

Ramping up sustainable purchasing

Through strategic collaboration, Canadian municipalities blaze a new trail

by Kevin McCarty



THE MUNICIPAL COLLABORATION FOR SUSTAINABLE PURCHASING (MCSP) is a group of nine Canadian municipalities and three regional municipalities who are working together to leverage their collective experience, knowledge and resources to advance sustainable purchasing initiatives.

The MCSP is made up of purchasing and sustainability staff from municipalities scattered across the country. The municipalities range in size from approximately 7,000 to over 800,000 residents. Together these municipalities spend billions of dollars a year and their supply chains extend across the world. The wide variety of products and services needed to operate a city, from cleaning and office supplies, to IT equipment, to motor vehicles and major construction projects, provide a unique advantage to create new

strategies for purchasing and supply chain management that will provide benefits locally, nationally and overseas.

In July 2010, the MCSP began researching trends and best practices in Canada to determine key success factors and identify opportunities for the development of their sustainable purchasing programs. The results were released in January 2010. It also hosted a series of peer exchange teleconferences to share sustainable purchasing resources and 'tricks of the trade.' Over the last six months, all nine municipalities assessed their sustainable purchasing performance and set priorities for closing the gaps between their current practices and leading North American practices.

In 2011, the members of the collaboration will begin to evaluate products, service and suppliers based on their sustainability performance. They will

be looking for products and services that can help to conserve energy, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, minimize waste, and improve workplace health and safety. At the same time, municipalities will be evaluating suppliers based on their corporate social responsibility or overall sustainability performance (e.g., looking beyond product/service design to determine how suppliers are 'greening' their overall business operations).

The value of sustainable purchasing for municipalities

Sustainable purchasing (ESP) is becoming an increasingly important element in the sustainability sections of municipal strategic plans. Few other programs can directly contribute to multiple civic agendas around zero waste, climate leadership, local economic development, strategic sourcing and staff engagement. Among

the advantages of an effective sustainable purchasing program are mitigating legal and brand risks, enhancing the municipal brand as a sustainability leader, reducing costs by selecting products with less energy consumption, waste and product-related health risks. Many Canadian municipalities are realizing these benefits and reporting cost savings as a result.

Collaborating to scale up sustainable purchasing benefits

According to Chief Procurement Officer Jeff Byrne, City of Ottawa, there are many benefits to participating in the MCSP program, including increased access to information and lessons learned, developing civic partnership and leadership, and advancing sustainability performance in the public sector. Through regular peer exchange teleconferences, participating municipalities have been able to access tools and information to help them make the right decisions for advancing their practices. The peer exchanges included expert consultations and sharing of recent sustainable purchasing challenges and successes.

Another active participant in the group, Sustainability Projects Manager Shannon Clohosey, City of Whitehorse, has said she is very optimistic about where the municipal collaboration is going and wants to remain active in 2011. This is echoed by Whitehorse Mayor Bev Buckway who stated, "Once the City of Whitehorse, in cooperation with these other jurisdictions, concludes our efforts, we may be in a position to adjust our policies based on the best information available."

All participating municipalities have some level of experience in sustainable purchasing. Specific initiatives undertaken by participating municipalities include reducing municipal waste by demanding products with minimal packaging, reducing carbon emissions by selecting energy efficient certified electronics, and limiting toxins by sourcing green cleaning supplies. At the same time, some participating municipalities are considering the social impacts of their procurement by demanding products that meet international labour standards for fair and safe working conditions.

To advance this experience, participants are focusing their efforts on a sustainable purchasing framework that includes ten success factors for municipal sustainable purchasing. This framework, identified through the recent trends and best practices research, clearly defines ten key program elements that municipalities plan to integrate into their sustainable purchasing programs in order to guarantee success.

Many municipalities will be focusing first on getting a sustainable purchasing policy or administrative directive approved to ensure high-level support for the development of sustainable purchasing and supply management. Developing a communication and training program for sustainable purchasing is also a key program element that most municipalities are looking to develop in 2011. Municipalities also feel that continued collaboration with the Municipal Collaboration for Sustainable Purchasing is a top priority for 2011.

Municipalities see value in addressing a triple-bottom-approach to sustainable purchasing, meaning that they want to realize economic, social and environmental benefits through their purchasing practices. That said, many municipalities will likely be focusing on environmental issues in the earlier phases of implementation to help address corporate environmental commitments related to climate change and waste reduction. However, they remain committed to building out social standards related to labour rights in manufacturing facilities and supporting local socio-economic initiatives, wherever feasible.


Who is involved?

To date 12 Canadian municipalities have joined the municipal collaboration project, which would not be possible without the lead sponsorship support of the City of Whitehorse, City of Edmonton and City of Ottawa. Other participants include: Halifax Regional Municipality, City of London, City of Guelph, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Town of Olds, City of Vancouver, City of Victoria, Region of Peel and City of Grand Prairie.

Plans for 2011

In March, the MSCP will be holding their fifth peer exchange teleconference, where they will receive a presentation

from the City of Toronto to learn about that city's leading sustainable purchasing practices. The Municipal Collaboration looks forward to building on the valuable lessons learned in 2010 and sharing them with other municipalities in 2011. Many Canadian municipalities are expressing significant interest and it is expected that the collaboration will continue to grow, providing a larger pool of experience, knowledge and resources to tap into and greater benefits for those involved.

Key deliverables for the project in 2011 will include continued peer exchange teleconferences, technical sustainable purchasing webinars, an update to the *2010 Trends and Best Practices Report*, customized individual action planning sessions for each municipality, and participation in relevant conferences and forums. 

Kevin McCarty is a consultant with Reeve Consulting. He has worked with Alberta Environment, the City of Vancouver, the City of Edmonton and the BC Product Distribution Centre. He studied supply chain management with the Institute for Supply Management and has a strong background in the fair trade movement. If you are interested in joining the Municipal Collaboration for Sustainable Purchasing, please contact Kevin McCarty at kevin@reeveconsulting.com.