

Smart Approaches to Environmental Sustainability Programming within Local Governments

Strategies for Improving Environmental Policies and Programming in the City of Santa Cruz

By Amanda Wilson

For City of Santa Cruz

Mills College Public Policy Program

May 1, 2018

Disclaimer

This study has been prepared for the City of Santa Cruz, California. The author conducted this study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Public Policy at Mills College.

The judgments and conclusions are solely those of the authors and are not necessarily endorsed by the Mills College Public Policy Program, the City of Santa Cruz, or any other organization or agency.

Executive Summary

To consolidate environmental policy and programming in the City of Santa Cruz, City Council should establish a new Environmental Sustainability Department. Currently, environmental programming is spread amongst the various departments and the Climate Action Program is tasked with implementing policies adopted by Council. Having this type of programming dispersed has created gaps in effective accomplishment of the climate action milestones and efficiency in the ability to track significant energy data. While Santa Cruz has adopted ambitious environmental policies, there is a lack of capacity and resources to reach the goals.

The Climate Action Program was established to carry out City environmental policies, but in not having a designated department to work on all functions of implementation, the City is missing opportunities to reach their goals. A needs assessment was conducted within the City of Santa Cruz to identify gaps in environmental programming.

Findings:

1. The climate action milestones are not appropriate measures because tracking mechanisms do not exist and baselines were not set, leading to the conclusion that the City will not reach the milestones by 2020.
2. Work on the milestones is done in an ad hoc manner, and is inefficient in securing needed funding due to lack of capacity.
3. Energy data is not being tracked and managed to provide insight on timely information due to outdated technology, and lack of strategic energy planning.

To supplement the gaps in environmental programming, best practices were sought from local governments across the United States. Three cities (Fort Collins, CO, Miami Beach, FL, and Imperial Beach, CA) with designated environmental departments and three cities (Oakland, CA, Santa Monica, CA, and Asheville, NC) that have embedded environmental programming into other departments contributed to this study.

Findings:

1. A couple of the largest contributing factors in launching the departments were strong political will from Council and a strategic management plan.
2. More and larger funding sources are typically available through enterprise funds and designated grant/resource managers.
3. The areas of responsibility for the departments were derived from sustainability plans and previous duties of the staff.
4. Climate dashboards serve as a means to track progress on climate action goals and utilizing external partnerships promote better data tracking systems, and are sometimes provided by other organizations.
5. Having a designated department allows for a more streamlined process to prioritizing projects according the strategic plans, capacity, and available revenue.

Environmental Management Systems are considered because they would require an advancement of information technologies; however, implementing an EMS would not provide the ability to address the variety of environmental policies in Santa Cruz. Similarly, embedding environmental programming into the Department of Public Works has worked well in other cities, but if it were embedded, needed growth of capacity and resources would not happen at a rate consistent with Council's policies and regulations.

If the City of Santa Cruz Council takes the recommendation to consolidate environmental policy and programming into a new, designated Environmental Sustainability Department, the next step is to immediately create an annotated environmental policy organizational chart to start clarifying roles. A strategic implementation analysis will then enable the department to start developing its capacity and functions in a manner that will promote growth. To provide the foundation for long-term growth and achievement of City climate action and sustainability goals, the City also needs to Develop a Strategic Sustainability Management Plan.