

Executive Summary

While green purchasing policies have the potential to significantly reduce carbon impacts across the globe, most U.S. cities have either struggled to implement them or do not have one at all. Consequently, green purchasing policies have not reached their potential to help local governments mitigate their environmental impacts. These are significant concerns that the United Nations Environmental Programme, the International City/County Management Association, the Sustainable Purchasing Leadership Council and others suggest must be resolved if we are to move toward an environmentally sustainable economy.

Researchers at the Arizona State University (ASU) Center for Organization Research and Design (CORD) have sought to address these issues with the assistance of a grant from the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation. Our three broad objectives are to:

- Determine the facilitators and the barriers to adoption and implementation of green purchasing policies in local governments.
- Recommend actions for advancing green purchasing practices.
- Encourage local governments that lack green purchasing policies to implement them within their jurisdictions.

To accomplish these objectives, we conducted a national survey of finance, public works and environmental directors in a sample of U.S. local governments. The survey generated 616 individual responses from 459 cities of 25,000 residents or more. These cities were representative based on their population size, income and geographic dispersion by state.

Directors surveyed reported that 28 percent of their cities have a green purchasing policy; 60 percent reported they have no policy, and 12 percent did not know if their city has such a policy.

How are local governments that have adopted green purchasing policies different from nonadopters?

Department directors indicated that cities that adopt green purchasing policies differ in five ways from those cities without such policies:

1. Complementary policies and practices
2. Purchasing criteria
3. Information access
4. Leadership, employees and resources
5. Vendor roles

What factors are more strongly related to implementation success?

Of the 28 percent (170 total) of department directors who reported that their cities had adopted green purchasing policies, more than half (58 percent, 90 total) indicated that their cities have implemented the policy successfully. By contrast, 42 percent (65 total) of the department directors considered the implementation of their green purchasing policies to be either “neutral” (neither successful nor unsuccessful) or “unsuccessful.”

Directors in cities who reported successful implementation of their green purchasing policies noted that these policies are more likely to have five general features:

1. Complementary policies and practices
2. Information access
3. Leadership and implementation responsibility
4. Vendor roles
5. Innovation culture

Recommendations:

Based on these findings, we have developed eight recommendations aimed at increasing cities' green purchasing policy adoption and implementation success:

1. Build on complementary policies and practices
2. Use information about environmentally preferred products like those recommended in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) Guidelines for Environmental Performance Standards and Ecolabels
3. Utilize e-procurement systems that integrate environmental product information
4. Track spending related to green purchases
5. Enhance collaborative vendor relationships
6. Assign accountability to top-level management
7. Foster a culture for innovation
8. Participate in professional networks to share best practices

About ASU's CORD

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CORD is a research center launched at Arizona State University (ASU) that promotes, supports and conducts fundamental research on public, private, nonprofit and hybrid organizations and their design. To achieve its mission, CORD has identified sustainable purchasing research as being an area that has high potential for improving societal conditions. This report is an example of our use-inspired research.

Additional Resources and Contacts

Please visit our website spa.asu.edu/greenpurchasing for additional resources, including:

- Project updates
- Survey materials
- Related research papers and reports
- Video clips
- Podcasts
- Slide decks
- *ASU Now* news articles
- Links to other green purchasing resources

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Advancing Green Purchasing in Local Governments

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