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The "Greening" of Local Governments

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Local governments have taken the lead in "greening" in the United States. Urban, suburban, and rural areas each green themselves through practices specific to their own level of development. While local communities do not enjoy equal amounts of public support or funding for greening, they can choose to contribute more or less to these efforts. In taking "direct" or "indirect" actions internally or externally, the seemingly piecemeal efforts of local governments to promote greening can lead to a significantly greener nation as a whole.

Environmental protection has become a major public policy concern in the United States. The salience of this issue has varied over time, however, as have approaches to dealing with it, particularly at the national level of government. Now that environmental consciousness has become part of mainstream political discourse, a long-term solution to the problem of environmental health has arrived as well. This solution is not some new technology but a new leader in addressing the problem: local governments rather than the federal government. Local governments have several unique capabilities that make them especially adept at dealing with environmental problems and finding innovative and sometimes even groundbreaking remedies.

Why Local Governments?

The growing recognition by scientists of adverse global climate change has provoked a blizzard of opinions both for and against governmental intervention to address the problem. Regrettably, the federal government has been immobilized by these clashing viewpoints. Ensuring a healthy environment while also meeting the nation's economic and energy needs is such a daunting and divisive task that the federal government has effectively swept the problem under the proverbial rug. Fortunately, municipalities have a growing interest in achieving a more effective policy balance. In the absence of coherent national policy, they are realizing that they can achieve their goals

through many piecemeal local actions rather than wait for a comprehensive federal plan that may never materialize (Verchick 2003, 1).

Politicians are the middlemen between citizens and polluters, but it is local politicians who are achieving the most policy change. The National Association of Counties (NACo) met in Washington D.C. in 2008 to discuss environmental policy. Its conference "sought to provide answers for counties looking to take the first steps to mitigating climate change and adapting to it, and to show that counties have already taken a leadership role in paving the way to a world in which 'climate change' does not spell 'Doomsday'" (Sprow). Underscoring the new role that local governments play at the forefront of the environmental movement, NACo cited many inspiring examples of counties that have devised policies for ameliorating a wide variety of environmental problems (Sprow). Thus, when public school buses in Pennsylvania's suburbs can be re-engineered to run on bio-diesel fuel, no one runs to Congress with a bill in hand. Instead, local officials are petitioned. "Local governments have begun to see that thinking and acting locally not only improve local conditions, but also contribute substantially to national and international environmental goals" (Verchick 2003, 1).

American communities have certain advantages in trying to promote more environmental responsibility, but they also face obstacles. For instance, physical settings differ widely across the nation. Previously "greened" or undeveloped regions require action much different from what is appropriate for "brown" regions. Urban, suburban, and rural areas each green themselves through practices specific to their own level of development. Consequently, different approaches to greening are needed. "The influence of local authority is particularly great in urban areas, now home to nearly half the world's population," but cities "are often the main contributors to environmental damage" (Verchick 2003, 2). On this point, Bonnie Hulkower (2008), a biologist and environmental planner for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, cites New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's effort to turn the Big Apple into the "Green Apple" by reducing the size of its formidable environmental footprint.

Yet, local communities do not enjoy equal amounts of public support or funding for greening. As with higher levels of government, they can choose to contribute more or less resources toward local greening.

Similarly, consumer advocates, environmental groups, labor unions, political parties, lobbies, and other advocacy groups within the immediate geographic area can generate varying amounts of public pressure both for and against environmental action. Because local politicians best understand local environmental problems and because they are the officials closest and most accountable to their constituents, they are naturally the ones most likely to affect the kind of change sought by the local electorate. All these factors must be considered when local communities develop and implement environmental protection policy.

Greening Strategies

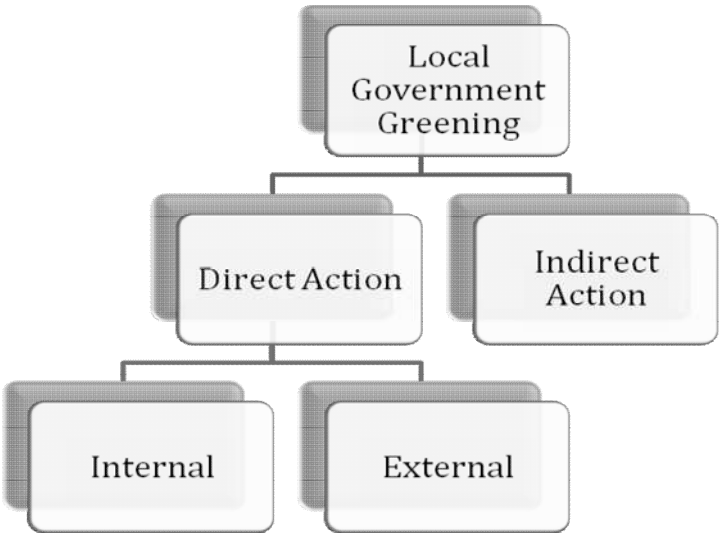
"Greening," also known as "environmental stewardship," is defined by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (2009) as "the responsibility for environmental quality shared by all those whose actions affect the environment." How can local governments take responsibility for reducing the environmental impacts of its operations? Local governments can create greener municipalities in two different ways: directly and indirectly (see Diagram 1 on the following page). Local governments can create greener municipalities in two different ways: directly and indirectly. A local governing body takes *direct action* when it reduces the environmental footprint of its own operations. It might, for example, use environmentally friendly lighting in its office buildings or makes the delivery of its water supply to constituents more energy efficient. Such action is the most immediate and apparent form of environmentalism practiced by municipalities because it involves the local governments themselves physically changing how they operate. This form of governmental action is direct in the sense that it directly reduces the negative impact of the local government's operations on the surrounding environment, even though it may not necessarily affect directly the local citizenry.

Indirect action includes governmental measures that do not directly influence the impact a municipality has on its surrounding environment but instead establish a context in which greener practices will take root in the local community. Such action is normally manifested in regulatory structures that promote or demand environmental awareness on the part of individuals and organizations. Indirect action is largely influenced by the opinions of those public and private sector actors most likely to be affected by such measures. This kind of action is effective only to the

extent that it affects agents not formally part of the local government itself. Many local governments throughout the nation make both direct and indirect environmental policies. This article will focus primarily upon those municipalities regarded as leaders in developing policies for protecting the local environment.

Diagram 1

Local Government Greening Strategies



To understand *direct action* more fully, a distinction must be drawn between *internal* and *external* green actions (IGAs and EGAs). When greening their own operations, local governments can do so in ways that either involve direct interaction with constituents or support such interactions. An IGA is a direct initiative whereby a government establishes green practices or obtains capital for its own use in ways consistent with green principles. An example would be a municipality choosing to use the kind of environmentally friendly lighting technology mentioned above rather than a less environmentally conscious alternative. Such initiatives generally involve the operating costs of governing. By contrast, an EGA occurs whenever a governing body

provides goods or services to the public in a way that adheres to green principles. An example would be the greener water delivery system cited above. These initiatives normally involve programs and infrastructure with which citizens have contact.

Taking Direct Action

Florida's Miami-Dade County has been implementing IGAs since 1992. A "Resource Conservation Committee" brings together representatives from different government departments to identify ways to use the county's resources in a more environmentally protective manner. The committee promotes environmentally friendly purchasing and use policies, particularly for environmentally dangerous custodial products such as solvents, wood preservatives, aerosol sprays, moth repellants, air fresheners, and cleaners and disinfectants. County buildings have been retrofitted with low-flow toilets and faucets, water-efficient washers and leak repairs, and energy-efficient lighting, heating, ventilation, and air conditioning. These improvements have saved the county about 55 million gallons of water and 17 million kilowatt hours of electricity per year, which equates to about 10,440 tons of carbon dioxide gas that the county has avoided producing. Miami-Dade has also been greening its motor vehicle fleet in recent years. A 2003 resolution called for a 3% to 5% reduction in fleet carbon dioxide emissions annually, with the goal of a 20% reduction in emissions over the course of five years. The county has also reduced carbon dioxide emissions by thousands of tons through the use of environmentally conscious purchasing specifications, tighter departmental control of operations, new technology, a moratorium on SUV use, and a doubling of the number of "hybrid" vehicles in the fleet from 281 to 413 to (Hefty 2006).

Chicago, Illinois, (Cook County) also is greening internally through its purchasing policies. Currently focused on purchasing recycled and recyclable goods for the county, local officials intend to set minimum standards for recycled content, thereby achieving the EPA "Energy Star" certification as well as meeting the Federal Energy Management Program's "Product Energy Efficiency Recommendations" (Quigley 2005). They are also creating "Green Teams" to help facilitate environmental initiatives across the county. In the course of examining information flow between departments, these teams watch for environmental problems and opportunities to go green (Quigley 2005).

IGAs such as these not only lower pollution levels in general but also set an example for the public and private sectors to promote a more environmentally responsible community.

EGAs in Cook County are continuously being implemented in a variety of government services. The county is seeking alternatives to biologically harmful road salt while making the roads themselves greener by reclaiming scrap tires for rubberized asphalt in highway paving projects (Quigley 2005). Similarly, Cook County's courts are saving energy and resources by shifting toward paperless communication. They are also considering whether to require that all court documents be submitted on recycled, double-sided pages or, alternatively, that they be filed electronically (Quigley 2005).

Public buses in Seattle, Washington (King County), are being run on a bio-diesel fuel blend (Novey 2007). Seattle is also installing natural drainage systems that account for an 11% reduction in the city's impervious street surface area (Sierra Club 2006). Iredell County, North Carolina, requires natural lighting and ventilation in new school construction. These systems not only reduce costs for lighting and air conditioning but also decrease absentee rates by increasing air quality. EGAs promote more community involvement than do IGAs because EGAs encourage constituents to use green services offered by local governments rather than just watch these governments green their own organizations.

Taking Indirect Action

Municipalities increasingly use *legal action* to adopt and enforce green-focused legislation. For example, local officials in Cook County, Illinois, have enacted a "Green Buildings Ordinance" that requires all future construction to meet Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification standards. They are also considering raising the requirements further to meet the more stringent Silver rating (Quigley 2005). Austin, Texas, has adopted a "climate change protection plan" that will require all buildings in the city to run entirely on renewable energy sources by 2012 (Guerrieri 2008). In Pennsylvania, the private advocacy group PennFuture has offered free legal advice and representation to individuals, organizations, and local governments promoting environmental protection (PennFuture 2004). The group

joined with citizens and other organizations to prevent the mayor of Pittsburgh from authorizing strip mining along the city's largest area of undeveloped land. It also filed suit when a power plant in Greene County, Pennsylvania, violated state and national clean air standards. Whether initiated by government or by the private sector, legal action is the most authoritative kind of indirect action that local officials can take because it demands action on the part of those being sued.

Although legal action is the only kind of indirect action local governments can take that demands a formal response, *economic action* can also be an effective force in promoting the greening of local communities. Economic action involves providing both the private and public sector with financial incentives for greening and disincentives for polluting. It also includes funding private organizations that promote greening. Groups such as PennFuture thus collect millions of dollars in grants and assistance from governments, which they use to enable citizens to do the greening themselves. Green building incentives are appearing across the United States, especially in cities and particularly with regard to green roof construction. Portland, Oregon, offers tax credits for reduced energy consumption, green building, recycling, renewable energy use, and cleaner fuel projects (Guerrieri 2008). The municipality also offers density incentives as part of a "floor area ratio bonus option" for developers who install environmentally friendly roofing materials.

San Francisco provides a speedy application process for installing solar power devices, and it offers help with design and installation (Guerrieri 2008). Chicago provides $5,000 grants for planning and installing green roofs (Guerrieri 2008). It is also pursuing innovative tax policies that promote greening, such as a new property tax classification for LEED buildings. Taxes on new vehicle purchases normally are based upon the number of wheels a vehicle has rather than upon its weight. Because weight is normally correlated with carbon emissions, however, Chicago is planning to base the tax and vehicle registration fee on weight alone (Quigley 2005). Municipalities prefer economic actions such as those cited here because they use incentives rather than commands. Economic action is also more affordable than direct investment in the short-term.

Social action involves the use of various communications media to create awareness and promote action on environmental issues among

citizens and businesses. Although these efforts are the least powerful of the three types of indirect action, they can still be effective. For instance, local school systems are increasingly becoming involved in stimulating environmental consciousness. In Traverse City, Michigan, Glen Lake High School participated in "Focus of the Nation," a program that visits schools across the country to teach students about global warming and to promote green ideas (Foster 2008). Schools in Prince George County, Maryland, have begun incorporating environmental education into their curricula. Environmental concepts are being introduced into students' classes by such methods as including environmentally relevant terms on vocabulary lists and debating the severity of global warming in social studies courses (Carter 2007). Local governments are also involved in promoting environmental awareness. The LEED rating system is a national code, but municipalities such as Chicago are using it to showcase greening within their jurisdictions. Social action might be the least authoritative means of indirect greening, but it creates effective social incentives for *encouraging* people to be more environmentally responsible rather than *forcing* them to that end.

Better Together

The seemingly piecemeal efforts of local governments to promote greening can lead to a significantly greener nation as a whole. If local governments start working together—forming a vast network of knowledge and expertise in going green—a sustainable environment is achievable. The municipalities discussed here have developed remarkable strategies for dealing with environmental problems specific to themselves. Because these strategies would not necessarily be as effective if pursued by other municipalities, broad national plans likely would not be effective. That does not mean, however, that *none* of the IGAs and EGAs employed by one local government can not be used effectively by another. While the tactics identified here are impressive, they are generally viewed as solitary, isolated cases. By looking at greening strategies only in this narrow way, we risk overlooking possibilities for broader applications of them. Many localities face similar environmental problems, even though they may be far apart from one another geographically.

It is crucial that local governments capitalize on these kinds of similarities. The speed of local government greening would increase

rapidly if municipalities adopted greening strategies that proved to be effective in other jurisdictions facing similar problems. Fortunately, organizations are emerging to address this need. ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability is a network of local governments across the globe that promotes sustainable development (ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability 2008). Among the many resources that this group offers to its members is a database that includes information about model green programs. It also helps to coordinate programs that advance environmental protection. By hosting an international conference in May of 2008 in Santa Rosa, California, to identify and discuss goals, the ICLEI has helped municipalities to develop their own agendas and plans for action. More than a thousand municipalities around the world are ICLEI members, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Denver, Atlanta, and Miami (ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability 2008).

The National Environmental Training Center for Small Communities offers resources geared toward local governments of communities with small populations. It provides educational materials and training as well as consulting services (Training Center for Small Communities 2007). State and national agencies can also play this kind of role. The Bureau of Recreation and Conservation of the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (2008) offers support and consultation for greening to local governments in Pennsylvania. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is probably the largest body of this type. Clean Air Counts is a project of various local governments in northeastern Illinois that have banded together in an effort to save energy and reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Illinois Green Fleets is another program that spans the private and governmental sectors. It provides recognition and other marketing opportunities for groups that use “clean, green, domestic, renewable American fuel vehicles.” The Chicago Area Clean Cities Coalition is yet another multi-sector group that promotes greening by coordinating local actors. Best Workplaces for Commuters recognizes and supports employers in Cook County who provide benefits for commuting employees. Cook County is also actively developing environmentally conscious purchasing agreements between local governments for the procurement of recycled products and other goods. Similarly, Miami-Dade County is making “Florida Green Local Government Certification” available to any local government that can meet strict greening standards. Programs like these

save money and foster cooperative working relationships among local governments. They also make a significant contribution to environmental protection.

Conclusion

Local municipalities no longer can rely solely on the federal and state governments for promoting green initiatives. The environmental movement is now knocking on the doors of local governments and it is up to local officials to answer the call for protecting the environment. Local government is well-equipped to grapple effectively with environmental problems because "local government resides closest to ecological effects, it holds the greatest potential for democracy, it is capable of flexible and innovative implementation, and it has the potential to protect local constituents from distributional imbalances on the regional scale" (Verchick 2003, 2). The strategies identified in this article are just a few of the many actions taken by localities to green themselves from the ground up. From directly making their own operations more environmentally friendly to indirectly stimulating their constituents to be more environmentally responsible, local governments have been given the "green light." As a result, they are traveling full speed ahead on the road to a greener America.

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