

NATIONAL LEAGUE of CITIES | MUNICIPAL ACTION GUIDE

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Sustainable Cities: 10 Steps Forward

Healthy, prosperous and resilient communities develop not as a result of isolated initiatives but through a combination of clear vision and strategic actions. Local governments increasingly understand the importance of addressing the urgent needs of today, while not compromising the opportunities of tomorrow. Sustainability, the term most commonly used to describe this approach, encompasses a broad framework of interrelated issues that includes (but is not limited to) environmental stewardship, economic growth, public health and social equity.

Given the all-encompassing nature of sustainability, this guide provides a broad overview of selected issue areas and action items commonly contained within a city-wide sustainability strategy. Though far from a comprehensive review, policies and programs presented here represent recommended and replicable strategies that have successfully contributed to city-led sustainability efforts across the country. This review provides ideas and inspiration for cities seeking to develop or expand upon their own sustainability initiatives.

To demonstrate commitment and realize maximum impact of activities, cities of all sizes are encouraged to develop sustainability plans, or incorporate sustainability goals into existing comprehensive plans — a process that can be both challenging and rewarding.

SECRETS TO SUCCESS

Sustainability plans are unique to each community, and can vary widely in scope, approach and issue area. Despite this, successful programs tend to share several of the following “secrets to success:”

Go public:	Actively seek and incorporate community input
Be a champion:	Demonstrate local leadership and commitment at all stages
Find meaning:	Clearly define what sustainability means for the community
Snoop around:	Seek out (and borrow from) the experiences of others
Make friends:	Encourage public-private partnership
Make more friends:	Include regional perspectives
Mix it up:	Think creatively — policies are but one tool in the toolbox
Focus on fairness:	Consider and promote social equity and inclusion
Organize for success:	Fully integrate goals and responsibilities throughout municipal operations and dedicate staff as necessary
Take stock:	Measure, monitor, report. Repeat.
Brag a bit:	Share what you’ve done — e-mail sustainability@nlc.org

A product of the National League of Cities, in conjunction with its Sustainability Partner, The Home Depot Foundation



10 STEPS TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY:

ENERGY: Install Energy-Efficient Traffic and Street Lights

Amid rising energy costs and in anticipation of future demand, cities are finding new ways to curb consumption through greater efficiency. One increasingly effective strategy is to replace traffic and street lighting with energy-efficient LEDs (light emitting-diode). Compared with incandescent streetlights, LEDs use at least 50 percent less energy and can last several times longer, offering significant savings in utility bills and long-term maintenance costs.

Ann Arbor, Mich., currently saves \$49,000 annually from a program begun in 2000 that replaced incandescent traffic and pedestrian crossing signals with LEDs. Building on this success the city is replacing 1,400 globe streetlights with LEDs, an initiative that is expected to save an additional \$100,000 annually.

A National Consortium for LED Street lights, led by Seattle City Light and launched by the U.S. Department of Energy (<http://www1.eere.energy.gov/buildings/ssl/consortium.html>), brings together cities, utilities and energy efficiency organizations to share information.

WATER: Incorporate Green Infrastructure

Availability, distribution, disposal and quality — these are just some of the challenges cities face regarding water resources. Depending on geography and season, specific issues may include droughts, flooding, access rights, infrastructure maintenance and pollution control. Green infrastructure, such as permeable surfaces, rain gardens, green roofs and urban forestry provide cost-effective and ecologically sound alternatives to traditional water management systems. These strategies also naturally recharge groundwater, improve water quality and reduce the heat island effect.

As a result of a series of green infrastructure projects, the City of Philadelphia has realized approximately \$170 million in savings and a significant reduction in combined sewer overflows since 2006. The City of Topeka, Kan., initiated an extensive partnership of local, state and federal government agencies, universities, non-profits and private stakeholders to develop and implement a comprehensive Stormwater Master Plan with a specific focus on green infrastructure. Completed projects have alleviated residential flooding, improved water quality, provided stream bank stabilization and provided urban green space.

LAND USE: Repurpose Underutilized Parcels

Developing vacant, abandoned, possibly contaminated and/or underutilized parcels can turn a community liability into an asset, foster economic development and reduce sprawl. Depending on size, location and condition, parcels may be converted into green space and community gardens, or developed for commercial and residential use. Common strategies to acquire and redevelop underutilized land include infill incentives and public-private partnerships. Of particular interest for sustainability is the repurposing of brownfields, which provide added public health and safety benefits, remove pollutants from soil and water resources and provide specialized job opportunities in clean-up and remediation.

The U.S. EPA's Brownfield Program (www.epa.gov/brownfields) provides helpful information on funding opportunities, legislation and tools.

MUNICIPAL OPERATIONS: Go Green

Given the high volume of products and materials purchased by local government, procurement policies can be instrumental in guiding decisions that will minimize negative impacts to ecological and human health. Often referred to as



Environmentally Preferable Purchasing (EPP), this strategy requires the use of selected criteria in evaluating products and typically aims to reduce waste, conserve natural resources, eliminate the use of toxic materials or pollutants and promote the use of recycled content.

Alameda County's EPP policy is widely considered a model for local government. The U.S. Communities Government Purchasing Alliance features a "Go Green" program (<http://www.gogreencommunities.org/>) as an excellent resource for cities to identify and purchase certified green products.

Another significant opportunity is available to cities that maintain and operate a fleet of vehicles for public transportation, emergency services or municipal operations. As a first step, cities are encouraged to conduct an inventory of current vehicles, identify where more fuel-efficient vehicles may be appropriate and determine if the overall fleet can be reduced through vehicle sharing across departments or through other alternatives. Several cities have also established "green fleet" policies that can significantly reduce fuel costs and emissions.

One of the first such policies was established in 1993 by the City of Denver and is now considered a national model. Similarly, in Santa Monica, Calif., more than 80 percent of the city's municipal fleet operates on alternative fuel and advanced reduced-emission technology as a result of a 1994 "Reduced-Emissions Fuels Policy for Vehicle Purchases." Columbus, Ohio, has included language in the city's environmentally preferable purchasing policy to include fleet-related decisions, while in Austin, Texas, a new car-share program for city employees has been well received.

TRANSPORTATION: Expand and Diversify Options

Increased access to alternative transportation has been shown to improve public health, reduce emissions and air pollution, increase housing values, promote economic development and contribute to a greater sense of place and community. Adding mass transit options — bus, rail, light rail, streetcar, trolley, subway, ferry, etc. — is a strategy that nearly any community can consider. To facilitate access to non-motorized options such as bike lanes and walkable streets, local and state governments are adopting "Complete Streets" policies with positive results.

Through an impressive program in Minneapolis, the percentage of bicyclists in the city has increased approximately 77% percent from 2003-2007. The City of Decatur, Ga., has embraced active living as part of its approach to sustainability and identified improved walkability as a core contributor to the city's economic and community development.

AIR QUALITY AND CLIMATE: Conduct a Greenhouse Gas Inventory

Greenhouse gas inventories are used to provide cities with a baseline understanding of current emission sources, identify priority areas and track progress over time. They are often a first step toward developing a city-wide climate action strategy. Cities may choose to limit their assessment to municipal operations or develop a more comprehensive community-wide or even regional analysis.

The U.S. EPA State and Local Climate Energy Program (www.epa.gov/statelocalclimate) is a one-stop resource that includes helpful tools and information for cities to get started on or move forward with their climate initiatives.

PUBLIC HEALTH: Increase Access to Fresh, Healthy and Local Foods

Sustainable communities are healthy communities. Yet a decrease in access to healthy, nutritious food options within America's cities and towns has been cited as a leading cause of the rising (and in some cases epidemic) rates of obesity and other related diseases across the country. In addition to providing direct public health benefits, a focus on healthy and locally produced foods supports the local and regional economy and contributes to a sense of place and community.



Strategies that cities can use to promote and expand food access include: the formation of farmers markets; incentivizing the development of grocery stores in underserved communities; and supporting or facilitating opportunities for urban agriculture such as community gardens.

Local food systems are included in the sustainability plans of cities such as Baltimore and Philadelphia and were the focus of an Executive Directive in San Francisco.

GREEN BUILDINGS: Encourage Green Building Standards for New and Existing Buildings

Green buildings, when part of a broader sustainability plan, consume less energy, produce fewer emissions, protect occupant health, minimize waste and create jobs. By adopting green building standards for public buildings, cities lead by example and help to create a market for similar standards across a community. Cities may choose to apply standards to new construction or extend requirements to existing buildings based on certain requirements (i.e. age and size of a building).

The City of Houston, for example, adopted a resolution to achieve LEED Silver ratings on new construction, replacement facilities and major renovations of city-owned buildings greater than 10,000 sq. ft. Demonstrating how green buildings can impact community development, the City of Los Angeles passed the nation's first "Green Retrofit and Workforce" ordinance directly linking energy-efficient retrofits to green job creation and social equity by prioritizing retrofits of buildings in low-income communities.

The U.S. Green Building Council (<http://www.usgbc.org/>) provides a range of helpful tools and resources for local governments to get started and expand green building programs.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: Support Local Businesses

A strong economy is fundamental to community sustainability. Small community-based businesses in particular contribute significantly to local economies and overall community development. Cities may directly support and strengthen small business through the provision of direct technical assistance, by adopting local purchasing agreements or establishing a 'buy local' awareness campaign.

The City of Austin, Texas, developed a model Small Business Development Program (SBDP) to help local businesses and entrepreneurs get started and expand their outreach. Services include technical assistance, business development classes, conferences and free access to software and databases. To promote local products and services throughout the city, Austin has also developed an online, interactive map of local businesses. Similarly, Phoenix has used funding through its Community Development Block Grant to develop a Management Technical Assistance program that provides small business owners with free consultation services related to general business and marketing, financing and loan packaging, business needs assessment and workforce development and human resource planning.

HOUSING: Increase Access to Affordable, Location-Efficient Housing

Approximately 12 million households pay more than 50 percent of their annual incomes for housing. When factoring in transportation costs associated with housing's proximity to jobs, schools and other amenities — termed "location efficiency" — the true cost of housing can approach 60 to 70 percent of annual income. Housing location and affordability present a complex challenge and are directly linked to a combination of factors, including land use, economic development and transportation policies. Yet local leaders can and are taking steps to promote access to affordable housing, often within areas offering multi-modal transportation options. One effective strategy has been the use of incentives — density bonuses, fee waivers, expedited permits and tax credits — for housing developers to include a percentage of



affordable housing units within a given project. Incentives can be used to increase the availability of affordable housing while also promoting specific objectives such as infill redevelopment and the incorporation of green building practices.

The Center for Neighborhood Technology's Housing and Transportation Affordability Index (<http://htaindex.cnt.org>) calculates the cost of housing based on location for individual census blocks in hundreds of metro areas.

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH OTHERS!

In pursuing sustainability, each city has a unique story to share, and by doing so, your city can catalyze local action by others and contribute to the development of innovative solutions and proven strategies that others can model. The National League of Cities is eager to learn about what your city is doing to promote and expand sustainability in your community. Please share information about your programs, plans, projects, and policies by e-mailing sustainability@nlc.org. Select examples will be included within NLC's sustainability database, highlighted in various publications, and featured on the websites of NLC and/or The Home Depot Foundation's Sustainable Cities Institute (www.sustainablecitiesinstitute.org).



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ABOUT THE NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

The National League of Cities is the nation's oldest and largest organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership and governance. NLC is a resource and advocate for more 1,600 member cities and the 49 state municipal leagues, representing 19,000 cities and towns and more than 218 million Americans.

Through its **Center for Research and Innovation**, NLC provides research and analysis on key topics and trends important to cities, creative solutions to improve the quality of life in communities, inspiration and ideas for local officials to use in tackling tough issues and opportunities for city leaders to connect with peers, share experiences and learn about innovative approaches in cities.

ABOUT THE HOME DEPOT FOUNDATION

Created in 2002, The Home Depot Foundation supports nonprofit organizations dedicated to creating and preserving healthy, affordable homes as the cornerstone of sustainable communities. The foundation's goal is for all families to have the opportunity to live in healthy, efficient homes they can afford over the long-term; to have access to safe, vibrant parks and greenspaces; and to receive the economic, social and environmental benefits of living in a sustainable community. For more information, visit www.homedepotfoundation.org and follow us on Twitter [homedepotfdn](https://twitter.com/homedepotfdn).

Created in 2009, the **Sustainable Cities Institute (SCI)** is a two-part initiative from The Home Depot Foundation that provides a one-stop shop for cities and sustainability professionals to find vetted best practices from across the country to help them identify and implement local sustainable practices and policies as well as communicate with other cities about sustainability related issues and topics. For more information, visit www.sustainablecitiesinstitute.org and follow us on Twitter [@sustcitiesinst](https://twitter.com/sustcitiesinst).