

## **Assessing Opportunities for Local Officials to Share Information on Sustainable Communities**

### **Sustainable Communities Questionnaire**

In July of 2011, the Institute for Local Government (ILG) circulated the online Sustainable Communities Questionnaire to a group of people interested in sustainability, focusing on local officials and staff. The goal was to collect information on:

- Sustainability topics of interest to local officials;
- Effective ways to present information and foster peer learning among local officials and staff; and
- The extent of local knowledge or expertise regarding sustainability best practices.

The Institute for Local Government (ILG) identified a group of 1,937 local and regional officials and staff who had previously shown some interest in receiving sustainability information from the Institute. The online questionnaire was distributed on July 21, 2011 and responses were collected through August 22, 2011.

Five hundred and fifty-two individuals responded to the questionnaire (28.5% response rate). As part of the ongoing effort to expand the range of potential responses, ILG encouraged respondents to invite their peers to take the questionnaire. As of August 22<sup>nd</sup>, an additional 137 people responded to requests from their peers and completed the survey. Between the two response groups, a total of 688 people responded to the questionnaire.

ILG will use information from the questionnaire to develop a peer learning network and disseminate resources which help local officials implement proven approaches in their own communities.

### **Sustainable Communities Learning Network**

The questionnaire is one of the first activities of a broader effort to establish a statewide Sustainable Communities Learning Network (Learning Network). The Institute for Local Government, working in partnership with the Information Center for the Environment at UC Davis, and with support from the Strategic Growth Council and The California Endowment, is developing the Sustainable Communities Learning Network.

The Learning Network is a service offering tools and support to local officials and staff as they work to incorporate sustainability into the day-to-day operations of a city or county. A key function of the Learning Network is to provide opportunities for local officials and staff to exchange information and learn best practices from one another to

encourage economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable development that meets the needs and priorities of individual communities.

## Why a Network?

The Learning Network aims to facilitate the diffusion of sustainability practices throughout California by encouraging peer learning. The process starts with local agencies that are innovators on a particular issue, such as green building codes or energy efficiency investments in municipal buildings. These innovations are then adapted and refined by “early adopter” communities. As more communities become aware of and adopt the innovations, the adaptations and refinements evolve into a set of best practices. The process continues with the diffusion and continued adaptation of these best practices throughout the broader group of local agencies.

The diffusion of innovation is a social process that relies on individuals to act as opinion leaders within the network and as change agents or champions within an organization. The Sustainable Communities Learning Network is an effort to increase the spread of sustainability best practices throughout California by providing opportunities for people who have considered and adapted sustainability practices to share their knowledge with local officials, staff, and others interested in undertaking similar efforts in their communities. The results from the questionnaire are helping inform the development of the peer learning network.

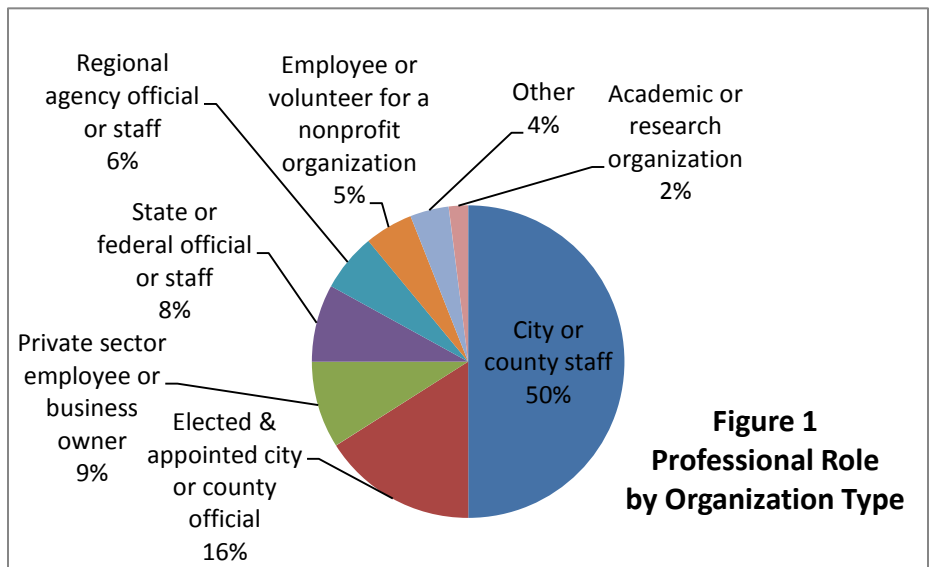
## Questionnaire Results

### Respondents

Two-thirds of the total respondents were from city or county agencies. City and county staff made up 50 percent of the respondents, followed by elected and appointed city and county officials (16 percent). Private sector, state, federal, regional, nonprofit, and academic employees made up the remaining one-third of respondents.

The make-up of respondents correlates well with the target audience of the Learning Network. The goal is to engage and provide resources for local

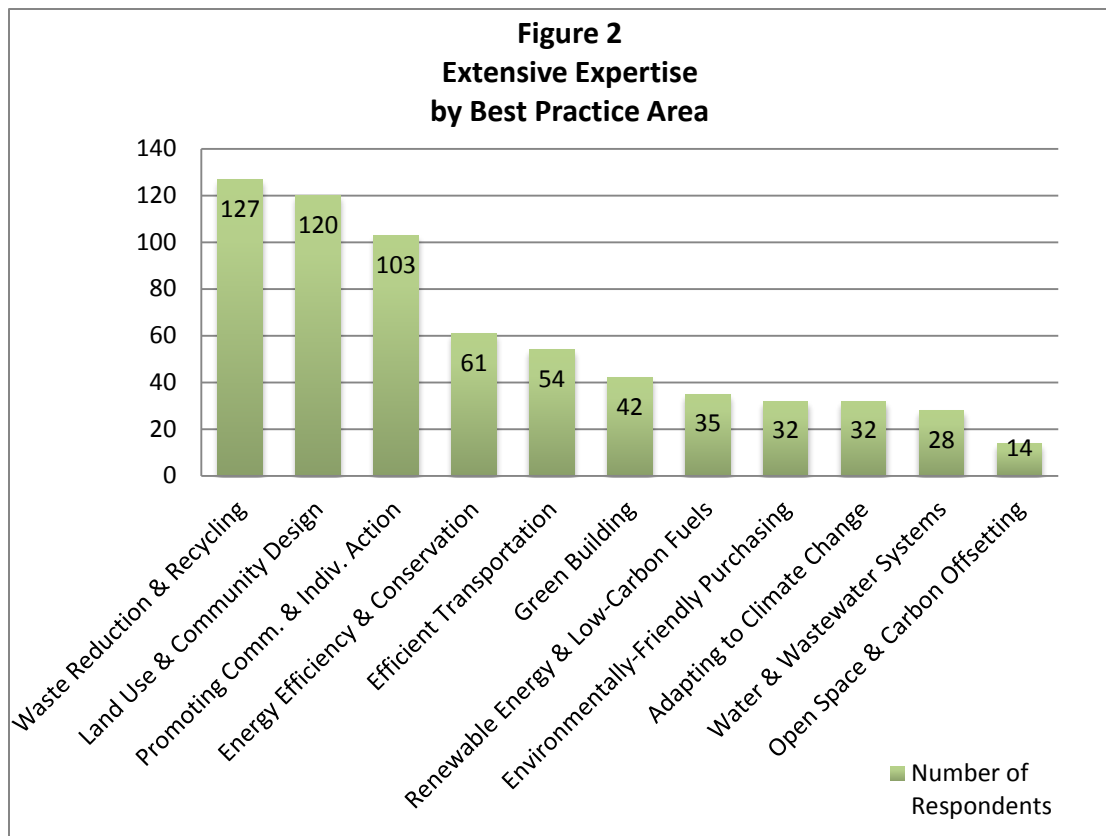
officials and staff, but a robust and useful network includes and engages multiple groups and perspectives.



**Figure 1**  
**Professional Role**  
**by Organization Type**

## Areas of Activity and Expertise

Most respondents were working in the fields of Energy Efficiency and Conservation (57 percent of respondents), Waste Reduction and Recycling (56 percent), or Land Use and Community Design (56 percent).<sup>1</sup> The smallest group of respondents was working in the topic area of Open Space and Offsetting Carbon Emissions (19 percent).<sup>2</sup>



Respondents were asked to rate their level of expertise in eleven topic areas related to sustainability (outlined in Figure 2). Choices ranged from “no experience” at the low end to “extensive expertise” at the high end. More than 40 percent of respondents reported having *extensive expertise* in one or more of the sustainability topic areas, with the highest numbers reported for Waste Reduction and Recycling, Land Use and Community Design, and Promoting Community and Individual Action.

## Learning about Sustainability and Sharing Information

The main purpose of the Learning Network is to facilitate information sharing on the local level, throughout the state. Over 50 percent of all respondents reported that they often turn to local officials or staff, nonprofits, foundations, and regional agency

<sup>1</sup> Respondents were allowed to choose multiple sustainability areas.

<sup>2</sup> The areas of sustainability that respondents are working in may be a reflection of who ILG sent the questionnaire to, not the actual level of expertise in various sustainability areas across California.

representatives for advice on sustainability, indicating that representatives from these organizations are viewed as trusted or helpful sources.

To better understand how local officials and staff seek information, we asked this group of respondents how often they turn to colleagues *outside of their own city or county* to share ideas and exchange information. Forty-three percent of local officials and staff (165) reported that they exchange sustainability information with local officials and staff outside of their city or county at least a few times a month. These results suggest that peer learning and exchange across organizations is an important mechanism for acquiring information and expertise on sustainability.

Respondents also often turn to the internet and websites or have meetings and discussions with their colleagues to learn new information about sustainability (more than half of the respondents answered “often” for these two resources). This makes a strong argument for both providing access to useful resources online and facilitating information exchange and peer-learning in a network setting.

## Next Steps

The relatively high response rate for the questionnaire (28 percent) indicates that the group of people ILG identified may be good starting point for building the Learning Network. Given the level of expertise that exists across various fields of sustainability, there appear to be ample opportunities to tap into experts to share information. The Learning Network can play an important role by facilitating information sharing in areas where there are gaps in knowledge, particularly in Open Space and Offsetting Carbon Emissions and Climate-Friendly Purchasing (in this group of respondents).

The information gathered through the Sustainable Communities Questionnaire will help ILG determine which resources are highlighted through the Learning Network, how information is shared, and what activities are offered to network participants. For example, respondents are concerned about the ability for local communities to implement sustainability efforts given the tough economic climate. Thus, ILG plans on highlighting resources and providing learning opportunities that identify funding sources and describe the economic consequences of investing in sustainability efforts.

The Sustainable Communities Learning Network is intended to be an evolving entity. ILG plans to periodically query Learning Network participants in order to continually assess if we are providing the most relevant resources in a usable format.

The Institute for Local Government promotes good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities. The Institute is the nonprofit 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 sustainability go to [www.ca-ilg.org/sustainability](http://www.ca-ilg.org/sustainability). To give us feedback on this report or if you have questions about the Sustainable Communities Learning Network, please contact Jessica Aviña, Sustainable Communities Program Coordinator by emailing [sustainability@ca-ilg.org](mailto:sustainability@ca-ilg.org).