

Educating Our Communities and Building for a Green Future

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Sustainability and “green” are two of the prominent buzz-words of the day. Both in the governmental and corporate spheres, there is at least a conceptual recognition at this point that many citizens and consumers are concerned with protecting the natural environment, either locally or globally, and want the governments that represent them and the companies that make the products they buy to do something about it. This is the current context to which local government policies and programs must respond. The key question for local governments that care about a green future is how can it be achieved in the most effective and expeditious way.

Political Will

City governments play the most vital role in developing more sustainable communities. The starting point for significant community action on sustainability begins with the presence of a political will to do it. Without a strong champion or champions on the City Council that are able to get a majority of their colleagues to agree, very little significant policy action is possible. Concomitantly, without a champion or champions at the executive staff level within a city government, policy action will likely be anemic. It is the convergence of a will for action by both elected officials **and** key executive staff within a local government that makes truly significant and innovative policies possible.

Walk the Talk

Before trying to convince the community to do anything green, the first thing that a city must do is build their own credibility by “walking the talk”. The first arena for action should be a city’s own facilities, infrastructure and operations. If the city does not possess the will to invest hard dollars and significant staff time in the greening of its own properties it cannot expect to convince its citizens to do so. City actions serve as a model for broader community action as well as provide an opportunity to confirm what works and what does not, thereby creating a base of local knowledge that will be transferable to residents and businesses.

Raise the Bar

A big part of the consciousness raising process comes from actions by the city to adopt mandatory and voluntary green standards. More stringent energy efficiency requirements for new construction, other green building requirements as a part of the building permit processes, retrofit upon sale requirements, codes and standards to increase water efficiency and reduce solid waste, and creation of incentives for green actions in both new and existing properties. As a part of the council and community review process for these proposed new mandatory and voluntary standards it is critically important that the actions be evaluated in

terms of overall long-term cost-effectiveness and other tangible benefits to the property owners, property occupants and the community as a whole. Most such actions are easily justified as intelligent and financially prudent strategies to improve the community's economic health and quality of life when holistic and long-term factors are used to weigh the costs and benefits.

Create a Groundswell

Simultaneous with a city getting its own act together and exercising leadership in adoption of new codes and standards to significantly raise the bar on the minimum green actions that are required, the city plays a key role in developing the green messages and the specific green program "offers" that will be marketed to the community. It is essential that considerable work be put into development and testing of the messages and programs before they are disseminated. Cities, utilities and other agencies are frequently frustrated by disappointing levels of participation in their programs. Sometimes the problem is that the program is not effectively marketed and sometimes the problem is that the program is poorly conceived. We should not waste our time trying to sell something that people do not want. Considerable up-front work on development and testing of both the programs and the marketing campaigns is therefore essential.

How then do we ensure the best outreach and education necessary to promote individual and collective action in the broad community? What has proven to be very effective in this regard is a combination of efforts both through official City channels as well as through alliances and partnerships with existing institutions and organizations in the community (chamber of commerce, school district, serving utilities, business improvement districts, environmental groups, community groups, colleges, HOAs, neighborhood associations, service organizations, industry groups, private schools, churches, etc.). People are much more likely to act on information and offers of program assistance when they trust the source of the information. Many times, a City staff person is not at the top of this list so strategic alliances with other trusted voices can deliver the message much more effectively.

What has also proven very effective is partnering with specialized non-profit or for-profit companies to help deliver the messages and administer the programs in the community. The Energy Coalition is one such non-profit entity. Sustainable Works, a non-profit created and supported by the City of Santa Monica, is another good example. Individual cities typically do not possess the staff capacity or the core competency to develop and administer energy efficiency, solar, green building or other similar types of programs. Such a capacity can certainly be developed over time if a city so desires, but in the interim the most successful approach is often the retention of surrogate representatives to assist in the dissemination of the green messages and the marketing and administration of substantial portions of the green programs. City staff is then better able to manage the overall strategies and goals of their sustainable community efforts.

Don't Let the Perfect Get In the Way of the Good

The great majority of our fellow citizens want to act responsibly and do the “right thing” to protect the environment and make their community more sustainable. Some of them need no help at all figuring out what they can do and how to do it. Some of them need just a little bit of help figuring out how to access existing programs to move forward. Most of these residents and businesses, however, need substantial assistance with both information, access to programs and financing. Experience shows that the more targeted the information that is given, the more likely that action will actually result. In other words, general information on how critical our environmental challenges are and how important it is that people “do something” about it is much less likely to lead to results than direct outreach and information to a targeted sector of the community on a particular program or initiative that will allow them to reduce their energy and greenhouse gas footprint in a meaningful and cost-effective way. The fewer separate points of contact with the targeted citizens the better as multiple messages and messengers can be confusing, the closer to one-stop shopping and bundling of programs that can be achieved the better, the more specific examples that can be shared from residents and businesses who have already taken the actions and seen positive results the better, and the more that the campaign is seen as an important means to building a safer and healthier community the better.

The important point is not how we start, but rather **that** we start. We must guard against the paralysis of analysis, accept that mistakes are inevitable, adopt bold goals and targets, and take advantage of opportunities when they arise and not after they dissipate. Finally, we need to have fun doing it.