



State of America's Cities: Sustainability

Executive Summary and Preliminary Results

December 2010 - Believing sustainability to be a rising priority among the nation's local governments, but with little hard evidence available on what actions cities are taking or how they view the subject, the National League of Cities has undertaken its first national survey on sustainability. Performed over the summer and fall of 2010, the survey generated responses from 442 cities, with significant representation from all regions of the country and all population sizes. A forthcoming research brief will further analyze these and additional results, while also providing detailed information on the programs and policies cities are instituting.

PRIORITIZING

Sustainability is on the radar screen of nearly all local governments, with a mere 8% of cities stating that they haven't addressed the issue. Sustainability is identified by 13% of cities as a leading priority evident throughout all municipal activities, and an additional 44% describe it as an important factor in developing the city's long-term goals.

As might be expected, a majority of respondents list concern for the environment as an extremely or very significant factor in prompting work on sustainability (57%). Cities exhibit a nearly identical level of response related to the economic aspect of sustainability, as the potential for long-term financial savings (59%) narrowly exceeds concern for the environment, followed closely by potential for short-term savings (56%), as well as potential to attract investment (46%).

Cities were also asked to identify barriers to their work on sustainability. Two issues dominated the responses: lack of funding was listed as an extremely or very significant barrier by 58%, while lack of staff capacity was listed by 46%. No other response exceeded 15%. Some barriers, commonly thought to be significant, scored particularly low -- lack of community support and awareness (11%), and lack of information needed to get started (11%) may not be the prevailing problems they are often assumed to be.

Asked about the recent economic recession, cities report that it has affected their willingness to invest in sustainability work, but nearly as many cities report that it precipitated an increase as opposed to a decrease. Of those providing a response:

- 33% reported an increase
- 29% reported no impact
- 38% reported a decrease

DEFINING

While every city arrives individually at its own definition of sustainability, the survey results indicate that local governments generally take a broad view of the issue, mirroring the “triple bottom line” approach that encompasses the intersections of environmental quality, economic development, and social equity. A clear pattern emerges when asked what components are included in their definitions of, or approaches to, sustainability.

A trio of issues are clustered at the top:

- Energy (76%)
- Economic growth (75%)
- Environmental protection (74%)

A second grouping of issues also show up in significant amounts:

- Public health (42%)
- Climate protection (38%)
- Social equity (38%)

Asked more specifically to rate the level of priority for a wide range of possible sustainability goals and initiatives, those most frequently listed as a high priority include energy efficiency and conservation (51%), waste reduction and recycling (43%), water infrastructure (39%), and water conservation (32%).

ORGANIZING

The crucial tool for organizing sustainability work is through a comprehensive sustainability plan, and 19% of cities report having adopted one. Another 46% have not adopted a plan but have substantial sustainability-related goals and initiatives.

As has been observed anecdotally, cities are employing a wide variety of staffing models to address sustainability. Some level of dedicated staffing is reported by 40% of cities, either housed in a single department (15%), in the city manager’s office (12%), in the mayor’s or council office (5%), or spread across multiple departments (9%).

The remaining 60% of cities report no dedicated staffing; 12% report no staffing at all, while the balance rely either on goals recognized throughout municipal departments (32%) or a citywide task force, committee or commission (17%).

While dedicated staffing is only found in a minority of cities, the presence of dedicated funding for sustainability work is even more rare -- 76% of cities report that they don’t have a dedicated budget for sustainability.

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

