Buying a Sustainable Future: Government Purchasers in Portland Lead the Way

Oregon city’s environmental initiatives are driven by visionary political leaders, innovative purchasing policies and quick access to on-staff sustainable purchasing experts.

BY SCOT CASE

Portland, Ore., is routinely named one of the greenest cities in the world, thanks in part to a dedicated group of government purchasers. *Popular Science* magazine recently evaluated a variety of environmental data such as transportation mix, electricity use and air quality before identifying Portland as the greenest city in the United States. *Grist* magazine, a respected environmental news source, ranked Portland as the second greenest city in the world. It praises Portland’s commitment to reducing carbon dioxide and other global warming pollutants, its aggressive green building program and impressive transportation infrastructure including light rail, buses and bike lanes.

Led by visionary political leaders, supported by innovative purchasing policies and with quick access to on-staff sustainable purchasing experts, government purchasers in Portland regularly incorporate environmental and social considerations into routine purchasing decisions. Their efforts help make Portland’s sustainability vision a reality.

**Greener office supplies delivered on tricycles**

One recent example of Portland’s efforts to “green” every city purchase is the city’s January 2011 office supply contract with Office Depot. It requires Office
Depot to deliver greener products for government offices in the downtown Portland area using electric-assist cargo tricycles at no additional cost to the city.

The trikes are operated by B-Line, a local bicycle delivery company. Each B-Line trike is capable of hauling up to 700 pounds of product on each delivery. While the city has long purchased greener office supply products, such as recycled-content paper products and remanufactured toner cartridges, the focus on pollution-free delivery is new.

In a local news story on the project, Portland’s Chief Procurement Officer Christine Moody, explained, “I knew Office Depot wasn’t going to do something that meant a loss for them, and I wasn’t going to do something that meant higher prices for us. All I did was suggest [Office Depot] talk to [B-Line] about what might be possible, because sending a truck downtown can be expensive.”

Portland was already recognized as one of the most bicycle-friendly cities in the United States. By exploring the opportunity to deliver office supplies on electric-assist trikes, Portland’s purchasers were able to further reduce downtown traffic while lowering air and global warming pollution.

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Stacey Foreman, Portland’s sustainable procurement coordinator, emphasizes that electric-assist trikes were not the only reason the contract was awarded to Office Depot. “We selected [them] based on a combination of factors: price, rebates, ease of use, customer service, green usage reports and overall contribution to our sustainability goals. In addition to the trike delivery, Office Depot continues to support the city’s sustainable procurement and green building goals by providing a variety of environmentally preferable products.”

“This is just another example of Portland purchasers constantly pushing the ‘green envelope,’” said Jeff Baer, Portland’s director of Internal Business Services. “Our staff has been buying greener products for more than a decade, but we’re always asking, ‘What else can we do? Are there additional opportunities to maintain lower costs while improving environmental performance?’ There is always more greening to do.”

**Other green purchasing examples**

Many governments are routinely buying greener electronic products, energy-efficient lighting, LEED-registered green buildings, certified green cleaning products and greener copy papers and other office supplies. Portland does all of this and more.

While bicycle deliveries of office supplies are unusual, it is just one of Portland’s many innovative sustainable procurement initiatives. Other examples include:

➤ **Sweatshop-free apparel** – Portland City Council passed a sweatshop-free procurement policy that requires all apparel suppliers to comply with labor and health and safety standards to ensure workers are not subjected to unacceptably difficult or dangerous working conditions. As a result, city procurement officials included sweatshop-free apparel requirements in a December 2010 solicitation for fire department dress uniforms. It is a way for the fire department to fight sweatshop labor practices while fighting fires.

➤ **Elevator modernization** – A June 2010 solicitation to modernize city elevators includes requirements for elevators to be maintained with biobased (plant-based) hydraulic fluids, lubricants and greases; cleaned with EcoLogo or Green Seal certified cleaning products; illuminated by energy-efficient lighting; and carpeted with materials meeting the NSF/ANSI 140-2007e greener carpet standard. It also avoids the use of wood products from endangered sources and requires all paints and coatings used as part of the effort to

**RESOURCE:** Visit the Portland Sustainable Procurement website at www.portlandonline.com/buygreen for recommendations on getting a green purchasing program started, copies of relevant policies and reports, sample purchasing specifications and buying green case studies.
meet California’s strict low-VOC requirements.

➤ Laundry and uniform services – A December 2006 contract for laundry services prohibits the use of perchlorethylene (aka “perc” or tetrachloroethylene), a common dry cleaning chemical; requires proof the supplier is using the least toxic laundry chemicals; and mandates that all packaging used to deliver laundered garments be readily recyclable in typical office recycling programs.

➤ Office chairs – The April 2010 award for office chairs was based in part on vendor responses to questions about the chair’s recycled content, use of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified wood, use of rapidly renewable materials, impacts on indoor air quality as measured by specified test protocols, design for durability and recyclability and the toxicities of the flame retardants used in the products. In addition, suppliers were rewarded during the evaluation phase for products that are certified by GREENGUARD, EcoLogo, or MBDC Cradle-to-Cradle or certified by an independent third-party as meeting the BIFMA e3-2008 standard.

Advice for others

“The one thing government purchasers can do to improve the environmental performance of the goods and services they buy is to ask a lot of questions,” suggested Foreman.

“Suppliers frequently don’t know about the environmental impacts of their products or services, but we ask them to find out. They can’t make environmental improvements, and we can’t buy greener products unless they see the need,” Foreman explained.

It also helps to have an environmental purchasing policy that supports sustainable purchasing. Portland’s policy, available online, identifies environmental, social equity and fiscal factors to consider when making purchasing decisions. Portland’s policy also strongly supports the use of third-party environmental standards and certifications. (See sidebar.)

“It is also important to remember that buying greener products does not have to cost more,” explained Baer. He cites recycled and extended-life antifreeze, crumb rubber sports fields, energy-efficient lighting, re-refined motor oil, recycled latex paint, and solar-powered parking meters from the Portland procurement website as examples.

Baer’s final piece of advice: “If you want greener products, you have to ask.”

About the Author

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Celebrating 55 Years!
Portland’s decade-long focus on sustainable purchasing has inspired hundreds of governments around the world to find ways to save money while reducing their environmental footprint, including nearby Multnomah County. Portland is the county seat for Multnomah County and, as a result, the two governments have very close ties and frequently share ideas, employees and suppliers.

In 2002, Multnomah County and Portland launched a five-year Sustainable Procurement Strategy. As the effort progressed, it became obvious that small differences in procurement processes and in the types of products and services being purchased – Multnomah County, for example, spends a larger percentage of its budget providing social services – made it challenging to unite their green purchasing initiatives.

As a result, in 2008, Multnomah County began developing its own sustainable procurement policy, building upon the lessons learned from its long partnership with Portland. With the active support of county political leaders and the efforts of Sophia Cavalli, Multnomah County’s procurement supervisor, and Julia Fraser, the county’s sustainable purchasing coordinator, the county formally launched its updated Sustainable Purchasing and Social Equity policy in February 2011.

The Multnomah County policy commits the county to purchase all goods and services over $5,000 with sustainability considerations integrated into each purchase.

One of the most innovative aspects of the county policy is that it requires departments to reserve at least 25 percent of bid evaluation points for sustainability criteria with 10 percent for sustainability criteria, 10 percent for social equity considerations and 5 percent for supplier healthcare and other benefits.

The policy also encourages the use of third-party environmental leadership certifications such as EcoLogo, Energy Star, and EPEAT.

To ensure the policy is fully implemented, procurement officials are required to complete a Sustainable Purchasing Checklist for each purchase covered by the policy. The checklists address topics such as energy and water conservation, waste management, alternative fuels, transportation, recycled content, indoor air quality and support for under-served populations.

Discussing the Multnomah County Policy, Sophia Cavalli, one of the County’s procurement supervisors, explained, “We have one of the most aggressive sustainable purchasing policies in the country. It’s already helping us green our purchases and we can’t wait to see how much it will allow us to accomplish.”

For additional information, visit the Multnomah County Sustainable Purchasing website at www.multcopurch.org/green.