



The Co-Benefits of Sustainability Strategies

The phrases “Buy one, get one free,” “Kill two birds with one stone” and “It’s a two-fer” are part of our everyday language. How do these common phrases relate to sustainability? Virtually all of the strategies that promote sustainability have more than one benefit — also referred to as co-benefits. In many cases, they provide much more than just a “two-fer.” Sustainability strategies save money, conserve resources for future generations, improve public health, respond to climate change and make communities more attractive places to live.

The Public Health Connection

The term “co-benefit” is often used in the public health community to describe multiple, ancillary health benefits of a program, policy or intervention, such as the health benefits that are achieved through improvements to the built environment. For example, how communities are designed — land use and transportation patterns, accessibility to parks, open space and transit, pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly features — all have *positive* direct and indirect impacts, or co-benefits, on residents’ health and health conditions, including obesity, asthma and cardiovascular disease.

Often overlooked is the fact that many of the design strategies to reduce vehicle miles traveled and greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) from transportation — the largest source of GHGs — also have multiple public health co-benefits. Thus the application of co-benefits extends well beyond the public health arena, and the examples are numerous.

Energy and Trees

Taking steps to implement energy efficiency measures in public agency facilities saves resources and money as energy bills decrease, which helps the local agency manage its budget. Similarly, planting shade trees reduces the need for air conditioning, thereby saving energy and money, and trees make communities more attractive. Trees also absorb greenhouse gases and improve air quality. Because energy generation is the second largest source of GHG emissions, reducing energy usage is a significant climate change mitigation strategy. The co-benefits of energy efficiency are numerous and broad.

Water

Water efficiency and conservation offer equally dramatic co-benefits. Improving water efficiency and conservation efforts reduces the energy usage (and GHG emissions) associated with water processing and delivery. This also saves money. Using water more efficiently has another co-benefit. By reducing water consumption, communities can begin to *adapt* to the impacts of climate change — and a future when water is scarcer due to increased drought, frequent extreme weather conditions and a reduced snow pack.

Green Buildings

Green buildings incorporate energy- and water-efficient features as well as products made of recycled materials. The co-benefits of this sustainability strategy include reduced energy and water use and resultant lower bills, and conservation of natural resources. Green buildings that use products with recycled content also help strengthen the markets for recycled materials and reduce the amount of material sent to landfills, which in turn lessens the potential for methane gas production, a vigorous greenhouse gas that is released from improperly managed landfills.

Wildfires

In recent years, wildfires have devastated neighborhoods and economies in rural communities and those on the urban-wildland interface. The fires also contribute to climate change by releasing carbon dioxide stored in the materials that burn. Efforts to reduce the likelihood of wildfires, such as implementing minimum brush clearance requirements and using fire-resistant landscaping and materials, also promote public safety and reduce the potential loss of life and property. Fire prevention efforts have climate change co-benefits because trees store carbon dioxide that would be released into the atmosphere if they were burned.

Saving Money

Whether a policy or strategy involves increasing energy efficiency and water conservation, making communities more bicycle friendly, reducing the likelihood of wildfires or improving public health, one theme is constant throughout — the direct and indirect potential to save money. This is an important co-benefit anytime, but especially during times of fiscal challenges.

An Opportunity to Agree

Californians agree that these are worthy goals:

- Using water more wisely;
- Reducing air pollution;
- Increasing recreation opportunities;
- Recycling; and
- Promoting well-designed, vibrant, healthy communities.

The same can be said for reducing dependence on foreign oil. The majority of Californians also believe it is important to address climate change. Understanding the co-benefits of sustainability strategies beyond a narrow set of impacts offers local leaders an opportunity to broaden the dialogue and unite around making their communities better places to live and work.

Resources for More Information

The following links are a few of the helpful resources available from the Institute for Local Government.

California Climate Action Network: www.ca-ilg.org/climatechange

California Climate Action Network: www.ca-ilg.org/bestpractices

Land Use and Environment Program: www.ca-ilg.org/landusecommunitydesign

Healthy Communities: www.ca-ilg.org/healthycommunities

This resource is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities.

ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute's resources on sustainable communities, visit www.ca-ilg.org/Sustainability. If you would like to access this resource directly, go to www.ca-ilg.org/SustainabilityCo-Benefits.

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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