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"Civic Engagement, Public Policy, and Sustainability in American Cities: Similarities and Differences in Policy Outcomes"

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Annual Meeting

March, 2009
Miami

American Society for Public Administration

Introduction

According to Portney (2003), there are at least twenty five major cities in the U.S. that have invested significant amounts of time, resources, and political capital in the development of initiatives to pursue some form of sustainability. It is safe to assume that cities using "best practices" in this area are also developing good public policy. After all, sustainability is a positive set of practices where at the core they are oriented toward good environmental policy and efficiency in over all government implementation systems.

One of the more well known cities that have focused on sustainability is Santa Monica.(Portney 2003). They have developed a comprehensive set of sustainability indicators which are consistent in a very general sense with most of the other twenty five other cities identified by Portney (2003). As such, we will use these indicators as a model in this paper. The general indictors fall into the following areas:

- Resource Conservation
- Transportation
- Pollution Prevention and Public Health Protection
- Community and Economic Development
- Solid Waste and Recycling
- Water
- Energy

These indicators cover most of the dimensions of sustainability. As a recent text on Sustainability (Bell and Morse, 2008) indicates , sustainability is a very flexible

concept which allows cities to adopt a wide range of public policies. As we will see later, the seven cities we chose for in a depth analysis had considerable variety in their policy choices when it came to sustainability. In short, while Santa Monica offers an interesting set of general indicators of sustainability, the other cities we will be looking at have indicators which are very diverse and reinforce the perception that indicators of sustainability are very different. In fact, looking at these cities we see more divergence that convergence in their sustainability profiles. Thus, at least looking at a small set of popular cities who indicate that they have good sustainability indicators, we will see that the concept of sustainability is complex and varies considerably. What appears to be happening is that cities are calling it sustainability in a general sense but in practice they are using a wide variety of policy tools and indicators. We will turn to this point again when we look at the indicators used by cities. The major theme of this paper is that while sustainability is widely valued and practiced, cities have adopted a number of different ways to implement the concept. One can not pick up the departments, policies, and programs and see sustainability in similar forms. There are a few similarities but most of the policies are quite different.

A last point on the definition of sustainability. A recent text (Bell and Morse, 2008) define sustainability as:

- Sustainability is the capacity to maintain output at a level approximately equal to greater than its historical average
- Maximizing the net benefits of economic development subject to maintain the services and quality of natural resources over time

- Development that meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs and aspirations

With this as a brief background , the overall observation is that while there are a small number of very well known cities which stress agreement on what constitutes sustainability, the practice of sustainability varies widely and there is little consensus on what policies actually constitute sustainability.

Comparing Sustainability in Cities

From Portney's (2003) analysis, there was identified twenty five major cities that have invested significant amounts of time, resources, and political capital in the development of sustainability and sustainability indicators. To further pursue the analysis of whether these cities look more alike on the indicators or look different we looked at a subset of sustainability cities. In short, we are checking the convergence and/or divergence of these indicators. We picked seven of the twenty five cities randomly for further analysis and interviews.

First we comprehensively reviewed the web site of the sampled cities for information on sustainability and then we interviewed over the telephone at least three senior staff people in the city for more qualitative information. Based on this review and interviews, the major sustainability policies are listed below.

Table 1 Major Examples of Core Sustainability Policies for Seven Cities

City	Sustainability indicators or examples, highest priorities based on interviews with senior staff
Asheville	A downtown Capital Improvement Plan, infrastructure plan over 5 years
Austin	Developed a Green Choice Program which is a successful utility sponsored green power program
Jacksonville	The Better Jacksonville Plan (comprehensive plan for the entire metropolitan area)
Portland	Developing a world class transit system including the development of light rail
San Francisco	Building of thousands of new affordable units of housing
Santa Monica	Landscaping grants and new storm water treatment facilities

Seattle	Enforces growth management laws so that growth was steered to the urban core and preserved open space and farm land

Source: Results from Interviews with Senior Staff in each City.

Table one clearly demonstrates that these well recognized sustainability cities each have adopted different types of core policies, policies that fit their community rather than any national standard. Table 1 shows that there does not appear to be a lock step approach to sustainability. Cities simply take their own approach to sustainability. Further evidence on divergence in sustainability policy on this is indicated in Table 2 where we coded the policy areas in each of the cities studied. We compared the following policy areas and the conclusion is that the Cities have only a very modest amount of overlap in policies when it comes to sustainability. They simply use their own combination and approach to this policy area. Policies are more unique to the individual cities than they are consistent with the models used in other cities.

Policies reviewed in the seven cities:

Transportation

Air Quality,

Solid waste

Housing affordability

Energy Climate Change

Local food and agriculture

Resource conservation

Open space and parks

Planning and land use

Economy and economic development

Table 2 Additional Major Policy Approaches in Seven Cities

	Asheville	Austin	Jacksonville	Portland	San Francisco	Santa Monic
Transportation	Exemplary downtown bus service	Toll-lanes reduce congestion, pedestrian programs	Integrates bus with transit-ways and exclusive transit lanes	Provides information to single passenger car trips	Extensive mass transit, trolley, bus, ferry, train, bikes	Urban transit system and cost efficiency
Air Quality	Poor air quality , focus on out of state pollution	Green utilities, wind and biodiesel programs	Air toxic monitoring program	Reducing toxic chemical use	Clean air vehicles for all city fleet	City vehicles fueled with cleaner air and sustainable fuel
Solid Waste	Innovative recycling program	Recycling collects all recyclables on trash day	Curbside recycling and appliances, and hazard waste	Master recyclers and community outreach	Extensive curbside recycling program	Water conservation programs
Housing Affordability	Focuses on Affordable housing program	Focus on low and affordable housing	Low interest mortgages available	Provide housing for homeless and people with disabilities	Focuses on low income housing and affordability	Focus on special needs groups
Energy	Energy and technology	Focus on green	Increase use of re-	Focus on cutting local	Reduce greenhouse	Stress on education an

Climate	needs	designs for all facilities	renewable energy sources	greenhouse emissions	gas emissions	energy efficiency
Local Food and Agriculture	Farmer's markets and rural farmers	Sustainable food center and put products in schools	Farmer's market, 365 days a year	Citizens advisory council for local food issues	Farmer's market and connection to rural areas	Four thriving farmer's markets
Resource Conservation	Storm water treatment	Watershed protection review department	Green up through city programs	City purchases from renewable sources	Use recyclable materials for city buildings	Watershed management and a twenty years plan
Open Space and Parks	Greenways Master Plan	Long range planning and natural resource analyses	Created two new parks with state of art pathways	Integrated pest management program	Reduced pesticides for parks	Every resident lives within one half mile of park or open space
Planning and Land Use	Infill development	Smart growth and limit on sprawl	Infill development	Early assistance Office helps residents with zoning issues, technical assistance	Focus on infill, zoning, planning and code policy	Mix use development and transportation connection
Economy and Economic Development	Mixed use development along the rivers	Create business retention programs	Road and infrastructure improvements	Community involvement in economic development	Long range plan with job creation, tax revenues, etc.	Attract businesses with social responsibility and environment stewardship

Table 2 for example demonstrates the following convergence and divergence:

- There is absolutely no overlap in Transportation among the seven cities, each has a unique approach.

- With air quality, San Francisco and Santa Monica are quite similar in approach but the other five cities have unique policies.
- With solid waste, five cities use state of the art recycling programs and two do not, so there is a moderate overlap.
- With affordable housing, all the cities are quite close in their policy approach.
- With energy and climate policies, there is no overlap, they are all unique.
- With local food and farmer's markets all the cities are active and there is convergence.
- With resource conservation, there is no overlap and considerable divergence.
- With open space there is no overlap and considerable divergence.
- With planning and land use, only three cities are similar and four dissimilar.
- With economic development there is no convergence.

Overall, divergence is present with transportation, energy and climate, resource conservation, energy and climate, open space, and economic development in cities. As for convergence, only affordable housing and local food and farmer's markets show overlap among all the cities. Finally, air quality and solid waste show some minor amount of convergence. Looking across the cities with reputations for sustainability, there clearly is more divergence in policy than convergence. So cities are not necessarily using similar policies rather they appear to be going there own way. This, of course, does not discourage "best practice". It just means these cities are more like to go their own way in terms of innovation rather than to copy some of the better know cities.

Quantitative Analysis of Selected Cities

Another approach to understanding the similarities and differences that cities have to sustainability, we established ten common indicators for measuring sustainability and then we collected data on the seven cities. Table 2 above lists the ten ways of measuring sustainability. We checked the major national environmental organizations and web sites to find out the major measurements used nationally. What we found with some agreement is that the following measures were widely used and we adopted them for our analysis of the seven cities.

Transportation. Number of gallons of wasted fuel per traveler. Texas Transportation Institute.

EPA monitoring stations, unhealthy air days and air quality charts from EPA Monitoring stations.

Solid waste diversion rate. Solid Waste. Sustain Lane.

National Home Builders Association Opportunity Index.

Sustain Lane rankings. Energy and Climate.

Farmer's Markets per capita. USDA Food and Nutrition Service.

Water usage daily. NGO.

Total expenditures per resident total parkland. Trust for Public Land

Sustain Lane Planning and Land Use.

Median household income. U.S. Census

Next we took the seven cities and ranked order each city on the ten indicators.

Table 3 Comparative Analysis of Sustainability in Seven Cities

City	Transportation	Air Quality	Solid Waste	Housing Affordability	Energy Climate	Local Food	Resource Conserva
Asheville	NA	4	4	3	NA	2	6
Austin	3	5	5	2	NA	6	1
Jacksonville	1	NA	NA	1	NA	7	7
Portland	2	4	3	4	1	3	4
San Francisco	5	3	6	6	1	5	3
Santa Monica	6	5	2	7	2	1	5
Seattle	4	3	3	5	1	4	2

Rank summary	***Asheville 33***	***Austin 34***	***Jackson-ville 34***	***Portland 32***	***San Francisco 33***	***Santa Monica 42***	***Seattle 29***

The lower the score, the higher the ranking on sustainability. What this analysis reveals is that Seattle and Portland seem to do the best on these indicators while the rest are closer to together and cluster around the middle. One interpretation of this is that in practice these seven cities are fairly close together on indicators of performance even though their policies are quite different. They are not doing a lot of things the same regardless of what their web sites say and what the interviewers said. In practice, these cities are more dissimilar in their policies. Ironically, even though policies are dissimilar, the rankings on measures of sustainability are closer than what might be hypothesized. It certainly means that different polices can result in similar performances which is rewarding for cities. There is more than one route to progress. Finally if you remove San Francisco and Seattle from the group, the rest of the cities are quite close in their performance which stresses performance rather than policy. With San Francisco and Seattle, we have two outliers that show more performance and accomplishments.

Civic Engagement and Public Policy

Table 4 Civic Engagement and Sustainability

Ranked from highest to lowest on sustainability measures	Presidential Election Turnout, 1976-2000	Municipal Elections 1976-2000

Seattle, $45,736 median household income	79%	41.4%
Portland, $40,146	77%	39.3%
Asheville, $32,772	69.8%	25%
San Francisco, $55,221	67.9%	43%
Austin, $42,689	57%	17.5%
Jacksonville, $41,736	71.5%	24.3%
Santa Monica, $43,518	72.1%	18.7%

Cities with high sustainability were also checked for civic participation. We assembled voting data for Presidential and Municipal elections and then compared the ranking of voting participation with the cities ranking on sustainability. Looking at Table 4, the findings are quite clear. With the exception of San Francisco, all of the communities with high participation rates are also communities with high ratings on sustainability. Income and turnout do not show a clear relationship . Thus high participation communities are more likely to develop their policies in the areas of sustainability. Income seems to be less important although all of these communities are clearly middle class. Higher income communities are more likely to get involved in sustainability. Lower income communities are less likely to get involved although we do not have any of theses in this analysis. We need to compare some data here.

In addition to civic participation, communities have there own view about why people are more engaged in the development of sustainability policy. The interviews with senior staff revealed some interesting comments about their residents and local politics.

In Asheville, the senior staff indicates that the continuity of community (political) leaders over time has been extremely helpful. These leaders form coalitions and networks and define the agenda. They have been very active in recent years.

In Austin, the senior staff sees civic support because of local artists, musicians, small businesses and others who want to maintain a high quality of life. They in recent years have been stressing the improvement of the quality of life.

In Jacksonville, the senior staff has seen the development of active civic organizations. There is a lot of local participation and interest in local politics and the groups help to develop the campaigns. The community periodically completes reports on the community and indicates what needs to be done. This is widely distributed in the community.

In Portland, people feel a sense of duty towards engagement. The Community feels progressive and is at the front edge of participation examples.

In San Francisco, the senior staff thinks the city protects minority rights and has a strong tradition of challenging local issues. Diversity and tolerance generate participation. There is a long history of participation.

In Santa Monica, they believe in activism, using their web site to communicate, and the importance of creating a tradition of involvement. The city demonstrates progressive activism.

In the city of Seattle, there has always been a reputation for Seattle being a raucous place for citizen involvement. There is also a strong history of neighborhood involvement.

In sum, civic engagement and sustainability are best seen in the ballot box. Cities with higher sustainability scores have higher voting turnout. Anecdotal evidence from senior staff in these cities reinforce civic engagement and each city attests to active citizen involvement. All of these cities are active politically and no doubt this is what has pushed them out front in terms of the development of sustainability policies.

Conclusion

Sustainability in a selected number of cities shows that there is more divergence than convergence in policies that are used to implement sustainability. In particular, cities that have dominant or core policies are more likely to be different rather than to be similar. Major policy approaches toward sustainability are also more likely to be different and not similar. It is also apparent that different policies can lead to similar performance measures. Cities do not have to have the same approach to get good results. There are different ways of getting to the same place.

With participation and civic engagement, cities with higher turnout rates are more likely to do better on sustainability measures.

What all of this says is that sustainability is a flexible concept and the policies used to achieve it are different and cities can use different approaches. In terms of public policy cities have flexibility in how they accomplish things. There are no hard and fast rules. Scoring well on sustainability is connected to turnout but otherwise experimentation with the use of different public policies is encouraged. Success has different routes.

References:

Simon Bell and Stephen Morse (2008). Sustainability Indicators: Measuring the Immeasurable? Earthscan: London and Sterling, Va.

Kent Portney (2003). Taking Sustainable Cities Seriously. MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass.

"Sustainable City Progress Report Update" (1999), City of Santa Monica, Task Force on the Environment

Table 5- Selected City Profiles based on 2000 census

	Asheville	***Austin***	***Jacksonville***	***Portland***	***San Francisco***	***Santa Monica***	***Seattle***
Election turn out: President							

Non-presidential Municipal (1976-2007)	69.8% 60.3% 28.4%	57% 33% 17.5%	71.5% 48.7% 24.3%	77% 64.1% 39.3%	67.9% 56.7% 43%	72.1% 54% 18.7%	79% 59.9% 41.4%
Median Family Income	$32,772	$42,689	$40,316	$40,146	$55,221	$50,714	$45,736
% Below Poverty line	15.5%	14.5%	12.2%	13.1%	11.3%	10.4%	11.8%
Population Change, 1990-2000	4.1%	32.8%	15.8%	8.9%	7.3%	-3.3%	9.1%
Population	60,045	656,562	735,617	524,121	776,733	84.084	563,374
Density	1683.4	2610.4	970.9	3939.2	16,634.4	10,178.7	6717
% Black	17.6%	10%	29%	6.6%	7.8%	3.8%	8.4%
%Hispanic	3.8%	30.5%	4.2%	6.8%	14.1%	13.4%	5.3%
%Manufacturing	9.9%	7.7%	6%	9.6%	5.6%	3.8%	8.4%
Per Capita local Govt. Expenditures	$2160	$3655	$1971	$5764	$7827	$5199	$6230
People 65 plus	18.3%	6.7%	10.3%	11.6%	13.7%	14.4%	12%
% Bachelors Degree or Higher	30.4%	40.5%	21.2%	32.6%	45%	54.8%	47.2%
Median Value of Owner Occupied House	$109,100	$124,700	$87,800	$154,900	$396,400	$625,900	$259,600

Source: U.S. Census and individual city budgets for turnout rates.