of cities with very unsuccessful SPPs do the same.

Advocates serve as the primary point of contact for SPP-related questions and actively advocate for the ideas within the policy. Advocates coordinate SPP tasks, such as education and training, and are accountable for the policy's success. Some cities identify a specific employee as their SPP advocate, while others assemble a formal green purchasing team or sustainable purchasing committee.

6.) Continual improvement

Almost two-thirds (64%) of cities with very successful SPPs incorporate provisions within their policy to continually improve it over time, thus adopting based on changes in knowledge and best practices. By contrast, only 13% of cities with very unsuccessful policies have continual improvement as part of their SPP.

The Urban Sustainability Directors Network and Responsible Purchasing Network suggest that cities' SPPs should be updated every one to three years⁵. Updating a

city's SPP more can hinder timely implementation, while waiting longer may ignore emerging priorities. Also, a broad range of input is needed during SPP revisions. Department staff can identify problems with policy implementation that is valuable during the revision process.

As U.S. cities step up to address issues of global climate change, sustainable purchasing should be added to their list of mitigation approaches. The six elements presented here can fortify cities' SPPs and increase opportunities for their implementation success.

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Sources:

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- 2 U.S. Census Bureau. 2016. *State and local government finances by level of government and by state: 2013-14*.
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- 5 Culver A, Reeve T, Duronio N, Panciera K, Novick L, Roth A, Zagorin E. 2016. *The Buck Starts Here Sustainable Procurement Playbook for Cities*. Urban Sustainability Directors Network and the Responsible Purchasing Network.