



Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

# ICMA Management Perspective

Fall 2007

## Sustainability

### ICMA Members Target "The Issue of Our Age"

Sustainability is a familiar concept for local government professionals, many of whom trace its roots to the values and considerations inherent in the practice of community planning. They are familiar with approaches to development that weigh long-term impacts as well as near-term benefits.

But city and county managers also know that the definition of sustainability goes well beyond planning and development. For local governments, it is not only about preparing for growth or trying to redevelop a vacant industrial property. It encompasses everything that a local government does—from long-term stewardship of the community to the smallest day-to-day tasks. It's about adding hybrid vehicles to fleets and using recycled water to irrigate public landscaping. It's about conducting a thorough financial analysis and considering the condition of existing infrastructure before making a decision to extend sewer lines. It's about creating a balanced economy with a variety of jobs. And much more.

For a growing number of communities, sustainability in its broader definition is becoming the overarching theme in their planning for the future. In some places, it has taken on other names such as smart growth, but the basic idea remains the same: development should improve quality of life, making a place more livable without harming the environment or creating a financial burden for future residents. Just as important, that principle should extend into the economic and social realms. And for local government organizations, it's critical to ensure that basic business practices—from hiring policies to fiscal management—are conducted with that same eye to the future.

That's the theory. But as anyone who's been through a rezoning hearing or efforts to recruit a major new employer can attest, it is never easy. For all the strong support for the broad principles, developing a consensus about what sustainability really means on the ground and how to reach agreement among community members with conflicting or competing goals can be something else altogether.

It is for all of these reasons—the great promise and considerable challenges associated with sustainability—that the ICMA Executive Board has adopted it as "the issue of our age." In February 2007, the board decided to make sustainability a priority issue and directed

In coming months, **ICMA** will publish a position paper on sustainability that will be informed by ongoing member dialogue. The ICMA Government Affairs and Policy Committee is also developing a paper to advise the "big seven" state and local government organizations on how sustainability-related policies at the federal level on energy, transportation, agriculture, and other issues could impact the ability of state and local governments to carry out sustainable practices.

ICMA also kicked off an on-line sustainability discussion forum on Earth Day 2007, giving members the opportunity to debate the topic and share their experiences. Members are encouraged to weigh in with their thoughts on the manager's role and other questions related to sustainability at <http://forums.icma.org>.

staff to launch efforts to position ICMA as a leader on sustainability. ICMA has established a Sustainability Advisory Committee made up of members dedicated to the issue, whose work as a committee is being supported by ICMA's strategic partner Camp Dresser & McKee Inc.—CDM. The leadership advisory committee convened by teleconference for the first time in early August, and its 37 members have agreed to serve as a sounding board on sustainability,

providing direction and guidance to ICMA's work. Two successive ICMA presidents—Michael Willis in 2005-06 and Bill Buchanan in 2006-07—have highlighted sustainability as themes for their terms as president, as well.

The establishment of the advisory committee follows a long history of sustainability work. ICMA has been the institutional home of the Smart Growth Network for nearly a decade, and has done extensive work on brownfields cleanup and

redevelopment, environmental management systems, energy efficiency and renewable energy, financial management, and other sustainability-related topics.

But the issue clearly is taking on greater importance. ICMA has never had more momentum in the effort to define sustainability and advance the fundamental role played by local government managers in promoting it.

## What Does Sustainability Mean for Local Governments?

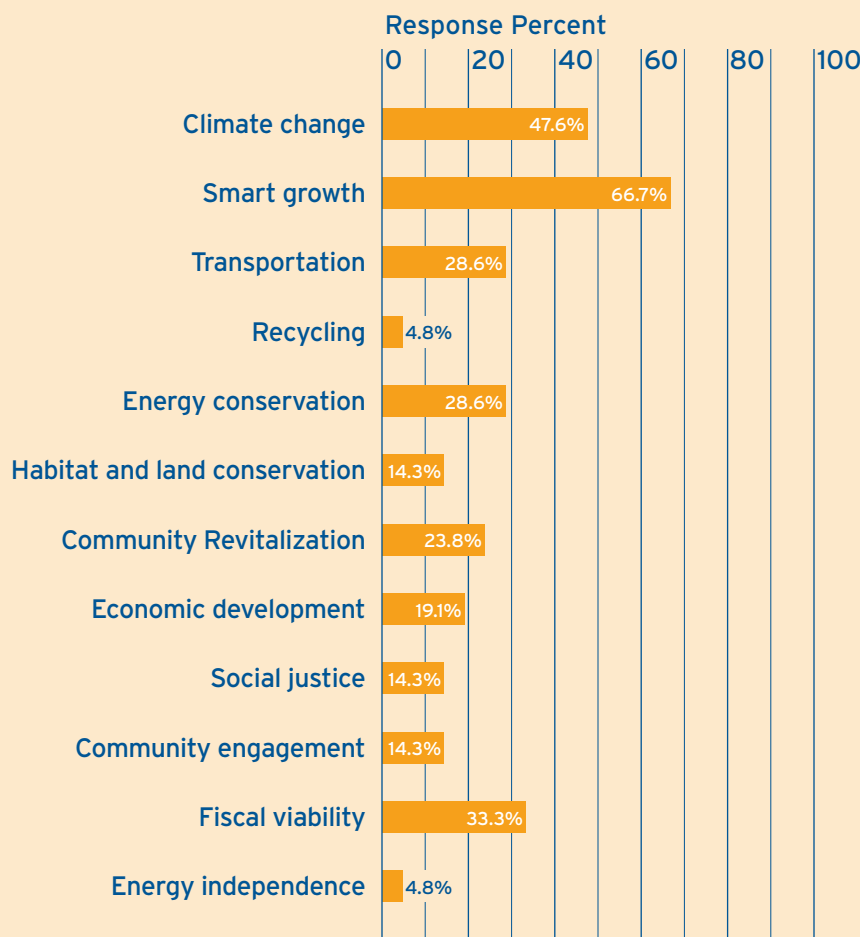
The classic definition of sustainability, as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,” remains as relevant today as when it was first articulated in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development.

ICMA further defines the concept as central to the professional management of local government, with three interdependent elements: environmental stewardship, economic development, and social equity. ICMA members also recognize that the financial and organizational viability of local governments is closely connected to sustainability, because without a solid financial foundation and strong institutions, they cannot attain their environmental, economic, and social goals.

Former ICMA President and Sustainability Advisory Committee member Michael Willis describes sustainability as having an integrated *triple bottom line* (environment, economy, and equity), as integrated thinking lies at the core of sustainability. When the manager and staff advance initiatives for the community, they consider and

### ICMA Surveys Sustainability Advisory Committee Members

When asked to identify the top three among a dozen sustainability issues, two-thirds of the advisory committee members chose smart growth. Respondents also ranked what managers need most to develop and implement sustainability programs. A slight majority named support from elected officials as most important, with community support coming in second.



balance actions that serve not just the environment, the economy, or social equity, but also the impact such actions have on all three elements. They make decisions and recommendations that attempt to simultaneously optimize the highest possible goals for all three.

Sustainability represents both a responsibility and an opportunity for local government managers, and provides a way of thinking about year-to-year decisions and policy making over the long term. Managers consider sustainability in everything from routine budget decisions to the most complex problems. By supporting citizens and elected officials' efforts to see issues through the sustainability lens, managers help provide a window to the future. They can help translate esoteric policy options into concrete impacts on daily life and a community's health. That, in turn, makes it easier to inform elected officials and build public support for decisions that benefit a community over the long term.

While there are themes common to every community working toward sustainability, many of the problems and solutions are different, because each community faces a different environment, has different resources, and holds different values.

For jurisdictions in Michigan hard hit by the downturn in Detroit auto-making, economic viability and social equity are key drivers. In Northbrook, Illinois, climate change might not be a key motivator, but energy independence is. Likewise, growth issues are central for many cities and counties, but they must be framed for the unique goals of each jurisdiction. In Arlington County, Virginia, the community uses the term "smart growth" to describe its progress in focusing urban growth along a subway and bus transit corridor to

optimize economic and environmental viability. County Manager Ron Carlee notes that the county has generated a lot of discussion this year around a major new initiative it has launched around climate change. He describes the focus as being an expansion of Arlington's smart growth efforts. "We have to take good land-use planning and good transit-oriented growth to the next level," Carlee said. "It is also about how we act and behave through our personal and business decisions, building community in ways that are truly sustainable."

Alternatively, Tallahassee, Florida, is using conservation as its rallying cry for sustainability. With its *Go Green Tallahassee* initiative, the city has engaged its citizens to work toward reducing energy demands and the need to build new utility plants.

## The Manager's Role

Being responsible for community sustainability requires a perspective that addresses the long term and the big picture. City and county managers, by the nature of their work, have *always* been the executives within local government who see the community and the organization in its entirety, without being tied to one department, one interest group, or one political point of view. And they have a natural affinity for the perspective that sustainability isn't just what the city or county government is doing. Sustainability encompasses what businesses are doing, what major institutions and citizens are doing, what neighboring jurisdictions and the region are doing, and what the state, the nation, and countries around the world are doing. Managers understand that

building sustainable communities requires partnerships with people outside local government.

Members of ICMA's Sustainability Advisory Committee noted that it is easy to be distracted by "the flavor of the month" approach to tackling sustainability, moving from crisis to crisis. The truth is that managers often face crises that threaten community survival—whether it is a factory closing, a budget shortfall, or droughts or natural disasters exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. They all are interlocking challenges, and managers know they need to address each event with a long-term perspective on how to care for the community's well-being beyond the current crisis.

In summary, managers have to play many roles to effectively build momentum for sustainability. They must be:

**Educators.** Managers have to help educate elected officials, department directors and staff, businesses, and citizens about what sustainability is and why it is important.

**Interpreters.** Managers should always help "frame" the discussion and clarify what sustainability means in terms that coincide with community values.

**Technicians.** Managers must utilize the best available technology, science and data to continuously work toward sustainability.

**Organizers.** Managers can align the resources of the organizations they serve to make sure everyone pulls in the same direction.

**Diplomats.** Managers must recognize that this is a topic that might get ignored, resisted, or hijacked for political purposes, and that they might have to defuse tensions and depoliticize the issues.

**Leaders.** Managers need to recognize that values will often come into conflict, and that they will be called upon to help engage the whole community in developing a vision and plan that can reconcile competing demands and perspectives.

Finally, managers have to be **Students.** Because tomorrow will bring something new—a new scientific discovery, a natural disaster, a global economic slowdown—that will require them to reinterpret and realign what they think and do related to sustainability.

## The Sustainability Movement and ICMA's Next Steps

Advisory committee member Rick Cole reflected on the similarities between what's happening with sustainability today and the civil rights movement of 40 years ago. "As managers, we don't tend to identify with being part of a movement, even though our profession was born out of a civic reform

movement," he noted. But think back, Cole said, to when local governments started addressing the crisis of racial inequality in the 1960s, launching fair housing efforts and other initiatives. "None of those local efforts would have made any sense absent a profound civil rights movement that changed people's hearts, changed people's minds, changed people's attitudes, changed people's lives; that movement was the backdrop that propelled governments to change our policies, in some cases implementing things that were politically inconceivable just weeks before."

In the same way, he described sustainability as "a profound global movement" that has placed managers in a unique interplay between their role in the policy realm "and our role as being part and partners of a movement that is both well beyond our borders and is actually happening inside our towns with our citizens who take up this banner."

ICMA and the advisory committee will continue to explore the leadership role for local govern-

ment managers in sustainability, developing new tools and techniques that can help ICMA members promote sustainability as it grows in importance. To learn more about the advisory committee, go to <http://icma.org/sustainability>.

Sustainability presents a critical challenge for local government managers, but it's the sort of challenge that defines the profession. The next step is to take what has started as a very substantive discussion and turn it into influential actions that members can begin to seed at home. As Bill Buchanan put it in his closing comments during the recent advisory committee teleconference, "It is now in our lap to make sure that it doesn't just turn out to be words, but some actual concrete steps forward that you and I can take as we try to improve our communities."

*This brief is the first in a series of educational resources that will be developed through the ICMA/CDM partnership.*

### About ICMA

ICMA is the premier local government leadership and management organization. Its mission is to create excellence in local governance by developing and advancing professional management of local government worldwide. ICMA provides member support; publications, data, and information; peer and results-oriented assistance; and training and professional development to nearly 9,000 city, town, and county experts and other individuals and organizations throughout the world.

### About CDM

CDM is a consulting, engineering, construction, and operations firm that delivers integrated solutions to improve quality of life, create economic opportunities, and provide for vital services—while enhancing and protecting the environment. CDM collaborates with public agencies, non-profit organizations, the private sector, and the academic community to develop innovative environmental and infrastructure solutions to improve the livability and sustainability of communities globally.

**ICMA**

Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

**CDM**

consulting • engineering • construction • operations