



Celebrating Local Leadership in Sustainability

Over the past two years, the California Climate Action Network, a program of the Institute for Local Government, has been busy collecting examples of how California local agencies are leading the way to incorporate sustainability measures in their operations, facilities, planning, policies and community activities. Whether the topic is energy efficiency in new and existing agency buildings, using rubberized asphalt on local streets and roads, adopting a green purchasing policy or incorporating smart growth and green building principles in new development — to name just a few — California communities demonstrate impressive creativity and vision.

Combining Leadership and Creativity

Local agency efforts to promote sustainability span a wide range and are remarkably diverse. In fact, some examples reflect decisions made long before the concept of sustainability gained widespread popularity. Some of these projects have justifiably received national attention. Other projects simply reflect the routine activities of innovative public officials serving their communities.

Green and Energy-Efficient Buildings

From San Jose to Pasadena to Calabasas, Fremont, Morgan Hill and Richmond, local agencies throughout California are adopting green building programs. Whether the program applies only to agency facilities or also to new or renovated residential and commercial buildings, these efforts are saving energy, resources, water and money and using materials with recycled content.

Richmond's green building ordinance applies to all new and enlarged single and multifamily residential projects as well as to new and renovated commercial and industrial projects. Richmond adopted the ordinance, the first in Contra Costa County, in July 2009.

Riverside's Green Builder program, based on the California Green Building Code, was developed jointly in 2007 by the city and the Riverside Building Association. It offers expedited processing and utility meter approval to builders of new homes. The Green Builder program also provides rebates through the city's municipal electric and water utilities for energy and water efficiency retrofits on existing residential and commercial buildings.

Promoting Alternative Fuels and Leaving the Car at Home

In California's autocentric culture, improving transportation efficiency can be challenging. However, local agencies are making important strides in attacking this challenge from different angles.

Vacaville has 25 electric vehicles and a growing fleet of compressed natural gas vehicles for police administration, construction inspection, maintenance work and buses. To promote residents' use of alternative fuel vehicles, the city has installed 40 electric-vehicle fueling stations strategically located throughout the city.

La Mirada's transit system provides a flexible route Dial-a-Ride program that offers curb-to-curb service within the city. The flexible route service encourages transit use for local travel and makes it easier for commuters to connect with regional services.

San Mateo County offers employees participating in its commute alternative program a guaranteed ride home in the event of a personal or work-related emergency. Although rarely used, this element is critical to reassuring employees that they will not lose flexibility by changing their commute behavior.

Riverside's bicycle master plan is the result of comprehensive planning for bicycle use in the city. It envisions more than 140 miles of new bike paths, lanes and routes to connect commuters with jobs, students with schools, and the general population with parks, shopping and regional bike trails.

Waste Reduction and Recycling

Residents in virtually all California communities have curbside recycling opportunities available to them thanks to partnerships between local agencies and providers of solid waste and recycling services. In addition, a growing number of local agencies require or encourage businesses in their communities to recycle.

Chula Vista has required all businesses to recycle for many years. By devoting agency resources to educating business owners and providing them with technical assistance, including audits, the city encourages businesses to recycle, thus promoting compliance.

Ojai makes recycling easier for businesses in its downtown redevelopment area, using a creative approach to address what otherwise could be a barrier to recycling. An assessment district provides common-area recycling services and storage bins for businesses that otherwise would lack convenient access to recycling opportunities.

Sustainable Community Design

Cities throughout California are taking advantage of new thinking in planning and community design in a number of ways, which include revitalizing their downtowns and making new developments more sustainable.

Vista is updating its downtown specific plan to accommodate higher density residential uses within the downtown area, which includes three separate rail stations. The plan also will make the downtown more pedestrian and bicycle friendly.

Windsor adopted special area plans and compact zoning designations for key parts of the town. These are designed to channel future growth into specified geographic areas and encourage mixed uses, smaller lot sizes and minimum two-story residential and commercial structures in key locations.

Livermore's updated zoning code incorporates "smart code" practices, such as enhanced pedestrian and bicycle mobility, transit-oriented development, mixed use and infill.

San Diego's concept of a "city of villages" will cluster housing, shopping, jobs and civic uses around future regional transit stations. The city's infill growth strategy depends upon coordination between land use and transportation planning. Its intent is to reduce dependency on cars by creating walkable, bikeable and transit-oriented neighborhoods.

Sustainable and Healthy Communities

Many of the local policies that support sustainability also promote healthier communities, thus providing multiple benefits. Anderson's General Plan suggests using "leftover" land to create biking and walking trails that use smaller amounts of land than parks and promote health and physical activity.

Azusa's General Plan includes policies to provide amenities that enhance the pedestrian experience. The goal is to encourage the development and use of an integrated, multi-modal transportation system that gets all residents out of their cars and traveling by bike, transit or foot.

Reaching Out to the Community

Local agencies are using web-based technologies to help residents and businesses embrace sustainability. For example, Manhattan Beach, Pasadena, Riverside, Santa Clarita and San Mateo County all feature comprehensive green portals on their websites. The online information assists businesses and residents in reducing energy use, recycling, using less water, saving money and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Public Engagement Is Critical

Sustainability policies and projects are not designed and implemented by agency staff and elected officials alone. Involving the public is critical to any successful sustainability practice, whether it is a green procurement policy based on a recommendation from a community task force, a solar ordinance developed in partnership with the local building association or a new bicycle master plan created with advice from local bike clubs. Such public engagement activities have resulted in policies that enjoy broad community support and foster a sense of ownership among local residents.

In addition to using technology, many local agencies offer seminars, workshops and "green bag" lunches to help educate members of the community about sustainability practices.

More Work Remains

One particularly exciting aspect of these and other examples of sustainability programs, policies and practices is their visibility in communities throughout California, not in just a select few. This does not mean that the work of making communities more sustainable is complete — on the contrary, much work remains to be done. However, the numerous examples of creativity and leadership demonstrate the richness of local agencies' efforts throughout the state and offer models and inspiration for communities considering similar projects and programs.

Learn More Online

The Institute's Sustainability/Climate Change program provides examples, stories and resources for local agency efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote sustainability. To learn about best practices, visit www.ca-ilg.org/climatepractices. For articles about local agency leadership, visit www.ca-ilg.org/ClimateStories and www.ca-ilg.org/ClimateWhitePapers. Information on updated state regulations for mandatory commercial recycling and a sample ordinance are posted at www.ca-ilg.org/commercialrecycling.

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