

PERSPECTIVE

How Procurement Officials Can Help Keep the Air and Water Clean

BY KATHERINE BARRETT AND RICHARD GREENE



For generations, procurement has been regarded as a way of getting goods and services into the hands of state and local government agencies—but purchasing dollars can also be used to help advance policy initiatives.

Environmentally preferable purchasing (EPP) is a perfect example.

The idea is simple: If an entity is purchasing a good or a service, and can spend the same (or potentially even less) money in a way that's beneficial to the environment, why not do it? There's a seemingly endless list of purchases that can be made with an eye toward sustainability and environmental soundness, beginning with lawn mowers, leaf blowers, fleets of vehicles (including buses), paper, cleaning fluids, and more.

"In the past we always thought of procurement as a transactional profession," Rick Grimm, CEO of NIGP:

The Institute for Public Procurement, told us recently for a column we wrote for *Route Fifty*.¹ "The client requested something, and we went out and bought it. As the years have passed, there has been growing acceptance of empowering procurement to act strategically in achieving the mission of the public entity, including the ability to use it as a lever for social responsibility."

"Procurement can establish itself as a strategic contributor," said Stephen Gordon, a veteran of 45 years in the public procurement arena, who is coordinator of The Continuity of Supply Initiative, an all-volunteer advocacy group.

The potential benefits are huge, including:

- Reducing waste, pollution, and hazardous materials.
- Minimizing the use of natural resources in production, including water, wood, and oil.
- Lessening the consumption of materials by limiting the frequency of replacement, which subsequently reduces waste as well.

Awareness of these potential benefits led 12 of the 29 respondents to a 2020 survey conducted by the National Association of State Procurement Officials (NASPO) to put a green

purchasing policy in place, while 14 had executive orders mandating green purchasing or sustainability initiatives and goals. And the number of entities that are moving in this direction appears to be growing, both at the state and local levels.

Of course, one obstacle to green purchasing is that it can sometimes cost more than other alternatives, and though taxpayers may want clean air and water, many are hesitant to pay for it at tax time. In fact, the City of Sacramento, California, has passed a statute mandating that the city cannot pay more than a five percent premium for the purchase of recycled products like paper.

In the places in the country where EPP has gotten solid traction—the northwest, northeast, and the State of Minnesota in between—it turns out that green purchasing doesn't necessarily have to strain the budget. As Matt Oyer, NASPO's chief learning officer, explained, "Compared to traditional or conventional options, many sustainable commodities are cost-neutral at purchase and have the ability to save money in the long term."

Above, King County, Washington is a national leader in the effort to preserve the environment in its practices.

Consider the decision made by the City of Dallas, Texas, to alter the kind of pesticides it was using in its playgrounds, parks, and other open areas. “We consulted with environmental experts to see how we could reduce the use of pesticides,” explained Chhun Chhuan, director of the city’s Office of Procurement Services.

The city turned to a variety of alternatives including putting in pest-resistant varieties of plants, “using biological controls, mechanical controls, less toxins, appropriate cultural techniques, and gradually reducing synthetic pesticides,” according to a city document. The city anticipates approximately \$1 million in total savings in the future, although that’s not a sure thing. Operational staff will have to be persuaded to fully integrate the new approaches to get there.

King County, Washington—a national leader in these kinds of efforts—has a number of examples of ways in which it has preserved the county leaders’ dedication to the environment through its procurement practices. In one instance, for example, the county focused on cleaning fluids that contained potentially toxic chemicals.

But, of course, things still needed to be kept clean. The solution: Buy concentrated cleaning fluids that haven’t been diluted by water, like the products that would be found in any large hardware store. By and large, such cleansers are about 80 percent water and 20 percent active ingredients. By purchasing 55-gallon drums of pure chemicals and then adding water, “You’re saving money by buying more bulk solutions and then diluting them to an appropriate strength, which minimizes their negative impact on the environment,” according to Karen Hamilton, the county’s sustainable purchasing program manager.

It would be a mistake to believe that the move toward green purchasing is without challenges. As Hamilton said, “Some people in the agencies are concerned about change. They’ve been buying the same thing from the same company for a long time. And you have to persuade them that the products are going to add value.”

At least in King County, there’s a deep-seated commitment to the efforts Hamilton is making. In many places around the country the idea of persuading leaders that they should be considering environmental concerns when making a purchase can be an uphill battle.

David Post, city council member for the City of Salisbury, North Carolina (a community with about 35,000 residents) said: “We had a federal grant for \$600,000 for small, 15-passenger gas-powered buses. Our buses are these giant diesel buses that are 14 years old, so we need to replace them. I wanted the town to be more environmentally conscious in selection, and I’d been thinking about micro transit.”

Done properly, with safeguards in place to make sure the benefits outweigh the costs, green purchasing can ultimately be a cost-effective way to keep our air and water clean.

“But the transit department thought it would be too difficult to make changes in the grant. I said, ‘I can’t imagine that the Biden administration would want us to be less environmentally sound.’ But they thought it would be too hard to ask. And the council was afraid that we’d lose the grant if we waited too long. So far, we’ve wound up buying one gas-powered bus for \$190,000. I don’t know what’s going to happen with the other \$410,000.”

Even in places where environmentally preferable purchasing is a thoroughly accepted notion, procurement departments have to make sure that a product is really environmentally sound, whatever the manufacturer claims. “There’s a concept called greenwashing,” said Gordon, “where companies will market their products

as green products, but they’re really not. It’s easy for politicians to say we’re buying green, but who is following up on that?”

A popular solution is the use of third-party environmental certifications, or ecolabels, according to NASPO’s Oyer. “Products and services carrying ecolabels have been independently certified to meet sustainability or environmental impact criteria. The U.S. EPA’s EnergyStar is a long-running ecolabel that most everyone should recognize.”

As the Environmental Protection Agency’s website explains, its Energy Star is a “symbol for energy efficiency, providing simple, credible and unbiased information.”

Beyond having ample evidence that a product is in fact good for the environment is the need for entities to do in-depth research about pricing—not just in the short term but over the lifecycle of the item being procured. “When you look at replacing gas-powered tools with battery-powered tools, they may cost a similar amount originally, but those batteries won’t last forever, and you may have to replace the batteries every year. So, it’s important to look at the lifecycle cost,” said Jack Pellegrino, director of purchasing and contracting for San Diego County, California.

In the final analysis, environmentally preferable purchasing can be a difficult undertaking. In places where low bids are the only element considered in procurement—an outmoded approach, now often replaced by something called “best value procurement”—it can even be impossible.

But done properly, with safeguards in place to make sure the benefits outweigh the costs, green purchasing can ultimately be a cost-effective way to keep our air and water clean. ■

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¹ “Leveraging State and Local Buying Power to Improve Resilience and Sustainability,” Route Fifty, October 25, 2021.