At Issue: SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is a defining issue of our time. Increasingly, citizens, elected leaders, and others are taking a closer, more critical look at the impacts of local, state, and national policies on public health and the environment, both now and in the future. The quest for sustainability is rapidly capturing the attention of all sectors of society, and the nation's local governments find themselves at the epicenter of the movement.

Cities and towns have always been great innovators; they have to be. While federal and state action on critical topics may take years, citizens demand answers more rapidly from their local elected officials. As a result, cities and towns across the country already are addressing sustainability issues by actively pursuing initiatives to conserve energy, reduce carbon emissions, and protect the environment in other ways.

The National League of Cities believes that federal government can and should be a full partner in these efforts, providing national leadership when appropriate, and supporting the many creative efforts that can only happen at the community level.

WHERE WE STAND

"Sustainability" can be defined to include any number of topics. As a practical matter, though, cities find that sustainability involves the intersection of key issue areas such as energy and the environment, transportation, and land use and development.

A variety of challenges have brought increased attention and timeliness to local sustainability efforts. For example, high oil and energy prices are affecting municipal budgets, in addition to the budgets of residents and businesses, while also drawing attention to the need for conservation and alternative, low-carbon fuels. Meanwhile, climate change is reported to be causing severe challenges to the country already, from droughts and wildfires to floods and heat waves; and scientists tell us we should expect the impacts to become still more severe in the decades ahead.

These are important challenges, but they can be opportunities as well. By adopting sustainability as a fundamental tenet of our policymaking at all levels of government, we can achieve an array of benefits for our hometowns and our nation. These include:

- Environmental protection. Conserving energy and natural resources, promoting renewable sources of energy, creating and preserving green spaces, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions can help protect our environment for decades to come.
- Economic growth and stability. Sustainability can yield economic as well as environmental benefits – creating jobs and careers in "green" sectors of the economy; and yielding cost savings for municipalities, households, and businesses as they embrace conservation.

"In cities across America, environmental issues aren't trendy; they are fundamental realities that alter the health, economic viability, and growth of communities." — **Kathleen Novak, Mayor, Northglenn, Colorado**

- Public health improvements. Creating new biking and walking paths will encourage exercise and help combat America's obesity epidemic. In addition, improved indoor and outdoor air quality can decrease rates of asthma among Americans of all ages.

- National security improvements. As the United States embraces conservation and develops more environmentally friendly forms of energy, we can reduce our dependence on foreign oil while making our economy more resilient in the event of natural disasters.

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Local Officials Leading the Way

The nation's local elected officials are in a unique position to provide a comprehensive perspective on sustainability issues. Every day, municipal leaders see the connections between sustainability, the health of local citizens, and the quality of life in their communities. As stewards of their communities, city leaders are using their bully pulpits to raise the visibility of global warming and climate change and to shine a spotlight on the everyday actions citizens can take to "go green." City actions on these issues can be divided into two primary categories: leading by example; and catalyzing change.

Leading by example. Cities are adopting local sustainability plans, calculating their carbon footprints, "greening" municipal buildings and operations, purchasing renewable energy, and offering employees alternative work schedules and telework options. For example:

- **Louisville, Kentucky** launched a "Partnership for a Green City" with Jefferson County Public Schools and the University of Louisville. The focus of the program: promoting energy conservation and reducing energy costs.

- **Chicago, Illinois** now has more than 1 million square feet of planted roofs in the city, including a 38,300-square-foot garden on top of city hall.

- **Westwood, New Jersey** is the first municipality on the East Coast to use hybrid vehicles in its police department. The estimated gas savings: $23,150 a year.

- **Dallas, Texas** is purchasing 40 percent of its power from renewable energy and has 16 city buildings operating at LEED standards for environmental sustainability. Overall, the city has reduced its energy use by almost 5 percent a year in the past five years.

- **Santa Monica, California** has exceeded its goals for reducing the environmental impact of city vehicles. Currently, 81 percent of the city's entire vehicle fleet is climate-friendly, including more than half of the city's Big Blue Buses.

Catalyzing change. Cities are revising waste and recycling policies, reconsidering planning and zoning, encouraging mass transit, distributing compact fluorescent light bulbs, partnering with utilities to encourage conservation, and involving citizens and businesses in sustainability efforts.

- **Austin, Texas** has adopted a Climate Protection Plan aimed at eliminating carbon dioxide emissions from all municipal activities by the year 2020. The city's plans include: powering all city facilities with renewable energy; converting city vehicles to alternative fuels and electric power; and curbing greenhouse gas emissions in every city department.

- **Bluffton, Indiana** launched a partnership with Wal-Mart, which is donating energy-saving light bulbs to homeowners throughout the city as part of the "Brighten Up Bluffton" campaign.

- **Riverside, California** is ramping up its reliance on renewable power sources, which currently are 12 percent of the city's energy portfolio. The city has seven solar photovoltaic (PV) generation stations; nine more PV facilities are in development. The city also contracts

for geothermal power, hydroelectric power, wind power, and landfill gas power.

- **Bismarck, North Dakota** recently added a biomass boiler to heat a new household hazardous waste center, using wood items such as tree debris, logs and pallets that have been brought to the landfill as a fuel source. In 2007, 40 percent of the municipal solid waste volume brought into the Bismarck landfill was either reused or recycled for other purposes and taken out of the waste stream.

In many cases, city sustainability actions are helping the environment and saving taxpayer dollars. The bottom line: America's local leaders are convinced that the economic benefits of committing to sustainability strategies and behaviors far outweigh the environmental and social risks of inaction.

"Local officials have always been on the frontline in thinking about how to manage for the future. With a strong partnership with the federal government, we can move our country toward energy independence and security, we can save money during tough economic times, and we can protect our natural resources for the future." — **Debbie Quinn, Councilmember, Fairhope, Alabama**

Environmental Awareness Enters the Mainstream

While many cities are leading the way already, many more understand the potential benefits and are ready and willing to take action. In November 2007, at the National League of Cities annual Congress of Cities and Exposition in New Orleans, an instant poll of city officials revealed that 61 percent said they are taking steps related to sustainability planning and "green" initiatives and plan to do more. Combined with those cities that are considering taking action but still formulating clear action plans, the total rises to 83 percent.

Clearly, sustainability has become a mainstream concern and priority at the local level. The efforts by America's cities on sustainability are echoed in many sectors of American society, including county and state governments, the business sector, the academic and scientific communities, and among nonprofit and philanthropic organizations.

The federal government has displayed an increasing interest in sustainability issues as well. In 2007, Congress enacted a law that authorized $2 billion annually for the promising new Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant program. The program would provide grants to cities, counties, and states for innovative practices designed to achieve greater energy efficiency and lower energy usage. Funded initiatives could include: building and home energy conservation programs; energy audits; fuel conservation programs; building retrofits to increase energy efficiency; "smart growth" planning and zoning; and alternative energy programs.

Congress also has considered comprehensive climate change legislation. A 2008 Senate measure that was defeated in a procedural motion would have established a cap-and-trade system designed to gradually reduce the amount of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. The bill also included funding for the new block grant program; funding to support the expansion of mass transit; and tax relief for the energy needs of low-income consumers. Congress is certain to return to all of these issues in the months and years ahead.

AGENDA FOR THE NATION

The National League of Cities believes that the federal government must take the lead in advancing policies that put America on track to a more sustainable future for our hometowns and our nation. Cities and towns call upon the federal government to:

- Adopt a comprehensive emissions reduction plan that includes the establishment of a national greenhouse gas registry and a cap on total emissions.
- Pursue a responsible energy policy that promotes the most efficient and affordable use of all sources, promotes renewable sources, encourages domestic production, protects the environment, decreases greenhouse gas emissions, and encourages efficiency and conservation.

- Support a multimodal transportation system that encourages mass transit, passenger rail, and non-motorized transportation, and the development of alternative fuels and low-emission vehicles.
- Assist local governments in leveraging their resources and increasing their ability to institute beneficial "green" initiatives.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

The time for change and action to protect the environment and the global climate is now. Cities and towns of all sizes and types (rural, suburban, urban) have embraced sustainability as a long-term priority, recognizing the multiple benefits it will bring to our hometowns and our nation. Federal policies in areas from transportation and taxes to energy can support and encourage community solutions while moving the nation to a more sustainable future.

For more information, contact:

Ken Rosenfeld
Policy Manager & Staff Director, Energy,
Environment, and Natural Resources Committee
(202) 626-3194

Carolyn Berndt
Senior Legislative Counsel
(202) 626-3101