

Turning Abstract Goals into Action

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While improved sustainability and energy efficiency are important objectives for many local governments, turning abstract goals into concrete action remains a challenge. In response, a new resource has been launched to help policy makers and sustainability advocates implement their sustainability initiatives.

The new guide, “Breaking New Ground: Promoting Environmental and Energy Programs in Local Government,” includes a detailed analysis of 2,100 local governments who responded to a recent survey on local government sustainability issues. The guide was released by the IBM Center for The Business of Government, an entity that stimulates research and facilitates discussion of new approaches for improving governmental effectiveness at the federal, state, local and international levels. Based on lessons learned by communities large and small, the guide provides a framework for those seeking to implement strategic sustainability programs in a challenging fiscal environment and with competing policy priorities.

The survey, which was sent to 8,569 local governments, was conducted by International City/County Management Association (ICMA) with input from the ICMA Center for Sustainable Communities, the Center for Urban Innovation, Arizona State University’s Global Institute of Sustainability, the Alliance for Innovation and others. The survey found that while many communities recognized the importance of this issue, most governments were still at the early stages of adopting a full range of measured sustainability activities.

The guide profiles nine communities where the local governments have found innovative ways to advance sustainability issues. Five major findings offer important lessons:

- 1. There is considerable variation in the extent to which sustainability actions have been implemented by local governments.** More than 85% of local governments report recycling, improving transportation (82%), and reducing building energy use (81%). In contrast, efforts to reduce energy use by altering work schedules or processes have been adopted by fewer than two governments in five (36%), and fewer than 25% of those surveyed employ any form of alternative energy generation.
- 2. Sustainability initiatives should be targeted to community needs.** No single approach to sustainability is right for every community, even when the government is actively committed. Framing the issues initially requires sensitivity to the concerns and motivators of a specific area.



3. Goal setting and progress measurement are important for all communities. Whether a large city or a small town, communities need to establish goals and targets and measure progress in a quantitative manner through baseline studies.

4. A few local governments are leading sustainability initiatives. The number of local governments at the low end of the adoption spectrum is slightly lower than that found in a normal distribution, confirming that many governments have at least begun to get involved in sustainability. It is also noteworthy that the pioneers and early adopters in the high category reflect the normal proportion. This means that an expected number of local governments are setting an example for others.

5. Policy priorities matter to sustainability initiatives. The survey revealed that a community’s policy priorities correlate to its level of activity in specific sustainability activities. While those jurisdictions which placed a higher priority on the economy reported only modest sustainability activity, for all other policy areas, greater emphasis correlates to more sustainability action. Communities that assigned a high priority to green jobs, for example, reported the strongest association with action in that area.

There are seven recommended action steps that, according to the guide, should be taken by local government that seek an integrated, long-term approach to the design and implementation of sustainability initiatives:

- Obtain a formal commitment and pursue a broad sustainability strategy
- Develop an engagement process to broaden community outreach
- Appoint a citizens’ committee to engage the community
- Develop partnerships with key institutional, private sector, and nonprofit actors
- Make changes to break down silos and encourage coordinated action
- Measure performance to assess the sustainability effort
- Report to citizens on progress

“Sustainability is the ability of communities to consistently thrive over time and involves making decisions to improve a community today without sacrificing its future,” says ICMA Chief Operating Officer Ron Carlee. “Increasingly ...sustainability is considered in the context of a ‘triple bottom line’—the environment, the economy and social equity—three dimensions necessary for society to flourish in the near and long term.”