

Green procurement Becoming a way of life

by Marja Hughes

Imagine shopping with the knowledge that whatever product you buy is recyclable – never waste for the city dump. “That won’t even be a factor,” says Suzanne Bycraft, manager of emergency and environmental programs for the City of Richmond, BC. “People won’t even be thinking that, because everything on that shelf will have recycled content and will be in good packaging.”

Far-fetched? Not if you live in Richmond, BC, the first Canadian municipality to develop a green procurement policy supported by a detailed guide to help city staff identify and purchase the most environmentally friendly products on the market.

The policy and guide, launched in 2000, were conceived in the mid-1990s when the Greater Vancouver Regional District decided that purchasing was an integral part of the region’s overall solid waste management plan. Richmond, one of 21 municipal governments in the district, decided it wanted to provide some leadership on this issue, says Bycraft.

Although other municipalities have similar policies, the guide sets Richmond apart as a user-friendly tool to implement their purchasing strategy.

The city identifies an environmentally preferred product (EPP) as one that is efficient, reduces waste, is reusable or contains reusable parts, is recyclable, and is made of recycled material. The guide includes examples – everything from construction, landscaping and vehicles to janitorial necessities, lighting and office equipment. Tips from avoiding paints or carpeting that emit volatile organic compounds and buying non-toxic, biodegradable cleaners to selecting power-saving office equipment and using salvaged building materials make the guide a valuable resource. Staff receives training on how to use the guide and there is a checklist to round off the smart purchasing steps of a product or service. The ultimate goal is to convince suppliers to produce more environmentally friendly products and services.

It is this dual opportunity to achieve a municipality’s broader environmental goals and influence the market, that makes green procurement such an effective tool, says Louise Comeau, director of the Centre for Sustainable Community Development at the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. Through purchasing, municipalities can directly influence their own environmental performance and gain a more

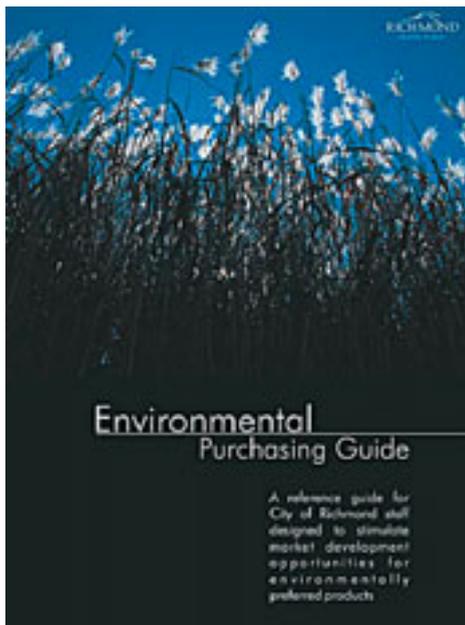
consistent approach to those objectives. And “through the power of their dollar, [municipalities] can influence the way products are manufactured and the environmental performance of their suppliers,” says Comeau.

For example, communities with set targets for greenhouse gas reductions in their operations can extend this commitment to the purchase of all their products, a powerful link slowly gaining recognition. “When [municipalities] buy vehicles, they would be looking for vehicles that are 20 percent more efficient,” says Comeau. “They would look at opportunities in bio-fuels... [buying] electricity from renewable energy... at higher recycled contents in their material. Because, the more recycled materials they buy, the more they divert from landfill.”

Critics suggest that green procurement policies cost more and demand more time from staff. But Comeau argues that even though EPPs may have higher capital costs, operating costs may be lower. Evaluating a product on the basis of its life cycle would help determine purchasing decisions. “You’re not just looking at the initial purchase price, you’re actually incorporating into your purchasing decision what it costs to operate the product,” says Comeau. Take social housing – often subsidized by municipal or provincial government. “If you’re purchasing appliances for those units and you’re looking at the capital costs of buying those fridges and stoves and washers and dryers, and you don’t think about efficiency and that government is subsidizing, for example, the energy costs of those units, you end up with a huge operating cost that you didn’t need to have,” she says.

Also, creating a pool of money allowing for a 10 percent premium on products, for example, and setting a limit on costs will help alleviate the expense, says Comeau. And if the product is not well known, a pilot project may be the answer. In Richmond, Bycraft will be measuring cost and benefit in the future. In the meantime their policy, already communicated to suppliers, explains the consideration of environmental characteristics along with price. “If there’s a product that’s good and helps promote the environment and costs a little bit more, we’ll certainly consider it because of the environmental characteristics,” says Bycraft. Richmond is pilot-testing a number of hybrid cars for future fleet consideration.

In terms of staff time to determine product life-cycle costs, Bycraft places the onus



on suppliers. "If they have done life-cycle costing and it looks good, we're going to give them higher consideration than we would somebody who hasn't," she says. "... it's up to industry to do the life-cycle costing on their products and tell us."

In municipal government the realization is dawning that, at minimum, procurement policy should match a community's overall policy goals. And although Richmond's Bycraft admits that the effect on suppliers is not yet significant, she is planning to update the guide – available on the city's website (www.city.richmond.bc.ca/environment/policy/purchasing_guide/purchasing_guide) – to keep current with market developments, and to keep up the pressure on suppliers with more requirements for the bidding process. "Now when [companies] bid, they're going to have to complete a questionnaire that tells us [about] their own environmental policy, the various attributes of their company, ...any violations of the *Waste Management Act*," she says. "So they actually have to complete these forms shortly, and they're going to be influenced by that."

Comeau emphasizes the potential market influence if all three orders of government combined their focus on green procurement. The municipal market alone is worth more than \$42 billion. "We are talking about,

potentially, spending power in the billions of dollars that can be used to influence the supply chain as well as the municipality's own performance," she says. "The leverage is huge."

Bycraft envisions a day when green procurement is as accepted a practice as recycling is now. "I want it to be 'you don't do things like that, that's antiquated, you don't buy stuff that pollutes, what are you thinking?'" she says. People won't even have to ask if one product is better than another, she says, "[it will be] so integrated into the way we live." ❧

Additional tools for green procurement

Federation of Canadian Municipalities information and links:

http://kn.fcm.ca/ev.php?URL_ID=1468&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201&reload=1047916281

International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives:

<http://www.iclei.org/europe/ecoprocura/index.htm>

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